Don't Look Back, You Can Never Look Back.

by iL0Vsuperman

Summary

Tony Stark: billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, and, now, superhero.

It’d only been a few months prior that he’d revealed to the world he was Iron Man and life couldn’t be better. That is…until he stumbled upon an old abandoned Hydra lab and kinda set off one of their machines by accident. A blast of blue light later and he found himself in the same lab…only it is seventy years earlier and it is full of Hydra agents.

Cue the entrance of the Howling Commandos led by Tony’s childhood hero, Captain America.

Suddenly, Tony is living out a dream. He’s joining up with the Commandos in the search to get Tony back to his right era. It’s the adventure of a lifetime and, at first, it’s amazing…but then he and Steve connect in ways more than just friendship and he finds that he is torn between wanting to stay with him or go back home.

In the end, whatever the result, he loses.
I am currently working on my Superfamily fic, *August 21st*, and this fic is my "Writer's Block fic". In other words, whenever I'm stumped on that fic I will work on this one. Once I am done with *August 21st*, I will devote my full attention to this one! Thanks for reading! :)

BTW, fair warning but sooooo many Back to the Future References are going to be made in this fic. I hope you've seen the movies! XD
One Point Twenty-One Gigawatts?!?

Fucking Hydra.

His dad always told him to never underestimate the organization and would always quote their lame-ass saying: “Cut off one head and two more will take its place.”

And then he’d always add, “Do the math, Tony. Two heads have twice as much teeth.”

As a young child, Tony lived off those words but, as he got older, he started to roll his eyes…

Yeah, Tony heard his dad, but he had also done the math. No more Hydra meant zero Hydra. Something that is dead stays dead.

Except…he hadn’t considered the mythology behind the damn name

Because appar-e-fucking-ly, decades after the fall of Hydra, it decided to grow back its Goddamn heads.

And it did so while Tony was mucking around one of its abandoned buildings in the middle of nowhere in France.

_Fucking Hydra._

He’d been looking for something to do with his updated suit. The Mark 15, which he has lovingly called Sneaky, had flown to the location smoothly. It was his new stealth armor prototype with sonic dampening thrusters and reto-reflective coating which adapted the suit’s tint to the surrounding environment for its stealth capabilities. So far, SHIELD nor any of the European agencies in the area had noted his presence, even when he flew at ranges his other suits were usually detectable.

Not long after he revealed he was Iron Man to the media, Tony had stumbled upon one of his dad’s old notebooks and, in it, Howard had noted the Commandos finding the base. He’d written there was a lab there that contained scientific marvels but the next page that went onto describe those marvels had been torn out of his journal. Tony’s curiosity was piqued and the chance to use Sneaky was just too good to pass up.

He didn’t think twice about there being any danger.

He felt unstoppable. Obadiah was dead and buried several months now and he was still living off the high of being recognized more for being Iron Man other than a rich playboy or warmonger. So exploring an old building should have been more of an adventure than a dangerous ordeal.

The building had been abandoned and, by the plant growth and decay, it had obviously been years since it last saw any human activity. The halls were dark and dusty and, wherever there was sunlight, there were plants growing out of the floors. The first few rooms he came across were mostly empty with the only signs of life being the paw prints of mostly rodents in the thick dust.

He had come across one large room that had been a barracks. The remains of the bunk bed shells were built of metal and nailed to the ground but were so rusted they’d probably break if Tony had applied any weight to them.

Eventually, he came across the lab.
As soon as he saw the bullet ridden, barely sealed blast doors, he knew he found the place his father was talking about. One blast from his repulsors brought the doors down. They collapsed with a loud whine and landed with an explosion of dust.

He held up his hands, letting the glow from his repulsors illuminate the room. Dust was everywhere, casting the room with a strange grey tone, accented by the light blue glow of his repulsors.

The room was circular with machines that circled the room in layers. It kinda reminded him of NASA’s setup where they had rows of terminals, each with its own setup, designed to complete a specific task. NASA had their setup done in classroom lines, with all of their stations, facing one direction. But this room was set up in a Socratic circle, with all of the terminals facing a giant structure in the middle. So naturally, Tony went to the center.

And that was where Hydra reared its ugly two heads…

The structure in the center Tony could only have described its function as a grandiose throne. A large red velvet sofa chair sat in the middle of the contraption. It was worn with age but looked like it had been built strong.

A box with levers and buttons sat in front of the chair and Hydra’s famous symbol was stamped to the front of it for everyone to see as a reminder who was responsible for this machine’s creation. It also had rows of numbers. The numbers were set to the date in his father’s journal and Tony did a double take when he saw that. It was further proof this place hadn't been touched since then.

The scientific marvel his father had been forced to abandon had been untouched for decades.

Behind the chair was a huge circular tower that had many wires and bulbs and things that looked like solar panels and Tony could only guess at its purpose. Wires from all of the terminals fed into this machine.

Taking it all in, it seemed utterly ridiculous.

And Tony loved it.

So…he fiddled with it.

The machine hummed to life with his hands buried deep in its mechanics under the chair. It glowed with a blue light, similar to the one his arc reactor gave off but…darker.

He scrambled to get away but he was not fast enough.

He was caught by some unseen force and was forced back into the chair.

The Mark 15’s screens flickered and his readings went off the charts. Energy levels broke all conceivable scales and then the screens went dark. He was blind…except for that dark blue glow. Through the smallest of seams in his suit, that light was beginning to leak through.

“J,” Tony gasped tightly. He felt like a child again, afraid of the dark in his massive bedroom, and wishing the real Jarvis, his late butler, would come to make everything better again.

There was no response…Tony did not expect one. As soon as the power was cut to the suit, so was Jarvis’s connection. His AI would act immediately, of course, and contact SHIELD, the French government, and anyone else that could help save its master.

But it won’t come soon enough.
He felt like he was being crushed by the same oppressive force that caught him. He could barely breathe. Tony felt like he took what he thought would be his last breaths being forcibly pushed out of his lungs…

The machine shuddered around him and the dark blue light invaded everything.

It was one last bite from the dead beast and Tony had gotten to close. He should have listened to his father.

He never imagined it ending like this…

And it didn’t…

The blue light disappeared in a snap and he fell forward, gasping air returned to his lungs and his suit began to recalibrate.

“J! System’s check!” Tony demanded, gasping for air and hunching forward. He clutched his chest instead as the pain began to fade.

Jarvis had yet to reply with an update so he questioned, “J?”

“Be – …is,” Jarvis’s garbled voice stated over the speakers.

Tony tried to focus his hearing to better hear his AI but, instead noted the other voices in the room. They were loud and frantic and all around him. Apparently, the Calvary had arrived in the meantime. Had he fallen unconscious? Was Coulson standing in front of him right now wearing his usual unhappy frown.

Tony leaned back in his chair and collected himself. He needed to appear cool and calm and not like the scared child he felt like he was moments prior. He was Tony Stark after all, and Tony Stark was not afraid of little things like the dark or death.

“Be-Beta –,” Jarvis said and his screens flickered with life. Tony sat up straighter as he took in the new world around him. Gone was the dust and decaying machines. In its place was a glowing, functioning lab filled with uniformed people, all staring at him in shock or hurriedly working at their stations.

“Beta Jarvis is online,” Jarvis stated in his ear and a shiver went down his spine.

Beta Jarvis?? Why would Beta Jarvis be on?! It was only supposed to activate if he lost connection to the main program! Could his communications be damaged?

“I am sorry, Sir. I am unable to connect to the server. Suit systems are returning to optimum function, but outside communication is very limited. I cannot get a reading on any satellites. It's like they are not there.”

Tony dryly swallowed and made himself stand. He recognized the uniforms the men around him wore. He’d seen them in the propaganda photos his father had shared with him and in war movie reenactments. They were dressed like Hydra agents.

“Two heads, Tony,” his dad reminded him from the past. “Remember, they have more teeth.”
“Fuck,” Tony hissed under his breath.

He looked for more differences, unable to process what his mind was adding up already.

The blast doors he’d shot down were now attached to the wall and looked practically new with not even a single bullet hole.

“I am picking up radio frequencies but the communications I am picking up are odd,” Jarvis continued.

Tony was not listening too closely to Jarvis, instead he was listening to the dialect of the people around him, who now had soldiers streaming into the room with weapons at the ready. But most importantly they were speaking German.

Tony could barely believe it but…he was in the middle of a very active Hydra base that was no longer dead because…because he was no longer in his era.

Hydra had built a Goddamn time machine and Tony stumbled into it none the wiser.

“Fuck,” Tony hissed under his breath. His heartbeat started to pick up and he could feel a panic attack on the verge of starting.

This couldn’t be fucking happening.

Ironically, his first thoughts on time travel were of Back to the Future’s Doc Brown yelling, “Great Scott!”

“Fuckin’ Great Scott,” he gasped instead.

He hadn’t moved since he stood and someone was approaching him.

Tony turned on his repulsors and raised into the air to keep his distance. It caused a commotion among the people gathered in the room, they obviously were not used to flying robotic men, but none of them tried to attack him…yet.

Cue explosion.

Tony shot higher into the air and out of the explosion’s burn radius. A volley of bullets followed and many of the people beneath him fell.

The Hydra agents were quick to react however and they pulled out various weapons and fired in retaliation.

Tony was the odd man out, floating above it all. The new fighters didn’t notice him as none of them thought to look up.

Tony was torn…what was he to do? Join the fight? But who would he aid? What if the guys fighting Hydra were just as bad?

A few bullets hit the time machine and Tony instantly knew where his loyalties lay. It was with the machine. It was his only ticket home.

Tony needed to stop the fight and he knew the fastest way to do so. He turned on the thruster blasts to max on his hands and spun a few times, firing over the heads and drawing a nearly perfect line along the perimeter of the circular room.
His repulsor blasts were nowhere near anyone’s heads but everyone ducked down and the fighting stopped almost immediately.

Tony landed in front of the machine and yelled, “Okay! We are stopping this right now! You!” He pointed at a soldier from the attacking force and the man flinched back as if Tony was going to shot him. Tony rolled his eyes but the man did not see as his face was hidden behind his face shield. Tony asked, “Who are you?”

Thankfully, the man spoke English, as he replied, “I'm Joe…”

Tony bit back his frustrated groan and he reiterated, “Who do you fight for?”

“America and her Allies.”

“Thank God,” Tony sighed. Upon Joe’s scared expression, Tony explained, “I am an American who was brought here against my will. I’m on your side. Okay, my countrymen! Stand down, I got this!”

Tony raised himself into the air again and used his camouflage technology to darken his suit to seem more menacing and stated, “Hydra. You are defeated. Stand down or you will deal with me.”

He brightened his repulsors and then brought out his arm, shoulder, and even the thigh guns and launchers. It was a menacing sight that made the majority drop their weapons. Those few who initially did not drop their weapons did so when they saw the fight now was hopeless without the advantage of numbers…

“Alright, Americans go do what you do best,” Tony said as he landed. “Hydra, I need one of you who speaks English and can tell me how I got here.”

“Wait a sec-!” One of the Americans interrupted. Without looking at him, Tony raised a hand with his repulsor glowing and the man shut up.

The Hydra agents all looked to one man in particular and he nervously stepped forward, saying, “That would be me…”

Tony turned to him and growled, “Talk.”

Nervously fiddling with the buttons on his shirt, the Hydra agent glanced uneasily at the Americans and then looked to Tony. He stated, “The Red Skull invested in many new technologies that could be used to expand our influence which was why we created this machine. We wanted to be able to alter the outcome of past battles to our favor or snatch superior weapons from the future…like you.”

“Send me back and then destroy this thing,” Tony hissed.

The Hydra agent flinched and then murmured, “We can’t.”

Tony rose back into the air and hissed, “What?!?”

Another Hydra agent stepped forward and frantically stated, “We brought you here when the base came under attack! We were hoping to use you to fight them off! We used the –!”

“Shut up!” The first agent hissed.

“What?” Tony retorted, floating to the more cooperative of the two.

“We used the Tesseract to bring you here. The Red Skull himself was here to insert it into the machine but he removed it as soon as you appeared and left with it because you didn’t seem to be
functioning. He couldn’t let himself nor the Tesseract fall into enemy hands.”

“Can nothing else power the machine??” Tony demanded.

“Tell the Captain, the Red Skull was just here!” The leader of the American force hissed to a subordinate. The soldier ran out of the room but Tony ignored it all to interrogate the agent in front of him.

“Nothing can replicate the power!” The agent retorted and Tony groaned with frustration. This was starting to not be funny. Was he going to have to wait for a figurative lightning bolt to power this thing too? His only real chance lay with the Tesseract but it was in the Red Skull’s hands and he knew of only one instance where the Tesseract would be in hand he wasn’t really down for being there when Cap dies. Tony wished he had paid more attention to his father’s stories, maybe then he would remember more instances where the Tesseract was involved.

“Where did he go??” Tony demanded, hoping for a miracle.

“I don’t know,” the Hydra agent squeaked.

His stomach was starting to churn and he turned to the American’s leader. He gasped, “We need to find the Red Skull.”

“…We will get him eventually,” the man replied. “…But we have been looking for him for months and this isn’t the first time he’s slipped through our fingers…”

Tony landed, his sinking heart weighed him down.

“Are you really from the future?” The man asked him breathlessly.

“The year 2009,” Tony whispered hoarsely as he wondered if he’d see his era again.

“And if you’re American, then does that mean…?”

“We win the war,” Tony replied and the man grinned. The American soldiers listening in were a little more animated and high-fived or laughed. Tony continued, “Who is in charge of this operation? I need to work with them in order to find the Red Skull faster.”

“This way,” the leader stated. “The Captain should be regrouping with the rest of the Commandos in the command post.”

Tony landed with a jolt and his heart began racing for an entirely new reason. There was only one Captain he knew of who worked with the Commandos. He gasped, “Do you mean Captain America…the Captain America??”

“The one and only,” the leader replied and Tony’s heart flipped in his chest.

“Great Scott,” Tony gasped again and he did so, not out of fear, but because of excitement.

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“Looks like the base is ours,” Bucky informed Steve as he strolled up to him with his helmet tucked under his arm. “But we’ve got boys already reporting in that Schmidt got away.”

A beat of frustration rolled through Steve but he did not let it show. Instead, Steve clapped Bucky’s arm and said, “Thanks, Buck…We got any POW’s here?”
Bucky shook his head and replied, “No, it looks like this is a – a…a wow.”

Steve turned around and followed Bucky’s gaze.

A corporal, who led one of their fireteams, was walking up to them followed…by a robot?

“Did I fall asleep and am dreaming I’m in a sci-fi comic?” Steve whispered under his breath to his best friend.

Bucky reached over and pinched him.

Steve flinched from the sudden, sharp pain and whined, “Hey!”

Bucky pinched himself and then said, “Nope. This is real.”

The corporal saluted him and then reported, “Sir, the base is secure but you won’t believe what we found.”

“I bet we can make a really good guess,” Bucky stated, staring pointedly at the robot.

Steve’s eyes darted all over the dark chrome machine. It was built humanoid in nature with arms, legs, fingers, even two eyes, though they glowed with a faint white light. He noted the robot had a marker on its chest though he could not make any sense to what “MK 15” could’ve meant.

“I am not the more amazing thing, surprisingly,” the robot stated, making Steve jump. Its glowing eyes hadn’t left Steve since it entered the room and it stepped closer to Steve and held out its hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, Captain.”

Steve shook the robot’s hand and a smile broke across his face. He informed the machine, “It will take a lot more to impress me. You are a marvel!”

The robot dipped its head and murmured, “Thank you but the sole reason I am here is because of a time machine. I am from the 21st Century and I need your help getting back.”

It took all of Steve’s power to not let his jaw drop.

“It says we win the War, Sir!” The corporal cut in excitedly.

“It?” The robot murmured in question.

“Sorry, is there something you go by?” Steve questioned. Despite its blank face, the robot seemed surprised as it tilted its head to the side. Could it have feelings? Did all the sci-fi comics get it wrong? Did it have emotion?

There was a long pause as the robot regarded his question. He and Bucky traded glances. What was the machine contemplating?

“I think it’s best if you call me…Sneaky, for now,” the robot murmured.

“Sneaky?” Bucky reiterated with a smirk.

The robot’s gaze finally broke away from Steve and looked to Bucky. Its color changed without warning and blended in with the light walls of the room. It stated, “The official title for this unit is Mark 15 but, with its stealth capabilities, I…My maker thought it appropriate to call me ‘Sneaky’.”

“Your maker sounds like a funny guy,” Bucky commented.
“He has his perks,” the robot said, sounding amused.

“You said you thought it best to call you Sneaky though,” Steve reiterated. He asked curiously, “Do you have another name?”

“…I do not want to diverge too much information,” Sneaky replied slowly. “My other name will… reveal things about the future. I fear if I reveal too much, the future might change and I like the way the future is right now so I don’t want to do that.”

Steve chuckled but he couldn’t help but wonder what that name could be. The MK 15 on its chest made sense now at least...

“Alright, Sneaky,” Steve said. “How can we help you?”

“The time machine will not work without the Tesseract. The Red Skull has it.”

“So we have a similar goal, finding the Red Skull,” Steve stated. Any unease he felt about Sneaky evaporated with his statement. The robot was on their side...for now at least.

Sneaky nodded and replied, “I’d be proud to help you on your mission. I will tell you one thing about the future, the legend of Captain America and his Howling Commandos lives on in my century. All of you are remembered and celebrated.”

Bucky puffed up his chest with pride but Steve smiled gratefully at Sneaky and whispered, “Thank you for telling us. The rest of the team would love to hear that.”

The robot nodded and murmured, “I am going to do a fly around. Maybe I’ll come across the Red Skull.”

“...Fly?” Steve repeated in awe.

Sneaky nodded and then rose into the air from a force of light coming out of his hands and feet. It stated, “I have your radio frequency. If I find anything, I’ll let you know.”

Steve nodded, smiling with delight, and breathlessly said, “Good luck.”

Sneaky nodded once more and flew out of the broken window. Steve and Bucky turned in unison to watch it go.

“Wow,” Bucky whispered. He turned to Steve and asked, “Can we keep it?”

Steve rolled his eyes and said, “It’s not a stray, Buck.”

“No, it’s a freaking flying robot from the future that wants to work with us!!”

“Only to get home. You heard it yourself. Its being here can change the events of the future. What if we don’t win the War because we changed the future too much?” Steve countered. Bucky frowned at him and Steve continued, “Gather the rest of the Commandos. We need to tell them about Sneaky.”

Bucky nodded and left the room. The corporal saluted Steve one last time and left him too. Once alone, Steve turned back to the window Sneaky had exited. He let himself feel a sense of wonder as he considered the future that awaited the world. Sneaky was amazing.

What else did the future hold for them?
Save the Clock Tower!

Chapter Notes

Because ya'll were so adamant for me to continue soon...Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The rumor of the robotic man from the future spread faster than a wildfire in dry bushland. The 107th was large but being isolated in a tight camp helped the rumor mill spread the information quickly. Wherever Steve went, he heard the rumor being whispered and Sneaky's story evolving into something even bigger than what the robot had described.

Sneaky had yet to return and Steve was beginning to wonder if he ever would or if he was even real.

Steve kept busy with Bucky: setting up camp, preparing for Colonel Phillips, and rooting out information on the remaining Hydra agents in the area.

But he was also waiting for the inevitable.

When the inevitable finally happened, they were in one of the newly constructed larger tents with thick wooden beam supports. They could stand up straight comfortably, compared to their smaller field sleeping tents. It was their HQ per say as it contained a few tables for them to strategize over their maps and orders.

“ROGERS!”

“There he is,” Steve sighed and Bucky rolled up the map with a knowing smirk.

A moment later, Howard Stark barged into the tent.

“What is this I hear about a flying robot??” Howard demanded.

Steve smiled, rolling his eyes, and replied, “No need to yell, Stark.”

“No need to yell? NO NEED TO YELL??” Howard repeated madly.

Steve grasped his friend’s shoulders and stated, “Yes, there is a robot but it is not here anymore. It went flying after the Red Skull.”

Howard sputtered unintelligibly and then garbled, “I-Is it coming back??”

“It said it will let us know if it found the Red Skull or not. Either way it will have to come back because the time machine is here,” Steve commented, holding back his smile with his final add on.

As he expected, Howard nearly had an aneurysm and screamed some more before demanding to see the time machine. Bucky volunteered to take him and Howard demanded more information on the robot. Bucky started to describe a robot Steve knew to not be Sneaky but from an Action Comic he and Bucky traded as children. Steve chuckled silently to himself at Howard’s expense.

Steve never got a break with his position. He made his rounds, talking to the leaders of the various
squads or individual soldiers. He was checking in on their progress but, was mainly checking on moral. The men seemed to mostly be in good spirits, they had taken down another Hydra base after all, but he made sure to sit down with the few that were in bad ways. Casualties happened. It was the way of war, but that didn’t mean the soldiers had to easily accept it.

Sneaky lived up to his name and snuck up on him while he was sitting down with one of these soldiers.

“Everything A-OK, Cap?”

“Cripes!” Gibbons gasped as Sneaky stepped out of the tree line, seemingly from out of the very darkness of the shadows. He jumped to his feet and dislodged Steve’s hand from his shoulder.

“He’s an ally,” Steve reassured the soldier, getting to his feet slowly as to not startle the man. He was already upset for losing his best friend and stressed from nearly dying himself.

Gibbons’ hands kneaded at the rifle in his hands and his eyes were open so wide, Steve could clearly see the white encircling both of his irises.

Sneaky raised his hands and did something weird with his fingers, creating a V from the space between his middle and ring fingers. The robot sarcastically intoned with a flat voice, “I come in peace.”

“Is-Is that the robot everyone is talking about?” Gibbons asked nervously.

“I would hope,” Sneaky replied, dropping its hands. “I will be very upset if you guys invited another futuristic robot to the party and didn’t tell me.”

Steve nearly rolled his eyes. Sneaky was clearly programmed with an unfiltered sarcasm chip. He grasped Gibbons’ shoulder and murmured, “Yes, this is it. It goes by Sneaky.”

“Yup, good ol’ Sneaky, just sneaking around, looking for Skelator’s sneaky red faced cousin,” Sneaky replied, rocking on its heels.

Taking the cue, Steve said to Gibbons, “I have to confirm some things with Sneaky. Why don’t you find the rest of the guys in your battalion and see how they’re doing? I’ll catch up with you later.”

Gibbons saluted him and said, “Alright, Cap.”

Steve nodded him off and then turned to Sneaky.

“I just got goosebumps watching that,” Sneaky stated. “It was like watching a history reel in the flesh.”

Steve’s eyebrow rose as he eyed the metallic skin and repeated skeptically, “Goosebumps?”

“Metaphorically speaking, of course,” the robot replied smoothly.

“Of course,” Steve replied with a chuckle. The robot was nothing like the cold, humorless machines he had read about in fiction. Steve was enjoying it and having fun imagining the environment it may have come from. “And your presence and earlier colorful commentary make me guess you didn’t find Schmidt?”

“Schmidt?” Sneaky asked, cocking his head to the side. He hit the side of his head and said, “Oh yeah, the Red Skull! Yeah, no, didn’t find him or his glowy key to the future.”
“Do you think he has another time machine out there?” Steve asked nervously. Schmidt could do a lot of damage if he had the ability to change time.

Sneaky shook his head and murmured, “No, I would have heard. The only reason this one wasn’t known was because it was in such a remote location and all the notes on it had been lost...But I should look at it, just in case. I need to understand how this thing works before I step back into it.”

Steve nodded but then winced as he remembered Howard. He replied, “You can, but we have our top scientist there right now and...he may want to look you over too.”

Sneaky froze and then dropped his gaze. With a lower voice, it asked, “Is it Howard Stark?”

Steve shouldn’t be surprised. The thing probably knew all of their histories but he still felt shocked by its correct deduction and the abrupt change in Sneaky’s mannerism. He replied, “Yes, yes, he’s the one. Do...Do you know him in the future?”

From what he gleaned from the other soldiers, it was from the year 2009. Adding up the years, Howard, Steve, and the others would be really old men at that point, but it was possible they were still alive during Sneaky’s timeline.

“I...used to know him,” Sneaky replied carefully, its voice neutral of any inflection.

A range of emotions coursed through Steve, but mainly, it was grief. It was fairly obvious what the robot meant when he said, “used to.” He didn’t know when his friend passed, and it was probably decades from now, but just knowing it happened was sobering. It was another reminder they were not immortal and, like Gibbons, he too could lose his friends.

For a moment, Steve was tempted to ask if the robot had “known” him too. He pushed the reckless idea aside. He didn't want to change the future but, also, he did not want to have the timer ticking down in his head for his own death.

Ignorance was bliss.

Steve nodded and cleared his throat before stating, “Well, he’ll be ecstatic to meet you.”

The robot finally lifted its gaze and met Steve’s eyes. Without breaking contact, it murmured, “Lead the way.”

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The last time Tony had spoken with his father, they argued about his future. Tony had wished he could take back that moment ever since. It was the last time he saw both of his parents alive and he hadn’t even said goodbye to them because he was so upset...He hadn’t know the true meaning of upset until the next day when he had to identify their bodies and face the horrible truth that they were gone forever.

Tony felt a lot of different emotions about his father. He loved him, hated him, idolized him, and reviled him. But he was his father...and he was alive again.

Tony tried not to walk too fast but he did extend his stride which the Captain matched.

Captain Rogers led him back to where the time machine was.

When he entered the room, he was struck by the amount of activity around the machine and then he noted the activity mostly consisted of digging into the machine.
He pushed past the Captain and demanded, “What on Earth are you doing?!”

Nearly everyone in the room jolted up sharply and looked at him in amazement. The last to do so was Howard Stark, sitting up in the middle of the machine and covered in black grease. As soon as his dad’s eyes fell on him, he grinned excitedly.

He exited out of the machine, wiping oil off his hands, and exclaiming, “Look at you!”

“Look at me! Look at you!” Tony retorted, “What are you doing to that machine?! It is my only ticket home and you’re picking it apart!”

Howard circled him and murmured, “I can put it back together…I can do the same with you too. Can I remove one of your panels or…” Howard had fully circled him and came to a jolting stop in front of him, his father’s eyes focused on his chest.

“What is that glow?” Howard asked breathlessly, staring at the arc reactor. The reactor was barely discernible thanks to the stealth flaps around it being partially closed.

Tony fully lowered the flaps, completely obliterating the light of the reactor, and stated, “This is futuristic technology that you should not see nonetheless examine.”

“Your very presence is changing the future,” Howard argued. “What’s the problem with changing it a little more?”

“Yeah, not going to happen,” Tony retorted with a snort.

Howard frowned and murmured, “We should call you Snarky, not Sneaky.”

*Right back at you, Dad,* Tony thought ironically.

Tony watched his father with wide eyes as he circled him. He was so young and this eyes were alive and dancing. That haunted look was gone. What had caused it? Could Tony find a way to…

No.

He shouldn't think like this.

He couldn't change the future. If he did, Tony might not end up being born or the Allies might lose or something even more worse might happen.

The only change he can make was what was going to happen to the time machine.

Tony couldn't help his father.

He couldn't even save his childhood superhero’s life…

Turning to said hero, Tony said, “We need to put this thing back together and keep *everyone* away from it.”

The only thing he could save was the machine that would take him home and there was no way he was going to let a younger, less seasoned version of his father poke around in it.

Cap nodded and looked pointedly at Howard.

“Rogers, this is an honest to God time machine –,” Howard began to argue.
Cap cut him off and said, “No. Sneaky is right. We shouldn't meddle with the past or future. Put everything back where you found it and pull your people out. We'll empty the room and then put a guard on it and then we won't use it until we send Sneaky home.”

“No means no,” Cap retorted and Tony had to hold back his laughter. He’d never seen anyone talk back to his father that way. As a child, he remembered everyone was afraid of the man but Cap was treating Howard like a child.

Tony loved it.

He monitored his father as he and his men put the machine back together and tried to understand its mechanics from the sidelines. Jarvis relayed commentary as he recalled what went where when he saw it through Iron Man’s cameras.

His father talked to him and tried to get him to mess up and reveal something about the future, his maker, or the tech of his suit. Tony caught it every time and chided his dad for every try.

“I know one thing at least,” his dad eventually grumbled as they evacuated the last of the personal from the room.

Tony turned to him with his head cocked to the side in question.

“You slipped on my name. You called me ‘Howard’ at one point.”

Shoot.

Tony had refused to call his father “dad” as a young adult and, as they were interacting, the name came out from habit.

“So future robot, how do you know my first name? Am I famous? Or do you personally know me in the future? Or…” Howard’s eyes trailed down to Tony’s concealed arc reactor and he continued, “Did I create you?”

Tony stayed silent in answer and Howard grinned.

“I’ll get it out of you one way or another future man!” Howard said in parting, waving his hand over his head. He was flocked by his lackies, carrying all the tools they were going to use to disassemble the time machine.

Cap too walked away as a soldier came to him citing the need for help and direction.

Tony was left alone standing next to a silent sentry and he wondered what he was supposed to do now.

Despite seeing it's innards, Tony did not know how the time machine worked. The Red Skull and his key to the future were lost to the wind and the sooner he was found, the sooner he could get home. And the closer he was to Cap, the more likely he'd be able to help take him down.

Tony snorted to himself as a solution came to him.

Jarvis probably would not approve but Tony needed help. So, like Marty McFly, he needed someone to share the secret with.

He did not have to think on it long on who he was going to pick.
Cap was the best candidate. He was a man of morals and Tony already knew he from what little interacted with the man that he could be trusted. The fact that the man was also Tony’s childhood hero was a perk and, as soon as he was home in the future, he was going to rub it in Rhodes’s face.

But, most importantly for the future, Cap wasn't going to live much longer, less than half a year if he was remembering correctly, so he'll take whatever secrets he learns from Tony to the grave.

The future and Tony's life should be completely unaffected.

Chapter End Notes

Till next time! :)

(August 21st's new chapter should be out by this weekend!)
There’s that word again: “Heavy.” Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the Earth’s gravitational pull?

Steve set himself up in one of the rooms a Hydra officer had been using. The room itself was very simple with a bed, wardrobe, desk, and a cast-iron, wood-burning stove. Steve had already gone through the room but found nothing significant so he shoved all the officer’s personal items into the wooden wardrobe. He lay his rucksack at the foot of the bed and some of the 107th’s correspondence on the desk, making the room the closest thing he had to home in a long while.

They were going to be hunkering down at the location until Colonel Phillips and the rest of the 107th grouped up with them. Currently, only one-third of the 107th was at the base with Steve and the rest of the Commandos. The smaller unit was more mobile but still had more than enough men for Steve to make the quick attack they needed to take down the base.

Steve had slept maybe a few hours in the room the night prior but the exhaustions of the long week were finally pushing him to sleep long and deeply tonight. He had one final meeting with the Commandos and then bid them good night as the midnight watch came onto their shifts.

Yawning heavily, Steve locked the door behind him and went straight to the wood-burning stove, kicking off his shoes as he did. There was a small stack of wood next to it and he tossed a fresh piece in and poked at the embers to get a fire started and the room warmed up.

Once satisfied with the small fire, Steve stood and unbuckled his pants. He froze with both ends of his belt in hand when Sneaky seemingly materialized out of thin air. The robot had said it had advanced stealth technology but Steve hadn’t truly appreciated how advanced it was until that moment.

He swore loudly and tripped on his loosened pants, falling back onto the bed.

“Sorry, Cap,” the robot murmured. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just wanted to speak with you privately and had to make sure you were alone before I showed myself.”

Flushing, Steve pushed himself up to be sitting on his bottom and pulled his pants back on as they had fallen to his knees in his fall. He buckled his pants with a flush and demanded of the machine, “Why do you need to speak to me privately?”

The robot’s glowing eyes focused on Steve and stated, “My father told me that you were the most honest and genuine man he had ever met. That you were true to your word, no matter the circumstances and, I was hoping you’d place your trust in me as I will do in you…”

“…Your father?” Was the machine speaking of its creator?

The robot nodded its head and then, to Steve's absolute shock, its face rose, revealing a flesh and blood man.

The rest of its body opened and the human stepped out. Steve watched the entire process, dumbstruck. The man rubbed at his flattened, dirty hair until it unruffled. His entire body was grimy like he hadn’t washed in days and he was barefoot wearing only old jeans and a thin undershirt.

“I’m Tony Stark, Howard’s son,” he explained. The robot shell closed itself and stepped back into the corner of the room.
“Howard’s son,” Steve breathlessly repeated. Tony was older than Howard by a decade at least and…

Steve’s eyes were drawn to Tony’s chest. The thin shirt couldn’t hide the blue glow of Tony’s heart.

There were hundreds of questions he could have asked: This was supposedly Howard’s son, from the future, stepping out of an amazing robotic suit with untold potential. The man was clearly placing his trust in Steve and may have revealed more about the future or Steve should have done something to confirm he was who he said he was.

But Steve did not consider any of that.

Instead, Steve pointed at the blue glow in his chest and asked, “What is that?”

Tony had opened his mouth, likely ready to spout a speech on the merits of trusting him, but he sealed his mouth with a smile upon Steve’s question. Steve flushed as Tony grinned wider. He may have asked an unconventional question but the man had an unconventional glow coming out of his heart!

Tony touched the glow and replied, “This is an arc reactor. It keeps me alive. Without it, I’d be dead within an hour.”

“Oh…” Steve looked up from the glow and saw Tony smiling at him. He flushed with embarrassment. Steve loved new things, especially the impossible. This man was the living embodiment of it and Tony clearly noted his wonder.

Smiling widely, Tony stated, “Cap, I decided I can’t navigate the past by myself and have determined you will be the perfect candidate to help me. I can’t go to Howard because he’d just use the opportunity to try to learn about my tech and there’s no way I’m letting my dad do that because he’d totally try to replicate it and change the future. So, you are my best bet to try and keep the future intact…”

“I…I don’t know how you expect me to help you?” Steve murmured.

“All I ask is that you let me shadow you guys and have the opportunity to snatch up the Tesseract and use it to get back home.”

“…Why didn’t you continue the ruse?” Steve had to ask. “We all believed you to be a machine. You could have shadowed us as ‘Sneaky’ and asked the same of me as a robot. Why put your trust in me like this?”

“I need your help, Cap. Seriously, I can’t do this without you and…well, with you knowing I am more than a machine, I was hoping you’ll be able to see how dire my situation is. I am a person, not a machine. I have people back home: friends and loved ones, another life waiting for me. Hell, I’m a superhero too! My tech is needed to help people! I’m not just a piece of technology and I needed someone to see. I need your help and compassion…and maybe some access to food and water…AND coffee! Definitely coffee! You wouldn't believe the caffeine headache that's been plaguing me! So...Will you help me?”

Steve’s heart went out for the man. It must have been frightening being ripped from everything he once knew and loved. What would Steve have done if the same had happened to him? If he no longer had Bucky to lean on? Peggy to confide in?

Steve leaned forward and stated, “I’ll be glad to help.”
Tony nodded and then stated, “Then you have to give me your word that no one will know about me, even Barnes. My existence must be kept a secret. I will keep living in my suit and will only reveal myself to you in private.”

Steve furrowed his eyebrows and he asked, “But how will you survive? You can’t stay in that machine all day.”

“We’ll get to that when it becomes a problem,” Tony retorted with an eyeroll. He held out his hand to Steve and asked, “So, do we have a deal?”

Steve looked to his outstretched hand and then back to the older man’s open expression. Tony was wary and scared but hopeful. His expression reminded Steve of himself when he agreed to take the serum. Steve grasped his hand and stated, “I swear I will never speak a word of your existence to anyone. You have my word.”

Tony released a sigh but tensed as soon as Steve stated, “But…”

Tony’s hold on him tightened and Steve continued, “But, you can’t stay in that suit 24/7. You need to sleep in a bed, you need to eat, and you need to get some sun…and you need a bath.”

Tony snorted and retorted, “Unless you want to horde me away in your room, I can’t do that. I’m obviously not one of your soldiers, I’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

“So we’ll make it that you do belong,” Steve retorted, his mind already racing with ideas.

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Tony was nearly jumping in place.

“This is so cool,” he gasped, holding up the mechanics uniform Steve had snatched for him.

“You're going to have to shave off the goatee.”

Tony dropped the clothes and gasped, “You've got to be kidding me!?”

Cap was leaning against the bedpost with a smirk. He teased, “Army regulations.”

“Howard never had to shave!” Tony argued.

“Howard is a consult and is not bound by the army's regulations,” the super soldier retorted with a grin.

“Then just make me a consultant too,” Tony stated, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It's not that simple. I am only a Captain in the army. I don't have much sway. I can make a new mechanic appear with some maneuvering but a consultant is much more higher up and noticeable. Unless you want to tell everyone you're from the future, you're an army mechanic.”

“My glorious facial hair,” Tony moaned, pressing his face into the new clothes.

“You can grow it back when you get back,” Cap retorted, waving it off like it was nothing. “For now, you can use my shaving kit.”

He opened his rucksack and pulled a smaller beige bag out of it and tossed it to Tony. Items clinked inside when he caught it and Tony wordlessly unknotted the bag and looked inside.
Despite his intellect, Tony was unable to name some of the items inside. He recognized the old fashioned blade, the lathering brush, and mirror but he'd never used said items when shaving. Hell, he used an **electric** razor…

Flushing, Tony murmured, “You're going to have to help me with this stuff…”

“You don't have shaving kits in the future?”

“Our razors are electric and move as we shave and our shaving cream comes pre-foamed in the can… I remember seeing my grandfather use this stuff as a kid but I've never used it myself…”

“…You're serious?”

“Just create the lather for me before I back out!” Tony said and sat down stubbornly at the desk. He set up the mirror in front of him and stared at the reflection of his beautiful goatee for the last time. He was a little embarrassed by his lack of knowledge but more uneasy at the thought of actually shaving off all of his facial hair. It'd been decades since he was last bare faced.

Cap came up behind him and asked, “…You really don't know how to make the lather?”

“Do you just add water?” Tony guessed. The Captain looked at him like he was a crazy person so Tony must have guessed wrong...

“…The future is so bizarre,” he murmured, opening a circular tin which looked like it was filled with soap that had melted flat. He got out another empty tin bowl and then poured a little water from his canteen into. Tony watched mystified as Cap, the super soldier responsible for bringing down Hydra, then dampen his brush with that same water and then scrubbed at the soap until he attained a fine foam and then transferred that foam to the empty tin. He churned that lather until it became a think foam and held it out to Tony saying, “Ta da!”

It took the man a minute to do but, the amount of steps, Tony was already missing his canned shaving gel…

Cap held the lathering brush out to him and Tony accepted it with a grimace. He hadn't been clean shaven since college!

“Cap, are you sure there is no other way?” Tony grumbled, giving the brush a death glare.

“Lather up, soldier,” Cap retorted, grinning at Tony in the reflection of the mirror.

Tony began to lather up his face with slumped shoulders and whined, “You're enjoying this aren't you?”

“Maybe a little,” Cap laughed. “And you're applying it wrong! Here, let me help…”

The super soldier plucked the brush from his hand and said, “Leam back.”

Tony obliged and Cap placed the soapy lather on his face and neck in quick circular motions.

Moving his lips as little as possible, Tony mumbled, “Never in a million years, could I have imagined getting a shave from Captain America.”

Cap snickered as he placed down the lathering brush and bowl. He picked up the razor and inspected the blade to see it was sharp enough, once satisfied, he pressed it to Tony's neck and stated, “I never imagined shaving the neck of a time traveler either but here we are…and there's no need to be so
formal with me, my friends call me Steve and I expect you to do the same.”

“Steve,” Tony repeated and his insides did a little flip. He was now on a first name basis with the Captain America. His inner child was about to faint.

Tony closed his eyes as Steve began to run the blade across his neck. It was relaxing and reminded him of the few times he had a professional barber work on him. Steve's hands were always on him either tilting his chin or resting on Tony's shoulder. Steve commented, “You look nothing like your father.”

Tony sorted and his lips twitched into a small smile. He murmured, “I take after my mom.”

“Me too,” Steve replied with a grin. He paused and then surmised, “You don't look like Peggy, so I guess you aren't her kid either then?”

Tony's brow rose in surprise and he replied, “No! Why would you say that?!”

“Those two are always flirting,” Steve replied with a shrug.

“Ugh, no, gross,” Tony groaned. He did not need that visual of Aunt Peggy with his dad right now. Tony paused, collecting his thoughts and then asked, “Wasn't – Isn't there something going on between you and Peggy?”

Steve paused with the blade stopping at the tip of his chin. He pulled the blade away and wiped away the excess cream before replying, “It...It's not real...more of a joke between us because of a silly rumor that was started at basic...do people really think it was real in the future?"

Tony opened one eye and peeked at the super soldier, he was blushing. Tony replied, “They even made a movie out of it.”

People love their tragic romances after all…

“Oh, God,” Steve moaned.

Tony’s mouth twitched into a smile and he murmured, “It was good. The director had a real artistic vision.”

“Alright, no more, the Captain America comics were bad enough, I don’t want to imagine a movie!”

Tony closed his mouth as Steve ran the blade around his lips. He heard the grainy sound as numerous hairs were cut and was soon able to feel air on patches of skin that should have hair. Pep was going to so tease him so much once he got back.

Within a few minutes, Steve was done. Tony sat up and accepted the towel Steve handed him. He rubbed the excess lather from his face and then looked at the mirror he had left on the desk.

Ugh, he looked younger. Tony ran his fingers along his chin with a frown. How long would it take to regrow his goatee?

“You look good,” Steve assured him. Tony glanced up at him in the mirror’s reflection and saw the super soldier looked a little flushed.

“You okay?” Tony inquired.

“Yeah,” Steve replied and quickly began to pack up his shaving kit.
Tony shrugged it off and went back to the bed where the mechanic’s uniform lay. It was a plain, tan, one-piece jumpsuit with the Army’s insignia on it. He could make it work. Tony slipped it on over his clothes and it fit fine except…

“Uh oh.”

Steve looked up from his rucksack and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Tony pointed at his chest and said, “We’ve got a glowingly obvious problem here.”

Steve reopened his sack and said, “I’ve got some bandages in here. Maybe if we wrap it up it’ll muffle the glow?”

Tony nodded and slipped off the top half of his uniform and then pulled off his shirt. Steve openly stared at the arc reactor. Tony had yet to meet someone who hadn’t. But, Steve then tilted his head to the side and he stated, “Before we bandage you, you’ll need a bath.”

Tony grinned and agreed, “I am a little stinky.”

“I’ll get you a tub,” Steve replied with an eyeroll. “I’ll be right back.”

Steve left the room, opening the door enough for him to slip out. Tony watched him go with a bemused smile and then turned to the Iron Man suit and asked Jarvis, “Well? How do you think it went?”

“Captain Rogers will likely keep your confidence and he did not learn of his fate. All-in-all, it went as well as it could be expected, you even look somewhat clean-cut now,” Jarvis added the quip with a nod.

Tony rubbed his smooth chin and sighed, “Some sacrifices were needed for the good of the future…”

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“Are you sure you don’t need help with that, Captain?” The soldier asked in concern.

“I’ll be fine,” Steve assured him and then hefted the circular tub up and onto his shoulder and held it there with the support of one arm. The water sloshed gently but it was only filled half way so Steve would need to do some serious jumping in order for it to get too sloshy. The tubs were army regulated and were only big enough for someone to sit crossed-legged in and made of lightweight tin so he barely felt the weight as made his way back upstairs to his room.

It was past midnight so most of the 107th were asleep. He passed a few of the watchmen and nodded to them in passing until he finally got back to his room.

Tony was sitting on his bed. He had been in the middle of conversing with his suit when he stepped in. Steve looked from the suit to Tony and asked with concern, “Were you just talking to yourself?”

Tony chuckled and replied, “No, no! Jarvis is operating my suit, my AI. He’s a super computer.”

“It is an honor to formally meet you, Captain,” the robot stated, nodding his head to Steve.

Steve put down the tub and openly stared at the robot as its eyes followed his movements. He replied, “It’s – ugh – nice to meet you too?”
“Is that my tub?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” Steve replied. His eyes skimming over Tony’s exposed chest. That reactor obviously was the main cause of most of the scars on his chest but what about the rest? Steve wanted to ask but Tony also needed to get into the water while it was still warm. He continued, “When you sit in it, the water’ll get high enough to come to your waist. I’ve got soap and spare clothes you can use!” Steve dove into his rucksack again and pulled out the needed items.

“That is the saddest excuse for a bathtub I have ever seen,” Tony groaned.

Steve smiled at him and held out the soap as he sarcastically retorted, “Welcome to the Army.”

“Har har har,” Tony grumbled snatching the soap from his hand.

Steve dropped a towel to dry off with and spare clothes on the bed, an undershirt and boxers, and said, “I’ll come back in ten minutes. Is that enough time?”

“Yes,” Tony sighed, pulling off his socks.

Steve realized, “You don’t have shoes. I’ll get you those while you bathe.”

“Thanks,” Tony replied. He clapped Steve on the shoulder and replied, “Really, Steve, thank you.”

“It's no problem,” Steve said. He walked over to the door and reminded him, “Ten minutes!”

Tony nodded and Steve slipped out. Steve instantly went in search of the quartermaster on duty and was able to get some shoes for Tony. He’d glanced at his feet and guesstimated the time traveler’s size but he was pretty confident he guessed right. After that, he strolled back to his room, stopping to check in with a few sentries.

Steve happened to come across the kitchens. The food service personnel already searched it and prepped it for breakfast tomorrow. Steve quickly peeked into the walking pantry and grabbed an apple and a loaf of bread. When had Tony last eaten?

Steve went back to his room at a quicker pace as he remembered how hunger felt clutching and twisting at one’s stomach.

When he reached his door, he looked down the hall to make sure no one would notice his odd behavior and then he lightly knocked on it.

Tony cracked open the door and, as soon as he saw it was him, he opened the door for him. He was clean and, with his hair wet, Steve realized how poofy it had been when dry. Steve’s large clothes also sagged on Tony’s thin frame and the arc reactor was peeking out from behind the collar of the undershirt. Steve tried not to stare but the mechanism was beautiful with its glow and linear flower-like design. His fingers itched to sketch it.

Steve held up the supplies he collected and Tony’s eyes grew larger as he gasped, “Food!”

He snatched the apple and loaf from him and began to devour it like a wild animal.

Steve tossed the shoes on the floor and said, “If you were hungry, you should have just said something.”

“I really didn’t notice until I saw it,” Tony said between bites.

“Sir, is used to long periods of no nutrition and has been repeatedly reminded of the importance of
“Sustenance,” Jarvis stated.

“Seriously?” Steve gasped.

Tony shot a glare at his robot and then shrugged.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Steve asked with concern.

“Nah, just a place to sleep.” Tony replied. He was slowing down on eating so Steve grabbed his canteen and tossed it to Tony. Tony caught it with a grin and said, “Thanks.”

“I can’t get you a bunk tonight. You’ll have to be assigned one by your superior and I have yet to inform the head of mechanics he’s got a new guy as he’s asleep.”

Tony shrugged and said, “I can just sleep in my suit. That’s what I’ve been doing since I got here…”

Steve glanced at the metal suit. When it had opened he didn’t remember seeing any padding on the inside. He commented, “That doesn’t sound very comfortable.”

Tony grinned again and replied, “I’ve slept in worse places.”

Steve shook his head and suggested, “Sleep in my bed. There’s more than enough room.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed and he asked, “You sure?”

“Bucky and I shared a smaller bed when we lived together. I’m fine with it as long as you are,” Steve replied.

Tony looked at the bed with a stare akin to longing and then looked back to Steve to slowly reply, “Yeah, sure, we can do that.”

Steve nodded, happy to help.

As Tony finished his food, Steve threw the dirty bath water out of the window and then set the tub outside for one of the quartermaster’s men to pick up. He then stripped to his underthings and slipped into the side of the bed closest to the door.

Tony wordlessly turned off the lights and Steve murmured, “Add some wood to the fire.”

Tony scooped up a handful from the basket and threw it in the stove. The fire inside flared and promised to keep burning for a few more hours. Tony’s side of the bed was closest to the stove and should keep him warm throughout the night.

Tony slipped into the bed and it shifted slightly from his weight. The glow from the reactor gave off enough light for them to see each other. Steve turned to Tony and whispered, “Goodnight.”

Still grinning, Tony replied, “G’night, Cap.”

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“Wakey-wakey Stevie, the Commandos want to go ov –.”

Steve had only the span of a few sleep addled seconds to focus. Bucky barged into his room like he always did when he thought Steve was sleeping in too late and in another step he’d see Tony in his bed.
Tony had made him swear that he told no one, Bucky included. Tony’s visible reactor would give away whatever deceptions they planned.

So Steve did the only thing he could think of, he grabbed the smaller man and pulled him tightly into his embrace so his chest was plastered against Steve’s and the light from his reactor was put out.

Tony grunted from the unsuspecting impact and sleepily gasped, “Wha – Wha’s goin’ on?”

Bucky jolted to a stop at the foot of his bed. He looked back and forth between Tony to Steve with large eyes and his brows increasing in height with every passing second. Finally, he stuttered, “You promised you’d never let any of them sleep over!” Bucky looked over to the door. It was only open just a crack and no one would’ve been able to see in but Bucky ran over to it, cursing, “Christ!”

He slammed the door closed and bolted the lock. He turned back to Steve with a furious glare and hissed, “Are you trying to get discovered??”

“Wha –?” Tony began to ask and pushed at Steve’s chest. Steve pulled him tightly back into his arms and looked down at the man meaningfully and tapped his own chest where the arc reactor would be in Tony’s chest. Tony’s eyes widened in understanding and he began to pull the blankets toward his chest. Steve loosened his hold on him to let him pull the blankets up and he fully let go of him once he was satisfied Bucky wouldn’t see anything.

Steve’s eyes quickly scanned the room but didn’t see the suit. Was Jarvis there, hiding with its superior technology? Or was it gone?

Bucky stalked back to the foot of his bed and looked furious.

“Buck…” Steve didn’t know where to begin. He made a promise to Tony to keep his secret and protect the future. But this was his best friend, a man he considered his brother… He’d never lied to Bucky before which was why Bucky was so concerned right now. He knew Steve’s deepest and darkest secrets, especially the one he thought Steve had let slip.

“Steve, you said you’d never sleep with anyone who knew who you were, nonetheless someone in our unit!” Bucky picked up the mechanic uniform and held it up like it was evidence for a murder. “There are already rumors in the camp but the brass can ignore rumors! They can’t ignore facts or a damned participant!”

“You…You think I slept with him?” Tony asked incredulously. “As in we had sex?!”

“Oh, don’t pretend to be innocent,” Bucky snapped. His glare fell back on Steve and he demanded, “How long has this been going on?!”

“You’re gay?!” Tony gasped to Steve.

“None too gay right now,” Steve grumbled to the man behind him. Tony was handsome and Steve probably shouldn’t have been so familiar with him as he shaved him but he didn’t flirt or ogle… much. He lived up to his promise to Bucky though. He didn’t make any passes toward Tony.

He looked back to Bucky, guiltily biting his lip, and truthfully replied, “I…I met him a few days ago.”

“You barely know him and you trust him enough to fuck him?!”

“Oh, my God, you’re gay,” Tony gasped. “And, apparently, you like to hook up with strangers.”
Steve looked over his shoulder to glare at the man in his bed. He repeated, “I am not gay right now.” Steve was the opposite of gay. Why would he be happy about this predicament?

“Captain America is gay,” Tony whispered, sounding star-struck.

“You keep saying that, but you don’t seem to be following our conversation,” Bucky stated, looking at Tony as if he was a crazy person. He continued, “This is a serious matter. Steve is not gay right now! Neither am I! Who are you??”

“This…” Steve looked desperately at Tony, not knowing what to say.

Tony sighed heavily and dropped his blankets.

Bucky’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as the arc reactor was revealed.

“Okay, first history lesson about the future. The meaning to the term ‘gay’ has changed a little in my era...”
Tony was struggling not to laugh at the soldiers’ expressions.

Bucky looked from Tony and then to Steve and then back to Tony again.

He pointed at Tony’s glowing chest and made a strangled noise.

Tony turned to Steve and asked, “So how long have you been a gay homosexual?”

“I – ugh…” Steve murmured distractedly as he stared at Bucky.

“Wait!” Bucky held up his hand. Bucky pointed at Tony’s chest with both of his hands and gasped, “You have a freaking light in your chest.”

“I’m from the future, keep up, dude,” Tony retorted.

“What’s with you two and the obsession with my chest? Do you two find that most attractive in a man or something? Holy shit?! Are you two an ‘item’?”

Bucky and Steve looked at each other in disgust and said together, “No!”

Bucky added, “I’m a lady’s man!”

Tony rolled his eyes and answered Bucky’s prior question by stating, “This thing in my chest is an arc reactor, it keeps me alive…” Tony slipped out of the bed and stretched his arms above his head. “It also helps keep my suit nicely charged…speaking of which, J?”

The Iron Man suit was exactly where he had left it last night. Jarvis was in sentry mode and had merely turned on all its stealth capabilities when Bucky had entered the room, but, with Tony’s inquiry, it reappeared and both Steve and Bucky jumped.

Having listened in, Jarvis stated, “At these levels, the suit will require a full charge in three more hours.”

“Perfect,” Tony stated, turning his attention back to the other two. “That leaves us enough time to discuss all of this.” Tony waved his hands between them. Bucky would, no doubt, want to talk about him being from the future and Tony would have to make sure both men do not talk about Tony being from the future to the others BUT, first… Tony needed to know all the juicy details about Steve’s mano-y-man activities!

“Buck, he’s Howard Stark’s son, he was in the suit,” Steve stated, slipping out of the bed.
“And Steve is gay, which, in the 21st Century equates to being homosexual and how in the hell did I not know he was gay?!” Tony butt in.

Bucky sat down heavily onto the bed and Steve and Tony positioned themselves in front of him. Steve and Bucky exchanged meaningful looks but did not reply. Tony pressed, “C’mon, I heard what you two said, I wasn’t born yesterday. In fact, technically, I haven’t been born yet.”

“O-Only Bucky knows the entire truth…” Steve stated.

“Steve!” Bucky hissed in warning.

“He knows now,” Steve reasoned. “And I doubt he’ll tell anyone, we know his big secret too!” Steve turned to Tony and said, “Plus, he seems like a guy you can trust.”

“Aw, thanks, Cap.”

Steve flushed and adverted his gaze, “I…I’ve been, well, how’d you say it? Gay? I’ve been, uh, gay my entire life. Bucky and I lived together so he met some of the fellas I took home.”

“Didn’t really meet them. More like I saw them in passing. They never stayed long…”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a sad sigh.

“So no one else knows…?”

“Peggy knows I like men but she does not know how far my relations with men have gone,” Steve stated with a flush. “She is a lady after all.”

“And there are some rumors,” Bucky added. “Whenever we stop in a major city, some fellas in camp noticed Steve would disappear into the less nicer parts. Everyone is trying to figure out what he does. A few guessed right but, luckily, they are just one of many hunches…” Bucky stared at him in disbelief and gasped, “You’re really from the future?”

“Yup,” Tony replied, popping the “P” with a loud smack of his lips. He asked, “I know it’s frowned upon in this era but is it really that bad if there’s even an inkling of Captain America being gay?”

Steve’s face flexed oddly and his gaze widened. Tony spared him just a glance before his eyes were drawn to Bucky as he replied, “It would be disastrous. The military is usually lax when it comes to the common soldiers but anyone who’s higher up…or under the public eye like Steve is…He could go to jail or worse…”

“Worse?”

“It’s just Bucky being paranoid,” Steve murmured, shaking his head. “I don’t do it that much and, apparently, everyone in the future think me and Peggy had a thing so I think we’ll keep doing rather well in hiding it…”

“Yeah, about that, you’re from the future!” Bucky stated, turning it around to that glaringly obvious fact. “And a light bulb is in your chest keeping you alive? And you’re Howard’s son??”

“Yes, we’ve gone over all of this already,” Tony replied drolly.

“It’s not much to go on,” Bucky grumbled.

“That’s all I can tell you. A lot happens in the future, the coming year especially…and I can’t risk
either of you changing it,” Tony stated seriously.

Images from the reports and scenes from movies replayed in Tony’s mind as he remembered both men were not expected to live much longer. Barnes would go first and then, less than a week later, Rogers would die. It was clear both would die for the other or…be willing to change the future to save the other and Tony couldn’t risk it.

“No way,” Bucky gasped. “You have to tell us how we end up at least!”

“Bucky…” Steve murmured in warning but Bucky kept going.

“I get married, right? My wife has to be a gorgeous dame! How many kids did we have? OH, MY GOD, WAIT!” Bucky grasped Tony’s shoulders and gravely asked, “Do I lose my hair?”

Tony plastered on his blank board members’ meeting face and truthfully answered, “No, you keep the hair.”

Bucky fist pumped thinking he dodged a natural ailment of aging…but the horrible irony was that he’d never even get the chance to lose his hair because he was going to lose his life first.

Bucky turned to Tony and asked, “So what are we like in the future? Do all of us still hang out or did we all split up after the War? Does Gabe go back to school? Does Steve go back to drawing?? Come on future man, tell us!”

Tony shook his head and murmured, “No.”

“W-Why not?” Bucky gasped. He inhaled sharply and gasped, "You lied, didn't you?"

Tony's heart seized. He was found out. Bucky guessed the truth. What gave him away??

"I do go bald, don't I!" Bucky demanded.

Steve sighed heavily and shook his head.

"...No, I wasn't lying about that," Tony replied. Despite the situation, a smile tugged at his lips for Bucky's obsession with his hair.

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest and demanded, "Then why can't you tell us?"

Tony bit down on his lip and then replied, “The future…if I reveal these things…they might change.”

Internally, Tony’s mind was screaming with the truth. It was so very tempting to tell them. To help them escape the horrors that awaited them. Because, it was one thing to read about the tragic heroes of the Howling Commandos, but…it’s a whole other to meet these young men and hear their dreams, not of glory…but of a normal future...

Bucky frowned but it went away as soon as Steve put a hand on his shoulder. Steve stated with confidence, “Everything will be okay. We win the War, remember?”

Bucky’s frown was erased and he grinned. They naïvely believed winning the war equated to their own victory and survival.

Bucky nodded and clapped his hand over Steve’s a few times before pushing himself up and off of the bed. He pointedly said to Steve, “Alright, you owe me a drink after nearly giving me a heart attack.” He then turned to Tony and stated, “And you owe me two for putting up with the both of
“You got it,” Tony promised with a grin, happy to switch gears to less serious topics.

“I thought keeping Stevie’s secret was hard enough but now I’m gonna have to deal with keeping your secret too! I can already tell you’re going to be just as frustrating as him.”

“My friends tell me they can only handle small doses of me at a time,” Tony teased.

“Great…” Bucky groaned. “I’ll see both of you at breakfast. Don’t take too long getting dressed or being any more ‘gay’ than you already are…”

“You’re hilarious,” Steve mocked with a dry voice and pushed his friend toward the door.

“Somehow, ‘fruit’ evolves into ‘gay’ in the future, if that ain’t funny, then call me Mucky,” Bucky retorted, strolling over to the door with the same swagger Tony’s father had joked about in his stories. When he reached the door, he waved over his shoulder, and said, “See ya at breakfast, gay boys!”

Tony snorted and Steve rolled his eyes as he closed the door.

“I think I just gave that man his new favorite word,” Tony observed.

“Thanks for that,” Steve grumbled, turning back to him. He crossed the few steps that separated them and then wrapped his arms around his chest as he stared at Tony.

Steve looked like he wanted to say something so Tony said, “What’s up?”

“What you said…earlier,” Steve began. His gaze flickered uneasily and he murmured, “You said being gay is frowned upon in this era but…what about yours? How much has the future changed for…for guys like me? For ‘gay’ guys?”

“Oh,” Tony whispered involuntary. That was why Steve looked uneasy. He wanted hope. Tony’s stomach twisted at the thought. He could give it but Steve would never get to experience it… Tony cleared his throat and then murmured, “Yeah, in my era, everyone is cool with it. It’s considered discriminatory to hate on people just because they’re gay…Gay marriage just became legalized in California and New York is talking about doing the same right now.”

Steve looked…shocked, like he had been expecting Tony to tell him different.

But then Steve smiled and it was filled with such emotion that Tony felt his knees tremble because...wow, what a smile. Steve whispered, “I always dreamed of...maybe finding someone one day. Even that dream seemed farfetched and if I had found someone we could never be public…But, to know that it’s so accepted in the future, it makes my heart soar…” Steve dropped his gaze and smiled sadly as he whispered, “Even if I won’t get it.”

Tony didn’t want Steve to lose heart so he stated, “Don’t say that! Don’t give up!”

Steve smiled sadly at him and patted Tony’s shoulder, murmuring, “You pretty much told me it wasn’t going to happen, you thought I was with Peggy, remember? History remembers me as a normal man who loved women. Don’t worry about it, Tony. I grew up knowing I’d never get what I want but, now, knowing what the future holds for people like me, well…it just makes me happy. I couldn’t ask for anything more. It’s near perfect.”

Tony frowned, not liking Steve’s way of thinking. He was giving up too easily and…Tony may
know the future was bleak for Steve but Steve didn’t know. He should live his life believing he
could one day fall in love and not be afraid. Even Tony, with his one night stands and numerous
flirtations, still believed that one day he’d find the one and settle down.

Knowing that someone like, Captain America, didn’t believe he wouldn’t find love was like saying
fairy tales didn’t get happy endings. It just wasn’t right. He was a symbol of the American Dream -
of hope for the future - and he should be able to hope.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and stubbornly stated, “The future is not written in stone.
Despite all our precautions, my presence is changing it as we speak. For all we know, it’s already
changed. Maybe when I get back to the future, Captain Steve Rogers will be the first man in line to
marry his partner when it gets legalization in New York.”

With glassy eyes, Steve smiled gratefully at him and replied, “I’d definitely lead the charge.”

Tony held out his hand and said, “If you swear to me you will, then it’s practically a done deal.
Captain America never goes back on his promises.”

Steve huskily laughed and then cleared his throat as he took Tony’s hand in his and shook it. He
stated, “Deal, I’ll be one of New York’s first gay marriages.”

Tony’s heart crumbled for the man but he kept up his front and he promised, “I’ll attend the
ceremony and throw you guys the most amazing reception ever.”

Steve was smiling widely now and that hope was shining in his eyes again.

Somehow, it made Tony feel worse.

“Let’s get dressed, put those bandages on you, and then I’ll introduce you to the Commandos,” Steve
said. “And then I’ll get you unofficially a part of the mechanics’ division.”

Tony nodded and grabbed the uniform Bucky had thrown to the ground as Steve happily pulled out
some bandages out of his bag.

Guilt churned inside Tony as he stood back up and looked to Steve.

Everyone has hopes and dreams but everyone also has an end. And as he looked at Steve, he
realized he knew all of it: his hopes, that dream of the future, and the day in which it all come
crashing down in a damaged Hydra plane…No one in the course of human history ever possessed
such knowledge. Yeah, some people may have known they were dying from a disease or they
planned to murder someone. But it was never certain. It was never a fact.

But Tony knew it was an absolute fact that Steve Rogers was going to die before he found someone
to love or saw the bright future Tony told him of.

Tony didn't like the power.

“You okay, Tony?” Steve asked.

Tony plastered his fake press smile on for Steve and replied, “Yeah! How do you want to help me
put on the bandages? You want me standing or sitting?”

“Sitting would be easier,” Steve retorted and Tony jumped onto the bed without another word. He
pulled off his undershirt for Steve and looked at him expectantly.
Tony put his hands on his head as Steve leaned in and began to wrap the bandages around his body. Every time he wound the bandages around Tony’s back they came into an indirect hug. This close to the man, Tony was able to distinguish his personal scent of soft soap and tough leather. He noted that this close Steve just looked younger. His face was clearer, his eyes bluer, and his hair less perfect. It just made him more human and less the fictional superhero Tony had grown up with.

Tony’s emotions were all over the place as he watched Steve wound the cloth bandages around his chest. Steve observed, “You have a lot of scars…”

“It’s mostly from shrapnel,” Tony answered the unasked question. “The rest are from a paltry surgery that was done in the middle of a cave with poor lighting and a patient who was awake for part of it…”

Steve’s fingers twitched against him when he mentioned the surgery but he did not pause in the wrapping. He asked, “Are you a soldier?”

“Nah, back then I was a War Monger. I…I changed after that though…”

“War Monger?” Steve asked, quirking his eyebrow. “You are the last person I’d call a War Monger.”

Tony shrugged and sarcastically retorted, “I was young and liked big explosions.”

Steve snorted and a relaxed silence fell between them. Steve’s hands were gentle as they spread the bandages and smoothed them down in a nearly never-ending touch.

Tony flushed to himself as he imagined Steve with his lovers. Was he this gentle with them? An image of what he imagined flashed through his mind with Steve and a man with his face cast in shadow. They both were naked and Steve’s hands were running over the other’s chest very similarly to what he was doing with Tony.

Tony fidgeted at that thought and Steve paused. He asked, “Is everything alright?”

Tony laughed at himself and replied, “Yeah, just letting my imagination get the best of me.”

Steve gave him a level look, but did not press Tony for any more details and, a few moments later, announced, “Done! And it works pretty well!”

Tony looked down at his chest and saw that Steve had secured the bandages tightly without any light shining through. Tony patted down on the pure white bandages and then stood up. He moved around to make sure they’d stay on and then turned to Steve, saying, “Good job.”

Steve tossed him his undershirt and Tony pulled on the tank and then the rest of his uniform. He smiled down at the plain mechanic uniform and then grinned at Steve. He felt like a kid again, dressing up like a Commando to help Cap, but now it was actually happening!

“Let’s get some breakfast,” Steve said.

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Steve watched Tony from the corner of his eye, repressing a smile.

Tony had been walking around in his Iron Man suit for the last few days in an aloof manner but now he was all wide-eyed and clearly excited. When he was able, he shot Steve random questions about little things he saw like the shoes the soldiers wore or what duties they were performing. He clearly been wondering some things for days and had probably a build up of questions for him. Steve happily
replied when he was able.

As soon as they had left the hall where his room was, they came into the thick of the 107th and Steve had people coming up to him for approvals or questions. He was currently one of the highest ranking officers, Peggy was actually the highest ranking but everyone knew they worked together so Steve was the perfect (less intimidating) proxy. He was probably going to be busy until the rest of the 107th caught up to them with the higher ups.

Tony was usually quiet when someone came up to Steve but, as soon as they were alone, Tony was chattering away again. Steve found himself leaning closer to Tony as he talked, enjoying his company and easy candor.

When they finally got to the mess hall, he easily spotted Bucky and the other Commandos sitting at one of the tables. Bucky also noted their entrance and waved to them. Gabe, Jim, Monty, and Jacques noted their presence upon Bucky’s movement and they too waved and eyed Tony curiously.

Steve waved at them but led Tony over to where the cooks had set up the breakfast line.

They usually were given boxed rations of dry, unappetizing food, but their cooks raided Hydra’s kitchen and had been cooking them up feasts since they found the large kitchen its abundant pantry. Steve’s stomach was growling as soon as smelt the first whiff of sweet brown sugar and bacon. Steve picked up his step and Tony instantly moved in step with him and they quickly joined the line for food.

With an amused tone, Tony murmured, "I like how you guys redecorated the place."

Steve smirked as his gaze flicker over the room. The symbol of Hydra had been carved into the walls but some of the soldiers had found some paint and drew over them, adding things like mustaches or thick glasses. Steve joked, "Some of these guys aspire to be interior decorators."

"I'd hire them," Tony was quick to retort and Steve elbowed him in his side as he smothered a chuckle.

They collected their food onto trays with Hydra’s symbol. Steve’s was unmarked but Tony was delighted to pick up one with a cigar drawn in the skull’s mouth and the American flag plaster over its forehead. He presented it to Steve, stating in a serious tone, "God Bless America and her soldiers."

Steve laughed and pushed the man along. Their meal consisted of fresh oatmeal with brown sugar and raisins, a slice of hot toast, a small cup of canned peaches, greasy bacon, and an uncracked, hard-boiled egg. Tony slowed to a stop, staring down at his tray. Steve bumped Tony with his hip to move him along and Tony did but he was still frowning at his tray.

"What's wrong?"

"Only one piece of bacon..." Tony grumbled.

"We're rationing," Steve teased and Tony sighed heavily and overdramatically, making Steve smile.

He was still smiling when they came up to the table and said, "Hey, everyone, this is Tony."

Bucky was looking particularly between Steve and Tony but, he put on a teasing smile, and added on, "Steve's new gay ol' buddy."

"Oh, my God, do you ever shut up?" Tony groaned collapsing onto the bench beside Bucky.
Steve sat down next to Tony and sarcastically sighed, "Sadly, he's afflicted with the inability to stop being a jerk."

The collective group chuckled at their bickering but the Commandos openly stared at Tony with unbridled curiosity. The only times Steve had brought people to their table was if he was going to be inducting them into the team. Jacques was especially eyeing the new "mechanic" inquisitively and poked Gabe, murmuring something to him in French.

Gabe smirked and then said, "Frenchie wants to know if Tony here is a boring mechanic or a fun one."

"The difference being?" Tony inquired while everyone else smiled knowingly at each other.

"Do you just fix car engines or do you spend your time making things explode?" Jim sarcastically replied.

Both Steve and Tony snorted and exchanged knowing glances.

Tony spread out his hands before him and stated with a smirk, "The boom boom option all the way."

Jacques grinned and must have understood enough of what Tony said as he reached across the table and said, "Bienvenue!"

Tony shook the Frenchman's hand and the rest of the Commandos visibly relaxed as they wordlessly accepted Tony into their tiny group.

"So, Tony where do you come from?" Monty asked. The British man leaned forward with interest and his background with British Intelligence showed when he observed, "I don't think I've ever seen you around camp before."

Steve kept his face passive but he clenched his leg with his fist. They hadn't discussed a background story with Tony! Did he just inadvertently lead Tony into another situation where he'd have to reveal his identity? Steve mentally hit himself in the head. He was supposed to be a master tactician but he'd been tripping over his feet since Tony revealed himself.

"I recently transferred over," Tony replied with a shrug. "I even got myself somewhat groomed last night so I probably look vastly different too." Tony rubbed his bare chin and grinned at Steve.

Steve relaxed under Tony's easy grin and smooth words. Thank God someone was thinking.

"Who's this?" A familiar feminine voice murmured behind him and Tony.

They both turned and he felt Tony stiffen next to him.

Peggy and Howard were holding trays of food and looking at Tony curiously.

He saw Bucky openly compare Tony and Howard, looking between them for similarities. Steve purposely did not do so. But, as he looked at the two newcomers, he couldn’t help but note little things about Howard that he saw in Tony, like the way they each held their shoulders in the same confident manner and had the same dark brown hair. Otherwise, they seemed to be virtual strangers...But, would Howard notice anything?

Peggy perked her perfect eyebrow in question and Steve realized he was just staring at them. He quickly stated, "Oh, um, this is Tony! Tony, this is Agent Peggy Carter and Mr. Howard Stark."
"You're with the mechanics' division, Mr...?" Peggy inquired fluidly taking a seat on Steve's other side. Howard went to the other side of the table and sat across from her.

Steve mentally smacked himself again. Peggy was already fishing for Tony’s last name. Why did Steve have to be friends with so many people who were intelligence gatherers?

"Edwards," Tony replied without beating an eye. He reached across Steve's chest and held out his hand to Peggy, stating, "Second Lieutenant Tony Edwards, ma'am."

He said the name like it truly was his own. Later, Tony would reveal to Steve that Edward was his middle name and he merely omitted mentioning his last name when telling Peggy his name.

Peggy shook his hand and said, "It's nice to meet you, Lieutenant."

Howard was already shoving food into his mouth and he bluntly asked, "Does Jacques like him?"

"Howard..." Peggy sighed.

"Jacques's opinion is an honest assessment!" Howard retorted with his mouth full of food.

"Jacques likes him," Gabe stated to keep Howard and Peggy from bickering.

Howard's eyes lit up and refocused on Tony. He swallowed his food loudly and rested his chin on his fist and drawled, “Well, well, well you just became mildly interesting…”

“Nope,” Tony said, scooping up a large glob of oatmeal. “I'm boring.” He then shoved the food into his mouth and slowly chewed it, looking anywhere but at Howard.

Howard gave him a pinched look, like he thought Tony was somewhat addled, and then transferred that look to Steve and asked, “Please don’t tell me you’re adding another ragtag soldier to your team…”

“Another?!?” Both Jim and Bucky exclaimed together.

“Howard, don’t patronize the Commandos,” Peggy teased the inventor.

“What!?” Howard whined, “They need to expand the group’s abilities, not their numbers! I’m just trying to ascertain Edwards’ worth!”

“Is Edwards joining the Commandos?” Peggy asked, openly staring at Tony from Steve’s other side.

“Well...I...I mean –,” Tony stumbled over his words for the first time since entering the mess hall.

“That’s up to Tony,” Steve stated, interrupting Tony’s babbling. Tony’s face grew lax with shock and Steve reassessed what he said and added, “That is...if you want to?”

Tony’s eyes widened and he stared at Steve as if he held the power to turn the Earth. Everyone was waiting for Tony’s reply and were staring at him but his eyes were riveted on Steve only.

Finally, Tony replied in a breathless gasp, “Yes, yes, yes! Do I have to sign something to make this official? Someone give me a pen!”

Steve and the others laughed. He pulled Tony into a half hug and said, “Welcome to the team!”

Tony returned the hug and smiled at him with the largest grin he’d seen on him yet...and wow, what a smile. Steve's heart beat a little faster and he squeezed Tony's shoulder a little tighter.
Because so many have been asking, it usually takes me a little over a week to write a chapter and I post sometime over the weekend (unless real life strikes when I'm not looking) but, since I'm currently working two fics, the chapters will come out every two weeks or so right now so I can devote time to both works!

BTW since these events are taking place in the middle of a WWII military operation, so please let me know if I misinterpret Army procedures or historical facts!

Thanks for reading! Till next time! :)

Chapter End Notes
It took a total of ten days for Colonel Phillips and the rest of the 107th to make their way through the harsh terrain and the occupied Hydra base.

It was ten days of absolute fantasy for Tony.

The Commandos warmed up to him instantly and he fused into their group as easily as a nuclear reaction. Daily, the team would split into groups of three and patrol the woods along the perimeter of the base and Tony was immediately included in the endeavor. He got to know each member personally as they strolled through the abandoned woods. They were all chipper, funny, and so young. Tony enjoyed getting to know them, or, in the case of Dum Dum and Aunt Peggy, learning knew quirks to their younger natures. The men he had grown up idolizing were very human but it made Tony think all the greater of them.

His being added to the mechanics’ division also went swimmingly. Panzer, the guy in charge of mechanics, took him in with no questions. Once he realized Tony wasn’t half bad with the more technical stuff, he got to help with more interactant machines.

But…

Then there was his dad…

“How do I not know you???”

Tony tried to ignore the fact that his father’s face was hovering only a few inches from his and kept his eyes on the dismantled Hydra ray gun in front of him. Panzer assigned him with the task of replicating its power and Tony readily jumped at the chance of understanding objects connected with the Tesseract.

“I'm from Malibu, California,” Tony dryly replied. His father had never bought property out there and only owned homes on the East Coast so it was safe for him to truthfully reply this little tidbit.

“Even if you lived in the other side of the world, I would have heard at least a whisper of you. You took this thing apart like it was a baby’s four-piece puzzle. My top assistants would need twice the time that you did and they’ve taken them apart before! You have skill. How do I not know of you?”

Because in this timeline, I'm still swimming around in your junk?

Tony looked at his dad’s crotch in disgust. Wait, he really was there right now.

Ew.

Tony did not need to think about this.
His father was still waiting for an answer so Tony simply shrugged.

“Forget Amy Mechanics, forget the Commandos, join my team.”

Tony's hands stilled and he gave his father his full attention.

When he was a teenager, he would plead with his father to let him help him in his projects or try out Tony's ideas.

He had been shot down every time…

But now here he was, wanting Tony to join his team.

It was a bitter irony.

Out of spite, Tony was so tempted to shoot Howard down like he had done to Tony time and time again. Growing up, it'd been Tony’s dream to work with his father but the man never gave him a chance, stating the work was too important for Tony to help.

“Hey, no poaching off my team,” Steve grumbled to the engineer before Tony could say anything.

Tony smiled gratefully at the super soldier.

Steve and Tony had been sticking close together ever since Tony revealed himself to him. Originally, Tony stayed by the man’s side for safety. He needed help navigating the past and Steve was his biggest asset. Tony had also done so with Bucky but, damn, was that man annoying! He kept stealing Tony’s food! Tony was a snacker and so was Bucky apparently. Neither one of their stashes was safe while the other was around…

Steve didn’t seem to mind the extra shadow and helped Tony out wherever he could. Most importantly, he didn’t steal Tony’s small ration of candy.

But they also enjoyed each other’s company. Steve wasn’t as noble as his father or the movies made him out to be. He was crude and funny and a dick sometimes but Tony ate it all up. They could sit down and talk for hours. Tony particularly loved hearing about Steve’s past. There was so much the history books left out on because this man was not the perfect man they made him out to be. He was so much more human with many quirks and weakness that defined him more than his ability to throw a shield or bench press more than humanly possible.

But, most importantly, after getting to know him these past ten days, Tony could call him a friend and Steve did the same of him.

“Yeah…I'm sticking with the Commandos,” Tony dryly murmured to his father and Steve grinned triumphantly at Howard. Howard melodramatically shook his head and sulked off. Tony had to hold in his laughter at the sight.

Steve didn't and chuckled as Howard left the room. Smirking, he turned back to Tony and asked, “This must be extremely bizarre to you.”

“You have no idea,” Tony sighed heavily. He turned his attention back to Steve and, now that they were alone, asked, “What did Phillips want? Are we moving out?”

“Actually, no,” Steve replied. “We need to secure the area. It's why it took them so long to get here. Apparently, the forest outside the perimeter is crawling with Hydra agents.”
“That sounds like a mission for the Commandos,” Tony stated quirking his eyebrow and smiling with a sly smirk.

“Almost Colonel Phillips’ words exactly,” Steve replied with his own smirk.

“I’m so in!” Tony declared.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” Steve asked.

“It was you who said I could be a Commando,” Tony retorted, crossing his arms over his chest stubbornly.

“What level of marksman are you?” Steve countered.

“Level 20.”

“…That makes no sense,” Steve chortled with a laughing smile.

“Makes perfect sense in the future,” Tony replied with airs, making Steve roll his eyes. He’d been using that excuse to get away with things for days. Steve strangely rolled with it. It unnerved Tony at first but it was how Steve was. He rolled with whatever was given him and Tony had fun with it. Tony asked, “So when are the Commandos moving out?”

“That was actually why I came here. I couldn’t really talk to you about it because I was wondering how’d you like to join us on the patrol but Howard was here. Do you want to go as an ordinary soldier? Or Iron Man?”

“Both options are tempting…” Tony murmured. His fantasies as a child had obviously not involved the Iron Man suit but it was also his most valuable asset.

“Everyone is going so it might be odd if our newest member stays behind,” Steve stated. “But Jarvis…”

“Yeah, Jarvis is a little overprotective,” Tony said with a smirk.

His AI’s prime directive was to protect Tony and being in the past put Tony at risk 24/7 so Jarvis’s protective instincts were at an all-time high.

Even at that moment, he could feel the AI’s eyes on him. Tony was sitting out in the open, enjoying the warm sunny day and he bet his entire fortune that Jarvis was lurking in the nearby woods, watching him.

“I don’t need Jarvis to babysit me,” Tony stated stubbornly. “Give me a gun and hiking boots and I’m ready to go.”

Smirking, Steve got to his feet and said, “Alright, I’ll let the others know. We’ll move out in an hour.”

“Aye, aye, mon Capitaine!”

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With an amused smile, Steve watched Tony as he wildly waved his arms around, trying to speak to Jacques with the basic French he knew.

Around him, the team was gearing up or checking their weapons. Steve was fiddling with his
weapon. He’d cleaned it that morning and it was ready to go but his fingers were restless. His eyes, however, were content to linger on the man from the future.

Bucky came to his side and, with one look, he observed, “You like him.”

Steve nodded and replied, “He’s a stand-up guy.”

Bucky positioned himself at Steve's side and reiterated, “No, you like him, Steve.”

“Oh,” Steve murmured, finally understanding Bucky’s insinuation. He cast his gaze down with a flush. He had been watching Tony a lot but…he didn’t think he was that obvious.

“I know you, Stevie,” Bucky murmured.

“Bucky…”

“He told you that stuff about the future,” Bucky whispered, his voice so low that it was near impossible to hear. He even had his hand cupped over his mouth to keep their lip-reading friends in the dark as well. Bucky continued, “But he never outright said he was ‘gay’ too.”

“I know…” Steve sighed, casting his gaze back to Tony. Beginning from the moment he met him, Tony had fascinated him. The man was smart, funny, handsome, and…without even trying, he gave Steve something he never even knew he wanted.

Before Tony, Steve had dreamed of finding another man to love and be loved in return. However, he assumed it was far-fetched. He thought, at most, he’d only be able to keep seeing the men who were only interested in him for his body. The idea of creating a relationship, nonetheless being able to marry another man seemed impossible.

But it was possible.

It could happen in the future…a world where Tony was from.

“Stevie, even if he was…he’s going to be like all the others. He’s not going to stay. He has another life, decades away…”

Steve sighed heavily again and looked back to Tony somewhat wistfully.

He knew what Bucky was saying was true but…Steve couldn’t stop the way his heart was already tentatively reaching out to the other man.

Steve had never been brave enough to romantically love another. The men he’d been with were clearly never interested but Tony…Tony was different and his heart knew it. His brain knew it was a bad idea but his heart still foolishly longed for a connection.

“I know, Buck, I just…” He tore his eyes from Tony and looked to his best friend, he murmured, “Let me have this. I never felt this way before about the others.” Those men had been passing shadows in his life but Tony, with a literal light embedded in his chest, was shining hope he never thought possible.

Steve was drawn to him like a moth to a flame and he knew he was going to eventually get burned…But he didn’t care.

It was a crush and Steve never had one before and may never attain another. He was not going to throw it away, he was going to cherish this…
“Stevie…” Bucky murmured sadly.

“I…I won’t sleep with him,” Steve stated. “We’ll just stay friends. Don’t worry, Buck. Tony probably doesn’t swing that way anyway…”

Bucky lay a hand on his shoulder and Steve leaned into the touch. Bucky whispered, “In his era, he probably wouldn’t have thought twice about it. You are a one of a kind guy.”

“Stop flirting with me, you jerk,” Steve murmured embarrassedly and elbowed his friend in the side.

Bucky clapped his shoulder one last time and they traded sad but meaningful glances. Bucky left his side and strolled over to Tony, calling out, “Hey! Gay boy! Where’s your belt?”

Tony had no ammunition belt which was more Steve's fault because he forgot to grab one for the time traveler. Tony and Bucky began to trade overly sarcastic words that made the others heavily sigh or roll their eyes. Steve eyed the gun, planning to grab Tony the belt and its ammunition but stopped himself…because Tony was carrying one of Hydra’s guns, the very one he had been tinkering with.

He walked up to Tony and asked, “Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Oh, yeah!” Tony laughed. He turned to Bucky and poked him in the chest and stated, “So no ammunition belt!”

Dum Dum was the last to arrive, adjusting his favorite bowler hat and smiling apologetically. The team was quick to move out once he was there. Steve had Tony keep close to him to make sure he really could handle the gun and to better help him understand how their team worked out on the field. He and Tony walked side-by-side whereas the rest of the team took their usual combing formation, stretching out and putting a large gap between each member but still staying within sight of one another.

Steve happened to glance to his right and saw Bucky also looking. His best friend wiggled his eyebrows in Tony’s direction and Steve looked away with a huff.

Curiosity got the better of him, however, and he looked to his left at Tony.

Tony was smiling widely as they all moved in unison. It was the same big, happy smile he wore when Steve first suggested he join the Commandos and it made Steve’s chest burst with pride. Being with Steve and his team made Tony look like that. A similar smile split Steve’s lips and he purposely didn’t look over to Bucky, knowing he’d probably be making a face in response to Steve’s smile.

The forest was quiet once they got away from the hustle and bustle of the main body of the 107th. Most of the Commandos were silent but would randomly exchange a word or a joke or two with quiet, muffled voices.

Tony was weirdly silent too. Steve had grown used to his voice as the man obviously liked to talk but he seemed to be taking the situation seriously and his eyes spanned the perimeter, looking around them and…above them?

“Why do you keep looking up?” Steve asked him curiously. The threat of snipers in the trees was very low as the branches were extremely sparse and too thin to bear any real weight. Bucky was trained in looking for them and he was positive his friend would spot any if there was a sniper in the trees.

Tony spared the sky one last glance and then murmured, “I think my suit is following us from
above…I thought I saw a distortion…”

Steve looked up too and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. He murmured, “Are you sure?”

“It’d be something Jarvis would do,” Tony sighed heavily. “The suit is probably in full stealth mode and, from this height, even I wouldn’t be able to see it. You don’t have to worry about it. Jarvis will only come if my life is at stake.”

“Well let’s hope it won’t have to come to that,” Steve murmured, sparing one more glance up to the sparse canopy and blue skies. His eyes returned to the horizon and his resolve back to the mission. Jarvis being overprotective of his master was not as bad as Tony made it out to be. It meant Steve did not have to worry as much about Tony’s safety.

Steve and Colonel Philips had mapped out where the Commandos were going to look prior to the mission. If all went well, they’d be out there for four hours and be back before dinner time. As the hours passed and Tony grew bored, Steve was beginning to wonder what the cooks were going to make for dinner.

Which was when Hydra attacked.

The first shot hit close to Steve’s head, destroying a nearby tree with its blue light.

“Finally!” Tony whooped and cocked his gun with an excited grin. He charged forward and Steve raced after him.

“Wait!” He gasped, “We need to stay in formation!”

Tony ran into a clearing and pointed his gun in the direction the shots were coming from. He pulled the trigger and nothing happened. Tony cursed to himself and fiddled with his gun, ignoring the blue rays that were shot in his direction.

“Tony!” Steve hissed and Tony turned toward him just as Steve impacted him.

Steve jumped on him and forced Tony’s body into a nearby ditch. Tony grunted from the impact, but he too pressed himself into the ground as the air above them exploded with blue light. They were chest to chest and Steve wrapped his limbs around Tony to best protect him from Hydra’s weapons.

Tony’s heart beat wildly against Steve’s chest and he grabbed onto Steve’s sides with a tight grip. They both pressed their faces into each other’s neck to protect their eyes from the sparks and burning light. When the Commandos retaliated with their own fire, the Hydra soldiers were forced to stop shooting and hunker down. The firing stopped and the two of them were finally able to breathe.

They slowly pulled their faces away from each other’s necks, wary that it wasn’t safe. Steve went to look at Tony to make sure he was okay but Tony did the same, bringing his face much closer than Steve thought it would be.

Their lips brushed and Steve jerked back in surprise.

The Hydra soldiers fired immediately and Steve ducked his head down, bringing his face over Tony’s with centimeters to spare. Their breaths intermingled in hot gusts and all Steve could think about was the sensation on his lips from where Tony’s lips had touched his just seconds ago. He could feel blood rushing to his cheeks but could not look away from Tony’s piercing gaze.

“Come here often?” Tony joked with a crooked and most definitely flirty grin.
Steve’s heart rate raised exponentially and his flush deepened.

There was another explosion closer overhead and Steve pressed his face into Tony’s neck as he jerked away from the blast. Steve lifted his head back up, his flush growing. Steve avoided the awkward situation they were in and instead chastised, “Why did you charge ahead? And what happened to your gun?”

“My fiddling must have done something to it,” Tony murmured. His gaze flickered away and he added, “I…I just wanted to help out and may have been a little reckless.”

“May?” Steve quoted with a scoff.

“Alright, it was a little reckless…and is that Jarvis?,” Tony retorted, shifting beneath him. His hips rubbed into Steve’s as he scooted up and Steve inhaled sharply as the innocent act translated into something much less innocent to his body.

He tightened his hold on Tony and gasped, “Stop!”

Luckily, there was another explosion and they both clutched each other to protect themselves again. Tony stopped moving and hopefully assumed Steve had commanded him to stop because of Hydra. As it was, Steve tried to keep his mind on the battle to keep his body from reacting to Tony’s anymore.

Even though Tony felt so good.

Steve turned his head and lifted it slightly so he was looking up and in the direction of Hydra. He couldn’t see much but foliage. He yelled out, “Status report!”

“Covering your stupid ass!” Was Bucky’s near instant reply from nearby.

“We’re fine! Thanks for asking!” Steve retorted and he felt Tony’s body shake as he chuckled. Steve gulped and paused to get a handle on his physical reaction and then continued, “Everyone else good?”

“Yeah, I took command as soon as you decided to catch the idiot who tried to kill himself,” Bucky replied.

“Hey!” Tony retorted indignantly.

“He says it out of love,” Steve told the man beneath him, and to his best friend, replied, “Isn’t that right, jerk?”

“Shut up, punk!”

“So caring,” Steve sighed and Tony chuckled again.

Steve looked back down to Tony and his nose brushed against the time traveler’s. Steve flushed and pulled back a little as he asked, “Are you really alright?”

“Yeah, just my ego’s damaged,” Tony retorted. “This was not how I imagined my first outing with the Commandos…”

“Bucky will definitely not let you live this down,” Steve stated with a knowing air, making Tony groan.

Steve’s mind instantly focused on the groan and provided scenarios in which Tony could make those
noises. Steve’s flush deepened and he looked at the mossy ground to avoid Tony’s eyes.

“You okay, Cap?” Tony asked. “You weren’t hit, were you?”

Steve shook his head and looked back to his friend and said, “I’m fine.”

Tony looked reassured by his statement and nodded. Their eyes locked again and they stared wordlessly at each other. Steve was admiring his eyes and he couldn’t guess why Tony stared back.

Their eyes broke only once the shooting stopped and Dum Dum yelled out victoriously. Steve lifted his head and looked around them. The fighting had stopped. It looked like the Commandos were victorious again. He looked back to Tony and murmured, “It looks like it’s safe to get up.”

“Oh, yeah, right,” Tony mumbled, extricating his tight grip from Steve’s sides. They were awkward as they tried to find a way to get up without making it any more weird. There was some stumbling into each other and silly chuckles before they finally got to their feet. They brushed themselves off and Steve was already missing the feel of Tony’s body pressed against his. Steve rubbed his face and wished Bucky hadn’t drawn attention to his attraction to Tony before they went out. His mind may have been so focused on Tony’s body if he hadn’t been thinking about him already…

He turned to the man and stated, “Let’s join the others.”

Tony was wearing a faraway expression and it took him a moment to reply, “Yeah, okay, let’s go.” He picked up his obsolete gun and led the way to where the rest of the team was waiting for them. Steve followed and stared at the back of Tony’s head, thinking about how great he felt against Steve.

When Steve took the lead back to base, Tony followed him close behind and then stared at Steve as if he was seeing him for the first time.
Look at your Brother – His Head’s Gone! It’s like he’s been Erased-Erased from Existence!

Since leaving the forest, Tony felt like he was fighting a magnetic pull. His every move was sluggish as he had a constant need to look at or be near Steve.

He couldn’t remember the teasing barbs the Commandos threw at him after the mission, nor the moment when he changed out of his muddy clothes, or when Jarvis left his side after fretting over him.

But he could clearly remember the tiny gasp Steve made as his lips brushed against Tony’s mouth when they nearly kissed. And the way Steve’s hips unconsciously pressed into Tony’s when Tony moved beneath him. And the way Steve’s flush made his eyes look more defined and blue and made Tony not want to look away but sink into those blue depths.

He’d felt this way before, he knew what it was, but…but…

It was silly.

However, Tony kept looking at Steve, searching for that strange feeling he felt in the heat of battle. He chewed on his thumb and watched Steve as he and Monty laughed at something Jim had said. Steve’s laugh made the butterflies in Tony’s stomach flutter and his denials began to crumble.

They got back to the camp late so they had the mess hall to themselves and were given a crate of beer in addition to dinner for a job well done. The men merrily dug in and Tony sipped at his beer, watching their leader with a critical eye.

Bucky fell into the seat next to him and asked, “What’s your beef?”

“How?” Tony asked, finally breaking his gaze from Steve.

“You’re practically glaring holes into Stevie there. Did you two get into a disagreement while hunkered down in your hole?”

“I’m not glaring,” Tony retorted, “Just staring.”

“Then why are you staring so much at my best friend?”

Tony was saved from answering when Gabe produced his fiddle and started to play a merry tune. Everyone turned to him and clapped in approval.

Dum Dum grabbed Steve’s arm and started to do a bastardized version of the dosey-doe. Tony didn’t have to have an excuse to watch him as they were now the center of attention, swinging around the tables without a care.

Steve laughed, his smile huge and his cheeks rosy. Tony’s body thrummed with pleasure from seeing Steve so and, when Tony realized what he was feeling, he chugged half the beer bottle in response.

Bucky was clapping along with the beat and whooping for Steve and encouraging him through his poor dance moves. Steve kept stumbling into Dum Dum and tripping over his own feet. It was quite a sight seeing such a large man have such wobbly limbs. Tony smiled despite himself. Steve’s clumsiness was endearing.
Dum Dum was also falling all over the place but that was mostly because he was drunk.

When Dum Dum fell into a chair and didn't get up, Tony quickly finished his beer with one last swig and announced, “I'll step in.”

Steve turned to him with a grin and Gabe started a new jaunty tune.

Tony grasped Steve's hands and stated, “I’ll show you how to properly dance, Captain.”

“Go right ahead, Edwards,” Steve retorted still smiling that larger than life smile.

Tony could stare at it all day.

Tony cleared his throat and adopted a very serious expression as he grasped one hand and placed another on Steve's waist. Steve did the same, though his serious expression was over-exaggerated and it looked like he was smothering another laugh behind his twitching lips.

Tony grinned at the super soldier and all the mock seriousness disappeared. Tony led their dance into a wild spurt that had no rhythm or sense. It was just the spinning around, jumping with Gabe’s beat, and holding each other close while sharing laughter and fun in the circle of their arms. They tripped over each other's feet and fell into one another and just laughed and laughed and laughed.

It was probably the most Tony had laughed in a long time.

It’d also been even longer since he last felt this urge to want to make someone laugh like Steve did as they danced.

Gabe eventually finished the song with a loud riff and then bowed to the Commandos. They all cheered and someone thrust another beer into Gabe’s hand, putting a halt to the music.

Tony and Steve let go of each other and exchanged chuckles. Jacques tossed Tony another beer and he cracked it open. When he saw Steve wasn't partaking, he asked, “Why aren't you celebrating?”

Steve shook his head and murmured, “It doesn't affect me like it used to…plus, someone's got to keep a clear head to clean all of yous up before the Colonel sees this.”

They sat down together on a bench and leaned back into the table. Tony chuckled at Steve’s comment and took a sip of the beer. He leaned his head more heavily on one arm that just so happened to bring him closer to Steve and he discreetly looked at him as he drank.

Up close, Steve was more handsome. He had that sharp jaw you'd only see on the cover of romance novels paired with those perfect pink, kissable lips.

Tony got off his arm and leaned away. What was he doing? Why was he doing this to himself? He'd drunk too much if he was allowing his body to dictate his moves. He put the bottle down on the table behind him.

“Tony?” Steve murmured in question.

Tony turned to Steve and was surprised to see how close he was. When Tony leaned away, Steve must have leaned in, keeping little distance between them. Tony couldn’t help but flush and Steve’s eyes seemed to loom closer.

“Steve?” Tony countered, tipping his head to the side with a coy smile despite his earlier reservations. He was a little tipsy but a little flirting never hurt anyone, right?
Steve bumped Tony’s leg with his and murmured, “I… I didn’t hurt your feet much from dancing, did I? Bucky says I got two left feet.”

Tony leaned back onto his arm, sliding it right next to Steve’s and positioned his face inches from the super soldier’s. He replied, “Nah, they’re just fine.”

“Looks like you need help elsewhere, soldier,” Steve replied. The Captain reached over and pinched Tony's chin where Tony had nicked himself shaving. He’d been practicing on himself ever since Steve first helped him shave. With every day, he had improved but still made accidental cuts.

The cut stung slightly from the touch but he didn’t really feel it. Tony only really noticed that Steve's thumb was now touching the corner of his mouth. It'd be so easy to playfully bite it. Steve's fingers lingered and Tony's eyes were drawn back to his blue gaze.

As soon as their gazes met, Steve’s eyes were searching his, for what, Tony could only guess at… because, before he could find whatever it was he was looking for, Bucky butted in.

He forcibly sat between them, breaking them apart and wrapped his arms around their shoulders. Tony instantly frowned at him, displeased by his presence. A ghost of Steve's touch remained on his flesh and he ran his fingers over his chin as if to make sure he really was no longer there.

“Alright, gay boys, I think you’ve both had enough to drink,” Bucky stated, shaking their shoulders in unison.

“Bucky,” Steve groaned his best friend's name like it was a curse.

“Oh, don’t ‘Bucky’ me,” Bucky hissed to Steve. “It looked like you two were five seconds from sucking on each other’s faces.” He leaned in closer to Steve and in an even lower voice, grumbled, “You told me this was only a crush…”

Tony wasn't supposed to hear it and he knew he wasn't by the way Steve's eyes snapped over to him to check to see if heard. Steve blanched and Tony knew that his face must have been an open book.

It was one thing to speculate or flirt…but to know that Steve…

Tony got to his feet, easily slipping from Bucky's hold and stated, “I…I think I’m going to hit the sack early.” Steve was staring up at him with stark fear and it made Tony's insides twist. He turned away from them and to the team said, “G’ Night, Commandos!”

“Don’t charge in, you might scare your bunk mates!” Jim teased, making fun of Tony’s reckless rush into Hydra fire.

The Commandos laughed and Tony rolled his eyes. He replied, “Alright, jerks, I’ll see you in the morning.”

With a racing heart, Tony avoided Steve and Bucky's gazes and made his way to the exit.

Tony just reached the doors when he heard Steve behind him say, “Wait up!”

Tony paused, his heartbeat picking up a little more, as he turned to the Captain. Steve’s face was a mask but Tony felt trapped by his worried eyes.

How was it possible for a human being to have eyes such a piercing blue??

Steve strolled to a stop beside Tony and said, “I… I’m done here too. Let me walk with you.”
“Sure,” Tony replied and they fell into step beside each other. Tony’s hand instantly was drawn to Steve’s…He wanted to hold it.

Crap.

He couldn’t deny it anymore…

He was attracted to freakin’ Captain Steve Rogers of the goddamn 20th Century.

Great Scott.

He’d had a short fling with a guy in college but had never felt attracted to another man until now. He’d thought it’d just been a faze…he never imagined it’d happen again…and with Steve Rogers of all people!

He could proudly call the man his friend. They had spent the last several days mostly in each other’s presence and developed a close trust. They knew each other’s deepest secrets so they obviously easily shared the rest. It’d be so easy to trust Steve with his fragile heart. He already trusted the man with so much more.

Nevertheless, there was absolutely nothing Tony could do about it. He was a man out of time falling for a man fated to die soon. It was an atrocious twist of fate.

Tony clenched his fist and diverted his attention by asking Steve, “Why are you leaving early?”

Steve shrugged and murmured, “Like I said, drinking doesn’t seem to affect me anymore and…”

“And..?” Tony pressed, placing his hand on the door and opening it slightly.

“Well, I was wondering if you wanted to take the long way back? The moon is full tonight and it’s pleasant outside…” Steve’s words trailed off and his cheeks were lightly flushed. “It’s a nice night and it’d be a shame to enjoy it alone.”

“Steve…Ah – I mean – I…” Tony struggled for words, a flush growing in his own cheeks.

In his entire life, he’d never imagined himself in this situation. It was reckless to even consider it. He was torn, wanting to be with Steve and wanting to protect the future as well.

“We don’t have to…” Steve murmured with a shrug and downcast gaze.

Ugh, now he looked like a sad puppy.

Who was Tony kidding? Steve knew there could be nothing between them. He just wanted to enjoy the night with a friend, nothing more. Tony was overreacting to these new feelings inside him and the fact that Steve liked him too. He needed to keep a cool head. The worst that could happen would for them to talk about their feelings and acknowledge they were both being ridiculous…

He truthfully replied, “I’d love to go…”

Steve smiled in response and Tony knew right there that it was a very nice smile, probably one of the top ten he’d seen in his lifetime.

Tony went through the door and began to move forward. Steve caught up to him and they wordlessly fell in step. Tony bumped into Steve’s side as they walked and Steve leaned into it with their hands occasionally brushing.
Tony began to inanely talk about the Hydra gun, explaining the misalignment with some coils inside was the reason it hadn’t worked in the fight. He was indepth with the details and was probably over explaining it but Steve listened with a small smile and made agreeing noises to show he was listening.

It was a warm night and neither of them needed additional layers to keep them warm. They walked around the perimeter of the building, mostly to themselves, save the occasional sentry.

When the main entry door came into view, Tony was a little disappointed to see it. Steve turned to him and said, “Thank you for joining me. I…I like spending time with you.”

Tony took a step closer to the super soldier and murmured, “Me too…”

Steve adverted his eyes for a second and ran his hand through his hair. He whispered, “What Bucky said earlier…like I told him, don't worry about it…it's - it's nothing.”

“It didn't sound like nothing,” Tony murmured, taking a step back to give Steve some space. He had been anticipating and dreading this conversation.

A bright red blush blossomed across Steve’s cheeks and he mumbled, “I…Tony, I – I like you in… in more than just a friend way.” Steve's face got impossibly redder and he continued, “You're probably the first man I've actually felt this way about. Before, I lived my life believing it was impossible…” Steve finally was able to meet his eyes though his face was rather quite red, he continued, “You made it possible and…even though ‘we’ aren't possible…I-I like this feeling…”

It was Tony's turn to turn bright red. He had, had a reputation for being playboy but he'd never been confessed to in such a pure way. It reminded him of those sappy romances that he never thought possible. But here stood Steve, flushing madly and smiling at him with that small cute but nervous smile.

Tony stuttered in reply, “I – I…thank you? Um…” He needed to say more. Hell, he wanted to say so much more but he wasn't as brave as Steve was and couldn't be so forthright. He usually danced around his feelings and he never put his heart out on display like Steve was doing.

Steve chuckled before Tony could think of more to say and he said, “You’re welcome, I guess?”

Steve took a step toward the door and looked like he was going to end the conversation. Tony's hand shot forward and he grasped Steve's hand to stop him. Steve appeared shocked by the move and he looked at Tony in confusion.

Tony let go of him and gasped, “Me too!”

Steve cocked his head to the side, clearly not understanding.

Tony's heart was racing but he needed to say this. No, Steve needed to hear this. Steve was going to die without knowing another’s affection and it just wasn’t right. Tony stated, “I mean…” He couldn't believe he was doing this and stated, “The feeling is mutual.”

Steve's eyes widened and his blush returned in a rush. He shyly smiled and wound his fingers around Tony's. Steve whispered, “Tony…” He bit down on his lip and then murmured, “Thank you.”

Maybe it was the influence of the beer or maybe it was that utterly sincere look in Steve’s eyes, but Tony pulled Steve in by their connected hands and out of sight of the doors into the dark shadow of a corner. Steve didn't resist in the slightest and even relaxed into his hold as Tony gently embraced Steve. Tony cupped Steve’s jaw and then rose up on his toes to kiss the super soldier. Steve met him
halfway and they both closed their eyes as their senses became overwhelmed by the presence of the other. Tony idiotically rationalized to himself that this was his own way of saying thank you in return.

It was supposed to be brief, but...he lingered... and then Steve’s hands were in his hair and he was pressing Tony into the wall and Tony’s fingers were spreading across the muscle of Steve’s back and he opened his mouth and...

“Sir,” Jarvis suddenly interrupted them with a stern tone. Tony and Steve separated in an instant and both of them looked to where Iron Man was landing a few feet behind Steve.

Jarvis must have been watching him again. Tony flushed to himself, knowing why Jarvis chose to make his appearance now of all times.

His AI had conveniently assisted them in the Hydra ambush (though Tony saw none of it because he’d been too busy staring at Steve). Tony knew Jarvis had been following him then so it shouldn’t have been such a surprise that he’d continue to do so.

Jarvis stated, “I must persist in an immediate end to what is going on between you two. The future is at risk with every passing second.”

“J…” Tony sighed heavily. His heart was slowing down and Tony’s insides were a strange mix of emotions. He murmured to his AI, “Make yourself scarce. Give us a moment.”

“A moment of reflection,” Jarvis advised and stepped back until he disappeared into the shadows. The only clue to his continued observance was the glow of Iron Man’s eyes burning through the darkness.

Tony ran his hands through his hair, sighing heavily again, and turned to Steve. Steve looked ashamed but, when their eyes met, Tony saw that there was a smolder there purely for Tony.

Tony had realized he just learned a few things about Captain America: (1) He was a great kisser, and (2) He was no Boy Scout.

And (3) Tony wanted to go back to kissing him...

“I’m sorry,” Steve stated, finally breaking the silence growing between them.

Tony shook his head and unconsciously stepped closer to Steve, murmuring, “No, it was my fault. I initiated it.”

“Bucky would've blown a gasket if he saw us,” Steve observed with a small smile.

Tony smile too and he leaned in to privately whisper, “Jarvis’s chips are probably smoking right now.”

Steve chuckled and he smiled happily at Tony. They were standing too close but Tony didn't make any moves to put distance between them. Tony merely smiled in return.

Steve wrapped his arms around his own waist as if to keep himself from touching Tony and, with a frustrated sigh, Steve said, “This sucks…”

“I know…” Tony sighed.

“I really like you, Tony,” Steve whispered. “I…I know we can't but…” Steve chuckled to himself
and mumbled, “I don't want to leave this alone now that…that I know.”

“But we’re going to have to bow out. I can honestly say it was the shortest affair I have ever had,” Tony said, not liking it at all. He didn’t want to and he didn’t want to deny Steve as well.

“…And it was the closest thing I had to an actual relationship, despite how short and unofficial it was,” Steve observed sadly. Steve leaned in and whispered, “But…thank you for telling me. I’m glad to know that there could have been an ‘us’ in another life…”

Tony reached out and grasped Steve’s cheek. Tony’s entire being wanted to comfort the super soldier upon Steve’s sad words. It wasn’t fair, to Steve especially.

“Sir,” Jarvis stated in warning, stepping out of the shadows.

“I know, J,” Tony waved off his AI but the suit remained where it was standing, watching Steve and Tony with an unwavering gave.

“I guess this is goodnight, Steve,” Tony sighed, pulling away from the super soldier.

Steve reached out and lightly grasped Tony's hand as he whispered, “Goodnight, Tony.”

Steve did not let go of his hand until Jarvis tersely repeated, “Sir.”

They let go of each other and stepped back. Steve went inside and Tony remained where he was standing in the dark, watching Steve until he was gone.

Jarvis walked up to his side and stated, “That was extremely dangerous, Sir. I know you like to take your own life in your hands but now the fate of the entire future is at stake. You cannot seek idle flirtations here.”

“I wasn't trying to, J,” Tony sighed and kicked over some pebbles. He murmured, “If this were my timeline and Steve was just another man…” Tony looked to the door Steve had disappeared through and seriously stated, “In another life, nothing would've been an idle flirtation about us…”

Jarvis said nothing and Tony sadly chuckled to himself, trying to put on a fake face for his robot. He tried to put Jarvis at ease and sauntered in the direction of the barracks where he'd been assigned a bunk. He walked slowly, enjoying the night and reminiscing that short walk he shared with Steve. Jarvis followed, not far behind but silent.

Tomorrow would be there before he knew it and he had to face a new reality with Steve. It was going to be near impossible to remain just-friends now. His body figuratively felt a pull toward Steve whenever they were in the same area.

Steve was fated to die and Tony accepted that. What he couldn't accept was what was happening between had to fizzle and die just because of that too. Steve was destined to never fall in love, but, maybe Tony could help him find something close to it…it wasn't going to be permanent but it'd still be something…Tony had many flings like that in his life. It’d be all fun and amazing but it’d eventually perish and they’d part as friends. Steve would have that relationship he craved before he died. Tony could give that to him at least.

As Tony planned, he determined Jarvis would probably become worse in his grumblings but, he wouldn't try to stop them. Tony was his master and he would obey him. Tony could handle his AI's commentary. He’d loved and lost many times over a lifetime. Another name added to his ledger would make no difference, even one as great as Steve Rogers.
Tony paused outside the barracks as his resolve grew. He could do this...he wanted to do this. He liked Steve and Steve liked him. This was going to be easy. Tony knew what he was getting into and, if Steve wanted to go through with it, then he’d know what to expect too. This would be a brief affair only and then Tony would return to the future and Steve would martyr himself in saving their country.

They weren’t going to be permanent. This wasn’t going to be a problem. History won't change.

Behind him, Jarvis continued to stare at the back of his head with its unwavering gaze but, with Tony's decision, the MK 15 inscription on Iron Man’s chest faded away, like it had never been inscribed there in the first place.
You’re Just not Thinking Fourth Dimensionally

Now that Tony was sleeping in the barracks, Tony had taken to bathing in a spring behind the Hydra compound. It was bitterly cold and no one else used it for this reason which gave Tony the privacy he needed when removing the bandages around his chest and properly cleaning the stink of the day off of him.

Waist deep in the water, Tony’s joints were beginning to ache, even the flesh around his arc reactor was throbbing. He rubbed the skin around the reactor to try and dispel the feeling but received no such result.

He had yet to see Steve since last night and he was excited to reveal his plan to the super soldier. In his vanity, he wanted to look the best when he suggested their affair...hence his bathing.

Jarvis stood sentry at the edge of the pool with its arms crossed over its chest. Something was off about the suit. Maybe it was the way Jarvis stood? It was very subdued compared to Tony’s usual cocky stance in the armor.

Tony stared at the suit as he rubbed the army regulated soap into his skin. It had a weird scent to it. It wasn't bad…but it wasn’t nice either. Definitely nothing like the more expensive soaps he was used to in the future...

It was only at that moment Tony happened to note the MK 15 marker was gone from the armor.

Tony paused and, for a second, his mind sputtered as he searched for a reason for it to be gone. But then he realized what had happened in a matter of seconds.

When had Jarvis removed it? It was such an insignificant clue to the past that Tony hadn’t even considered using the armor’s stealth technology to hide it. Had Jarvis done so as soon as Tony left the suit? Was it trying to somehow protect the future by hiding such an insignificant marker?

Before Tony could ask, Jarvis stated, “I do not require another charging, sir.”

Tony did not correct his AI’s assumptions for his staring but he did sigh heavily to himself. In the future, the Iron Man units were connected to the larger arc reactor that powered both his home and lab. They never needed charging from his personal reactor to operate separately, especially since he mostly used the suits while wearing them. As soon as he got back to the future, the first thing he was going to do was install arc reactors in all of his suits. The suit needed to be charged at least once a day and it was really starting to get in the way. What was he going to do when they moved out? How was he going to charge his suit in the middle of the 107th without anyone noticing?

Tony did not linger in the cold water long and grabbed the towel he had left at the water’s edge and patted himself down as he shivered. Jarvis opened the suits hands and turned the thrusters on their lowest settings to help warm him up. The air heated around him and his shivering lessened.

He dressed quickly and then asked the AI, “How do I look?”

“Like a man, treading a dangerous path,” Jarvis stated. Tony had informed the AI of his intentions that morning and, unsurprisingly, it did not approve.

Tony chuckled, “No one ever said Tony Stark was the epitome of safety standards.”

Jarvis leveled a stare at him, practically radiating its disapproval through Iron Man's slanted gaze.
“Everything will be alright,” Tony assured his creation, stepping away.

Tony left Jarvis with an extra skip to his step and he could feel the AI’s eyes on him even after Tony had left his line of sight.

As soon as Tony exited the forest, he walked around camp, looking for Steve in his usual places.

He finally found the blond in the command tent, hovering over a map with Aunt Peggy. Tony did not enter, just merely looked within. Neither noted his presence and continued to discuss the coordinates on the map before them. He loved watching Steve work, especially when he was concentrating on something. A small crease always appeared between his brows and his bottom lip jutted out just slightly. It was ridiculously endearing and so different from the easy smile Steve effortlessly wore. But who was he kidding? Steve’s calm smile was also charming.

Yup, Tony was unabashedly smitten.

“Ya need something?”

Tony turned and found Bucky and Monty. They looked like they were going to step in but Bucky’s inquiry stopped them.

“Just wanting a word with Steve,” Tony replied.

“A word, eh?” Bucky murmured, bumping into Tony as he walked past. “Stevie, your gay boy’s here!”

Steve’s head shot up and he smiled as soon as he saw Tony. A light flush brought about by joy burnished Steve’s cheeks was instantly mirrored on Tony’s face. Bucky’s little glib went unnoticed by the others but Bucky was now looking between the two of them particularly. Tony pretended not to notice.

Steve lightly touched Peggy’s arm and murmured, “We’ll continue this later.”

Peggy’s eyebrows rose a fraction and now she too glanced between the two of them curiously. She did not make any comment however and rolled up the map with a nod. Bucky and Monty walked over to Peggy as Steve went to Tony. Bucky looked between the two of them with a pinched brow.

When Steve reached his side, Tony suggested, “Let’s take another walk.”

“Really?” Steve sounded somewhat shocked but he then smiled happily at Tony and replied, “Sure.”

Tony led the way by leading Steve away from the hustle and bustle of camp. With his heart rate picking up, Tony took him into the forest where no one would see them.

They walked in silence, traversing their own path through the thicket and over rocks and roots. When the sound of camp was just a distant murmur, Steve bumped into Tony's side.

“Where are we going?” Steve asked, his voice bouncing with good humor.

Satisfied that no one would interrupt them, Tony leaned into a tree and, wearing his most flirty expression, he smiled coyly at the super soldier. Tony murmured, “I’ve been thinking…”

“About?” Steve inquired, playing with Tony in their now flirtatious game. He placed his hand right next to Tony’s head and leaned over him but did not touch him. Steve was still denying himself…but he wasn't going to have to any longer.
“Us,” Tony replied, lightly touching Steve’s chest with the tips of his fingers.

“Us?” Steve repeated, straightening up and returning his hand to his side. Tony’s fingertips slid off his chest from the sudden movement.

Tony did not relent and reached out to grasp the fold of Steve’s breast pocket and let his arm hang heavily off it. He murmured, “I think we should try ‘us’. We’ll go into the relationship knowing there’s an expiration date but we can still have it.” Tony ran his hand up Steve’s chest and then cupped the side of his neck. Steve did not push him away nor did he break his gaze. He stared at Tony with wide eyes and, beneath Tony’s hand, he could feel Steve’s pulse rising. Tony continued, “It’d be better than denying it, right?”

Tony had expected for Steve to readily agree, especially by the way the man had been smiling at him ever since he saw Tony. He was interested in Tony. He also wanted this so it should have been easy…

However, he could tell Steve was torn when he broke his gaze from Tony’s and stepped away. The super soldier stated, “We can’t, Tony…”

“It won’t change the future,” Tony reasoned.

Steve looked at him with quirked eyebrow and dryly said, “Me having a relationship, where I originally had none, would in no way distract me, change me, or how I react and thereby change future events?”

“Well, when you say it that way it certainly sounds bleak…” Tony murmured.

Steve shook his head and said, “I want to…You can’t imagine how badly I want to…” Steve reached out to him, as if to touch him, but he pulled back at the last second and continued, “But we can’t…you said it yourself, even the littlest of things can change the future. I do not want to change the future you laid out to me.”

Tony bit down on his lip, not liking where this was going. He reached forward and grasped Steve’s hand as he countered, “That is why I suggest entering this knowing it will expire. We can have our fun and then look back on it fondly, but, in the long run, it won’t change us. We will still do what history expects of us. You’ll remain in the 20th Century as Captain America and I’ll go back to the 21st Century as Iron Man. We’ll still do what we got to do, but, in the background, we can be together. We’ll live in a secret just like you’re already doing. Easy Peasy…I want to try this with you, Steve.”

Steve didn’t break away from his hand like he expected him to do. In fact, he carded his fingers through Tony’s and replied, “It possibly can’t be that simple.”

“If we go into the relationship with a certain mindset, I think it can be,” Tony confidently retorted. Tony had personally been in relationships with a few celebrities just for the press and they went into it with a contract laying out how long the relationship would last. Steve was obviously different than the more callous people he’d been in a relationship with and Tony couldn’t wait to see how their relationship would progress.

When Steve did not immediately respond, Tony announced, “Then you leave me no choice!”

He let go of Steve’s hand and started to walk back to the camp. Steve followed after a few seconds and the super soldier asked, “What do you mean?”
Tony spun around making Steve jolt to a stop to keep from running into him. As it was, Steve was now very close to Tony and Tony took advantage and lightly caressed his jaw as he announced, “I, my dear Captain, am going to woo you.”

Steve blinked a few times and then turned bright red. He stuttered, “W-What?”

“You heard me, I'm going to woo you and then progress our relationship as normal once you've fallen for me.”

“T…Tony…” Steve began, still blushing adorably.

“Give me three days and if you aren't sufficiently wooed then I'll put this to rest,” Tony said, hoping Steve would give him this leeway. He even stepped back but Steve swayed forward, like he wasn’t ready for him to go.

Steve pursed his lips but then nodded and murmured, “Three days.”

“You won't regret it,” Tony saucily retorted and then blew the super soldier a kiss as he walked away. The blush re bloomed on Steve’s face with a fiery intensity. Tony chuckled as he left Steve alone to recover and regroup himself.

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Steve returned to camp like a man ready for his first battle.

The only difference was his heart was beating not out of fear but from excitement.

Tony was actively pursuing him. He didn’t want the chemistry between them to fizzle out. He was interested in Steve!

Steve couldn’t stop smiling because of it. It…it just made him so happy to know someone he liked was also interested in him.

That excitement quickly deflated when he saw no sign of the time traveler around camp. He started to walk back to the command tent but was always cognizant of the fact Tony could “woo” him at any moment.

Steve found himself blushing again.

No one had ever said that to him before nor flirted so aggressively. Tony was certainly a handful but…he was turning into Steve’s handful. Steve smiled to himself despite the fact it shouldn’t happen. He still wasn’t too sure about Tony’s idea but it was a nice thing to imagine.

He went back to Peggy first and they finished looking over the map and picked the best route for the troop. Steve expected Tony to randomly show up and start his “wooing” but he never appeared. Even as Steve went about his usual duties, the time traveler never made an appearance.

Hours passed since he last saw Tony, but, when he met up with Bucky at the mess hall for lunch, he finally saw the man.

Their eyes met from across the room and Tony winked at him.

“You alright, Stevie?” Bucky asked and pressed his hand to Steve's forehead. “You're flushed like you have a fever. I thought you couldn't get sick no more?”

Steve brushed his best friend’s hand off and murmured, “It's nothing…”
Steve’s eyes flickered back up to where Tony was eating alone, in the back corner of the mess hall. The man had a lot of paperwork in front of him and Steve wondered what he was working on. It couldn’t possibly be connected to his “wooing”…right?

Bucky followed Steve’s gaze and rolled his eyes when he saw Tony. He grabbed Steve’s arm and marched him out of the cafeteria.

“Buck? What are you doing?” Steve whined but used none of his superior strength to pull away from his friend. Bucky didn’t reply. He just pulled them into the closest empty room. He sealed the door and turned on Steve.

“It’s nothing’ says the man making goo-goo eyes at the man of his dreams who he just so happened to walk off into the woods alone with today and last night,” Bucky retorted, sarcastically.

Steve's blush returned with a vengeance as he remembered last night and Bucky smirked in victory. Steve grumbled, “Tony may have said some things…” And kissed him…not that Steve was going to mention that.

Bucky quirked an eyebrow and leaned closer as he whispered, “Something’s going on between you two, isn’t there?”

Thinking of the way Tony looked at him just a moment ago, Steve smiled and murmured, “Maybe…”

“I knew it,” Bucky sighed.

“…He…He feels the same, Buck,” Steve stated. “We were pretty frank with each other last night and I thought it was over but he approached me this morning wanting…more…”


Steve did, laying out everything that had happened between him and Tony last night and earlier that morning. Bucky listened with a blank expression but cloudy eyes that Steve could not read.

When Steve finished his account, Bucky fell back into the door and groaned, “Of course, the man you find for yourself comes with more baggage than Macy’s luggage department.”

Steve expected a lecture or for Bucky to freak out like he had when he found Tony in his bed but, not this…teasing? He eyed his best friend peculiarly and asked, “Y-You’re not worried?”

“You bet your ass I’m worried,” Bucky hissed. Bucky crossed his arms over his chest and whispered, “And he will hurt you just like all the others because he cannot possibly stay in our era and he even said there’d be a time limit on whatever yous would have going on, but…but he isn’t like the others too…”

“What do you mean?” Steve murmured, his heart already feeling heavy from all of Bucky’s observations. He fell into the wooden door at Bucky’s side and faced the same direction as him so he wouldn’t have to meet his friend’s piercing gaze anymore. He and Tony could never be permanent… but they could share something – a small something, but something nonetheless.

Bucky leaned into Steve’s side and gently whispered, “None of the others looked at you like he does.” With his hopes suddenly rising, Steve turned and saw Bucky smiling at him with a soft smirk. Bucky continued, “He’s also befriended you. He knows you. He’s not just after you for your body. He cares for you in here,” Bucky said as he pressed his hand over Steve’s heart.
Steve's heart fluttered as he remembered Tony's gentle fingers over his heart in the same place.

“B-But the future?” Steve argued half-heartedly.

“If the time traveler from the future wants to try it, I don’t see the problem,” Bucky retorted. Bucky looked forward, at nothing in particular as he stated, “I think you should go for it… You’re lonely, Steve. You’re so lonely sometimes it breaks my heart just to look at you.”

“I’m not lonely, Buck, I’ve got you, Peggy, the Commandos, a –,” Steve began.

“Can you honestly tell me that damn big heart of yours feels full from all of us alone? That you don’t crave love, especially when you see me flirt with a pretty dame or listen to the guys talk about their sweethearts back home?”

Steve’s heart convulsed slightly from the rendition. Yes, whenever that happened he did crave a person to call his own...

“This is crazy,” Steve whispered.

“I say, let him try and ‘woo’ you and if you like it, go for it,” Bucky stated. “Tony’s a smart guy and he knows more than he’s letting on. I bet he’s got an eye on all the major historical events that are going on right now. He won’t let them change. I trust him.”

“Me too,” Steve stated breathlessly. He laughed, feeling giddy and gasped, “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Bucky got off the door and Steve followed suit. Bucky put his hand on the handle and stated, “Let’s go back out there and let you get wooed by your man from the future!”

Steve grinned and couldn’t hold back the slight blush that flushed his cheeks. As Bucky opened the door, he stated, “This sounds like the plot to a really weird H.G. Wells novel.”

“Then we better get a move on before the Martians attack,” Bucky retorted, swatting Steve like a horse to move quicker.

Steve chuckled and they fell in step with each other as they returned to the cafeteria. Steve's eyes were instantly drawn to Tony and he smiled at him. Tony smiled too, though he looked a little confused, most likely from Steve and Bucky's sudden, hasty exit.

He and Bucky got on line for food and Steve numerously looked over his shoulder to Tony. Tony always seemed to be looking his way too and Steve would turn away from him with a pleased smile.

There was no questioning where they'd sit. Steve felt like he walked quicker and he knew Bucky was smirking at him but Steve didn't care because Tony was smiling at him.

He sat across from Tony and Bucky sat beside Steve. Tony had paperwork beside his plate with mathematical notes and rough sketches of machinery. Steve saw an image of an Iron Man peeking out and he lightly pulled the paper to him to see it better. It wasn't Sneaky exactly but it looked pretty close. He stated, “This is good. I didn't know you can draw.”

“Not as well as you,” Tony purred and, beneath the table, his foot bumped into Steve’s. He didn't move his leg and the heat of his body sunk into Steve’s from the slight touch.

Steve flushed happily and tried to hide his smile by taking a bite of the French onion soup he got. Tony mirrored his actions, smiling slyly as he took a bite of his sandwich.
“So, Steve tells me you're gonna try to ‘woo’ him,” Bucky murmured into his spoonful before sipping it down.

Both Steve and Tony nearly upchuck ed their food at his comment.

After Tony swallowed his food, he chuckled to Bucky, “Not one for subtleties I see.”

“If you hurt him, I'll make sure your future ain't so bright.”

“Buckkkkk,” Steve groaned, blushing furiously.

Ignoring Steve, Bucky leaned forward, towards Tony and murmured, “Now onto the subject of Steve’s virtue…”

Steve stood up and announced, “That's it. You are uninvited to this table. Go eat somewhere else.”

Tony was smothering laughter as Steve glared at Bucky's teasing smile.

Bucky picked up his tray and replied, “Alright, punk, but no frisky business. I got my eye on you two.”

Bucky went a few tables over to a group of soldiers he was friendly with and positioned himself within their sights.

Steve sat down with a heavy sigh and Tony stated, “You two are ridiculous and it is the best thing to watch.”

“I'm glad you're enjoying the show,” Steve replied drolly.

Tony leaned in and flirted, “I love watching you.”

Beneath the table, Tony foot ran up Steve’s calf. Steve felt his cheeks flush but he pretended not to notice and took another sip of his soup. He wasn't going to make this easy on the time traveler after all.

When Steve looked up from his soup, he saw Tony watching him with a burning gaze.

“Is poking me with your foot ‘wooing’ me?” Steve teased.

“Just the beginning, mon Capitaine,” Tony purred. Steve grinned as that purr vibrated through his body in a thrilling way. Tony played with his pencil and then asked, “Have any plans tonight?”

“No, why?”

“I want to woo you by the moonlight,” Tony retorted and Steve chuckled. Grinning, Tony stated, “We did pretty well last night under the stars…”

Steve stopped laughing and smiled warmly at Tony as he remembered their kiss. He whispered, “Yes, we did.”

Tony pressed his foot against Steve’s and whispered, “I want to hold your hand right now. I wish I could hold your hand but… all I can do, is this…” He lightly angled his foot to rub against Steve's ankle. He planted his foot on the ground beside Steve's but it remained pressed into his and his warmth sunk into Steve's body.

“It’s strange to imagine a future where holding your hand in public would be considered okay,”
Steve whispered wistfully. “…But, I'm more than happy with this arrangement.”

Tony's eyebrow rose a fraction and he said, “Oh? No longer worrying about the future?”

“I figure I’ll trust the genius, time traveler with protecting the fate of the future. If you really think this will work then, I want it.” Steve lightly rubbed Tony's ankle with his foot, just like he had and, as his heart did somersaults in his chest, he confidently whispered, “I trust you.”

This time it wasn't Steve who flushed and Tony embarrassedly flushed but also fondly smiled down at his notes. Steve's eyes were trapped by those lips. He was becoming obsessed with every way they moved. Tony's gaze rose back up in seconds and Steve saw an excited spark that wasn't there before. His lips quirked into a coy grin and Steve's breath caught in his throat.

“Cap, it will be short, but I have a feeling we are going to have a memorable time together.”

Steve nodded as his heart fluttered madly within his chest. He still couldn't believe this was happening – that this man was interested in Steve more than just his body. He could almost feel his heart reaching out to Tony's, yearning for that intimate contact that only people in love could share. They hadn't really progressed that far into the relationship but he was ready and his heart was already falling for the easygoing man with the most amazing smile.

Steve leaned into his hand and picked at his food as Tony changed the subject about the papers around him. Tony explained his designs and managed to whisper flirtations or innuendos under his breath at the same time like it was nothing. Tony made this secret fling feel…normal.

And the most astonishing thing was, in the 21st Century, this would be normal. Steve maybe be an old man at that point but he was going to be apart of it.

The future couldn't come soon enough.

Steve and Tony had different duties so, after their meals, they had to part.

But the lunch itself renewed Tony's confidence that this was going to work. He and Steve had flirted low key between trading information about their day and where the 107th was going. They even planned a time and place to meet after the second night watch started their shift. Most would be asleep and wouldn’t notice their departure. Steve may have been wary at first, but now he was obviously willing to try it out. After all, they both had nothing to lose in the end.

They had an easy cadence with each other and, strangely enough, Tony found himself reflecting over it as he worked. It's not like he had never thought this much about a person before. It'd been a while, sure… It was probably because he worshipped this man as his hero but now Steve was just… more. There were elements to Steve Tony could have never imagined before meeting and getting to know him. He was funny and nice and when he looked at Tony…Tony just felt special.

The 107th was busily regrouping, collecting what information they could from this Hydra site, and preparing to leave it all at once. They had a few more days there before moving onto the next possible Hydra compound. Tony was wary and excited about going with the Commandos. Excited because, hello, it was the Commandos. Who wouldn’t be excited? And Steve would be going so, of course Tony would follow.

But, it would also mean leaving the time machine…and that scared the shit out of Tony.
His presence was changing the future. There was nothing he could do to stop it. So…what if something happened to the machine while he was gone?

What if he became stranded in the past?

The very thought forced Tony to stop what he was doing and put down his tools.

Tony wanted to rip through the fabric of time and grab onto Pepper and Rhodey. He needed them, he needed Jarvis, he needed his home, his world…his century. He couldn’t imagine the agony of being forced to grow old in those formative years of the new century and not doing anything out of fear of changing the future…He’d go utterly mad.

But mostly he'd yearn for his oddly put together family. He already missed Rhodey's friendly barbs and Pepper’s soothing voice… What were they going through? How were they handling his disappearance? Would it be like when he was taken by the Ten Rings? Or would they hold out hope that Tony would make it back like last time? How long would they wait for him?

Tony wished there was some way he could tell them he was alright...

Damn…He missed them.

He rubbed his face and murmured to himself, “I cannot be thinking like this.”

It was just making him sad and he had tonight to look forward to! He smiled, thinking of Steve. At least he wasn’t completely alone in the past.

Tony went back to work with a small smile on his lips as he thought of the super soldier.

Tony dreamed up different scenarios involving Steve as he worked on the menial tasks Panzer had left for him. Most were innocent as he imagined different ways to flirt and win over Steve…though, a few were not so innocent. It was fun and distracted him from the pain of being torn away from his home and family…

When his dinner hour came around, Tony hadn’t noticed because Jarvis wasn’t there to notify him. It was Panzer himself who knocked Tony off his bench and ordered him out of there. He was certainly more direct and forceful than J. Tony laughed as he got off the ground and happily smiled at Panzer as he left the garage.

He quickened his step as he approached the cafeteria and was nearly running by the time he reached the doorway.

His eyes spanned the room and then landed on the broad shoulders of one Captain Steven Rogers. Tony smirked to himself and walked over to the man. Steve was eating with the rest of the Commandos, sitting in the middle of his collective band of heroes.

Bucky noted his presence first and must have said something to Steve because he turned around before Tony reached them. And that smile Steve greeted him with, damn, Tony nearly stopped in his tracks…

“Hey, Tony,” Steve said, his smile not breaking as he uttered the greeting.

“Hey, there, Steve,” Tony murmured, smiling with a coy grin.

“Get. A. Room,” Bucky groaned and under his breath sighed, “Idiots...”
The others laughed like it was a joke and Steve chuckled with them.

Tony smirked at Bucky and then grasped Steve’s shoulder as he said, “I’m going to get some food, I’ll be right back.”

He squeezed Steve’s shoulder and he leaned back into his hold for the sparse moment he held him.

Tony hurried over to the line and got his tray. Today’s tray was carved up. Hydra’s symbol had X’s over the eyes, a very voluptuous woman’s body was attached to the head, and someone played tic-tac-toe in the upper left-hand corner. Tonight’s meal consisted of chicken, buttered biscuits, mashed potatoes, and boiled carrots. Tony’s stomach rumbled lightly as he smelled the meat. It was a small serving again, something that was sadly becoming a norm. He couldn’t wait to get back to the future that wasn’t so limited with something as simple as chicken.

His eyes met Steve’s as he returned to the table and he reassessed that prior thought…this era wasn’t completely limited.

Tony placed his tray next to Steve’s and leaned into him as he sat down.

“So, how was your day?”

“Mostly uneventful,” Steve replied, with a twinkle in his eye.

Bucky rolled his eyes and grumbled, “Loads of fun. I found another source to my grey hairs…”

Tony chuckled and teased, “What are you talking about, Barnes? That head of hair looks perfect!”

“Uh huh,” Bucky replied, glaring at him.

“You’ll probably go bald before you go grey,” Jim teased.

“Nope! The robot says I retain a full head of hair in my later years!” Bucky proudly retorted, slicking back his hair with a grin.

"Of all the questions about the future, of course that is what you ask it," Monty sighed heavily.

“Please tell me Sneaky says he gets premature greys at least,” Jim asked Steve.

Feeling uncomfortable, Tony played with his food and plastered a fake smile on his face as Steve laughed, "No, Sneaky said nothing of the sort!"

“Ugh, Barnes, I hate you and your perfect hair…” Jim sighed.

The Commandos laughed at them and teased Jim about his messy hair but Tony didn’t really listen. He was reminded of Bucky’s early death and the sad melancholy that accompanied this fact felt like it weighed heavier on his shoulders.

“Bucky is going to have a fat head the rest of the night just because of his hair, you know?” Steve whispered to him in a tease.

Tony turned to the super soldier and that melancholy weight on his shoulders tripled.

I’m going to make his last days memorable, he reminded himself.

He pressed his leg into Steve’s and whispered, “Then we’d best leave him to his own devices.”
Steve nodded in agreement and pressed his leg back into Tony’s with a smile.

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Before leaving to meet up with Tony, Bucky gave him a long and serious lecture on caution and how to protect the nature of their meeting from others.

Steve made agreeing noises and nodded when appropriate. He knew he needed to be careful and he knew just how to do so but he listened to Bucky’s advice all the same so Bucky would feel better about Steve leaving.

Bucky’s lecture kept him, however, so he had to run to their meeting spot in order to get there on time.

Tony was waiting for him with a blanket in his arms. Steve looked at it curiously and asked, “What is that for?”

“This is for our date,” Tony stated and Steve couldn’t help but smile widely at that.

Steve was going on a genuine date. He’d never been on one before…His eyes met Tony and his heart skipped a beat. Not only was he stepping out but he was doing it with one handsome fella too.

“We got ourselves a late-night picnic?” Steve asked, touching the blanket.

“You’ll see,” Tony teased, stepping into the dark and away from Steve's reach.

Steve was quick to follow and they walked out into the night side-by-side. Tony pinched his arm and murmured, “I’d be holding your hand right now, if it wouldn’t get you in trouble.”

They were still within sight of the compound but would soon be in the forest.

Steve ducked his head to hide his smile and pinched Tony’s arm back and replied, “I’d be doing the same…”

They walked in silence the rest of the way as Tony led them behind the compound and into the forest. Tony paused just inside the forest’s edge to loosen his shirt and let some light from his arc reactor spill out. He turned to Steve with a smile and held out his hand. An excited thrill ran through Steve as he slid his hand into Tony’s. They went back to walking, this time hand-in-hand, and Steve was so happy he could not stop smiling even if he tried.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Steve asked as they journeyed deeper into the forest.

“I go here all the time, Cap,” Tony replied. “It’s the only place a guy with a reactor in his chest can get any proper washing in.”

They came up to a small pond that must have been freezing and Steve stated, “You can start taking your baths in my room like the first time…I wouldn’t mind.”

Tony chuckled and laid out the blanket as he replied, “I might take you up on that offer.”

Tony patted the blanket and said, “Lay down.”

Steve did but watched the time traveler curiously. Why was Steve laying down? What did he have planned? There was no food so they weren't having a picnic. Did…Did he expect sex? Steve’s heart withered at the thought. He wanted Tony to woo him. He wanted what most other couples’ had before jumping in bed together…
Tony lay beside him so they were shoulder to shoulder and turned his head to whisper in Steve’s ear, “As a kid, I and every other kid on the planet who watched the moon landing wanted to be an astronaut.”

Steve’s chest muscles loosened. Tony wasn’t trying to initiate sex and…

“Moon landing?”

Tony pointed to the moon and whispered, “Don’t tell anyone, but we will walk on the moon in another twenty or so years.”

Steve looked up at the moon with wide eyes. How was that even possible?? The white orb seemed so far away and unreachable.

Tony continued, “So, since I strived to explore the stars, I obviously studied the stars. The skies aren’t exactly the same in New York as they are in France but, there are some constellations that can be seen from anywhere on Earth.”

“Really?” Steve gazed up at the sky and wondered if someone in Brooklyn right now was looking at the same thing.

“Can you guess which ones?” Tony asked.

“I know nothing about stars,” Steve pouted.

“I bet you’ve looked at them loads of times,” Tony countered. “Don’t you see them? The big dipper and the little dipper?”

Steve chuckled as his eyes locked onto the familiar sight. He’d used the north star on the little dipper’s handle countless times without a second thought. He whispered, “You’re right, there they are…You know there aren’t as many stars out in New York as there are here.”

Tony rested his head on Steve’s shoulder and whispered, “Yeah, that’s because of light pollution. The city is a glowing galaxy in its own right but it makes it impossible to see the galaxies beyond our reach.”

Steve’s sense of wonder was growing with Tony’s words…but so was his heart. Tony’s head resting on his shoulder was sweet and exactly Steve wanted from this date. Steve’s universe was expanding as he stared up at the multitudes of stars and his feelings for the man at his side were growing with it.

“Most believe the North Star is the brightest star but it isn’t. The brightest isn’t even in either one of the dippers. It’s right…over…there.” Tony pointed but there were too many bright stars to pinpoint the brightest.

“Where?”

Tony grasped his hand and carded all of their fingers together except for their pointer fingers. Their pointer fingers pressed into one another and Tony guided Steve to the star, whispering directions and star names as they went.

Steve listened with a small smile and nestled his face closer to Tony’s to follow along better and to just be closer to Tony.

This was what couples did. They flirted, they went on dates, they gazed at stars, they cuddled, and they held hands. This was finally happening to Steve…
Tony was directing him to zodiac constellations now, drawing them with their combined point, not letting go of Steve, not that Steve wanted him to. He could stay out there all night if it meant lying beside Tony and simply holding his hand…

He never noticed it before but the sky moved. It was how he measured the passage of time as stars and constellations disappeared on the horizon.

Steve didn’t want the night to end, lying next to Tony and whispering about the stars.

Eventually, Tony whispered, “We should get back. I need some beauty sleep after all.”

They helped each other up and then Tony picked up the blanket and shook it out. Steve helped him refold it and, when they pressed together the last fold, they were within each other’s space again only they were facing each other. They didn’t pull away but lingered with their hands just barely touching where they each held their ends of the blanket.

Steve whispered, “Tonight was wonderful.”

“I liked it too,” Tony replied, his voice just as hushed.

Steve leaned in and Tony did too.

They had kissed before but this was different. This wasn’t brought about by lust but by their hearts. Steve’s heart was so full of wonder and joy that it made him want to kiss Tony. Even the kiss was different. Their lips were gentle as they brushed together in a soft caress and they held each other like they were made of glass.

It was short and easy but it took Steve’s breath away.

When he reopened his eyes and gazed at Tony, the other man seemed to be glowing.

So this was what falling in love felt like…

---

Watching from the shadows, Jarvis’s systems experienced an odd fluctuation. The entire suit flickered as its energy was lost for a moment. The AI ran an intensive system’s check but everything came back as green.

Whatever the cause of the instability, it was not the internal components...
Darth Vader came down from Planet Vulcan and Told Me that, if I Didn't Take You Out, that He'd Melt My Brain

Chapter Notes

Due to reactions to the prior chapter I just wanted to elaborate that the suit is a reflection of the future and Steve and Tony are now the deciding factors of that future. You can think of the suit like a rope and Tony and Steve are pulling on both ends, whoever wins the rope pulling contest decides the fate of the future. What exactly those possible futures will be will be seen in a reflection of the suit in later chapters! :D

Steve was walking to the basement, where the coal was stored, when a familiar hand shot out of the shadows and grabbed him. Steve let his basket fall to the ground and smothered his initial chuckle as he willingly let Tony pull him into his arms.

The last couple of days had gone by similarly. Tony would come across Steve and pull him away for a quick kiss. Or he’d privately whisper endearments to him when no one else could hear. At night, they’d spend more time together in the secret embrace of the forest…but that time was dwindling to an end.

“Good morning, mon Capitaine,” Tony whispered and then kissed him gently. Steve melted into his embrace and cupped Tony’s face to better kiss him.

He’d seen Tony last night. It had ended with them sharing a late-night walk and Steve pressing Tony into a tree and kissing him so deeply the other man moaned into his mouth. As soon as he woke, he began to miss him…but now here he was in Steve’s arms, again.

With Tony’s hands linked behind Steve’s neck, the older man asked, “So, it has been three days, have I sufficiently wooed you, yet? Are we going to go through with this?”

Grinning, Steve pressed his forehead to Tony’s and whispered, “I am head-over-heels wooed.” He kissed Tony and let his mouth show Tony how enamored he was with him as his tongue found its way into the other’s mouth. The hands on Steve’s neck suddenly dug into his flesh and Tony moaned encouragingly.

Steve still couldn’t get over the fact that this was real, that Tony was real, and what they were creating was real. Steve broke their kiss and whispered into Tony’s mouth, “Thank you.”

Tony snorted and caressed the side of Steve face with his thumb as he asked, “For the kiss? You are most definitely very welcome.”

“For everything,” Steve retorted, smiling happily at Tony and carding his fingers into his significant other’s hands.

There was a murmur down the hall and Tony pressed one last quick kiss onto his mouth and then pulled him back into the hall before anyone saw them pushed together so intimately. Steve grabbed his basket and returned to Tony’s side. Tony smiled warmly at him and they began to walk toward the coal pile like nothing had happened.
Regardless, Steve’s body was vibrating with adrenaline and the taste of Tony was still on his tongue.

After a few steps, Tony pinched his arm and whispered, “I’ll give you everything until the end…”

His words were…mellow and Steve even felt a little sad by it too. They wouldn’t last forever… even their time at the fortress was coming to an end. The Colonel issued the move order just yesterday...

“Tonight will be our last night to escape into the forest,” Steve observed in a whisper. They reached the coal container and Tony grabbed the scoop and Steve held out his basket to let him pour the coals in.

They were going to be leaving early in the morning. Colonel Phillips had them moving out to their next assignment. Steve had been getting the coals so he’d have one more night of a warm sleep before he returned to the thin covering of his tent and tiny sleeping bag.

“We’ll still find time together…When we can,” Tony whispered, his voice nearly drowned out by the sound of the tumbling coals.

Three soldiers rounded the corner and saluted Steve. He nodded to them and they stood down and joined them at the pile, grabbing some coals for themselves. Tony added another scoop and Steve murmured, “That’s enough.”

Steve said goodbye to the soldiers and he and Tony began their walk back. He held the basket, now weighed down by the coals, close to himself. Yes, he’d sleep warmly tonight, but...but he didn’t have to sleep alone again either…

This may be their only chance to spend the night together… their one chance. After that, it’d be close quarter camping and no privacy.

Steve held the coal closer to his chest as his heart began to beat faster.

“Tonight…” Steve began, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth. Tony side-glanced at him and his brows rose in question when Steve struggled to find his words. Blushing like a virgin he most definitely was not, Steve looked down at the basket of coals in his arms and murmured, “Tonight… why don’t we spend it in my room before...you know, I don’t have one anymore.”

He glanced at Tony and knew the man had caught on to what Steve was implying by the way he flushed. Tony murmured, “Mon Capitaine, are you trying to have your way with me tonight?”

Steve should have known that was going to be Tony’s response. He was bold and forthcoming as ever and it made Steve smile at the coals.

Steve was not as good at subtle flirting or roundabout conversation as Tony was doing right now. He was more straight to the point and direct so he replied, “Only if you’ll have me.”

Tony tripped over his own feet and that flush to his cheeks grew. Steve turned to where the time traveler had stumbled to a stop. Tony was staring at him like he’d grow two extra heads, making Steve feel a little subconscious. Maybe it was too soon…How long did real couples wait? He never asked Bucky how many dates it usually took him until he asked a dame to bed.

“Wow,” Tony gasped, his voice breathless. Was that a good “wow”?

Tony looked up and down the hall quickly and then pushed Steve into the wall. His mouth smothered Steve’s confused gasp and any fears Steve had floated away as he felt Tony’s excited pulse and responded to Tony’s frantic kisses. Tony broke their kiss and whispered harshly into his
mouth, “I’ll have you in several positions by the end of tonight, I can promise you that.”

Steve’s face felt like it was burning bright red as Tony slipped away from him with a wanton smile. The engineer started to walk again and Steve watched him dumbly, unable to really process his jumbled thoughts after such a dirty promise.

Tony glanced at him from behind his shoulder and whispered, “Coming, beloved?”

If there had been any blood left in Steve’s body, it was all gone now as the remainder shot straight to Steve’s burning cheeks after hearing the endearment.

No one ever – ever called Steve “beloved” or any other sweet name. His heart skipped a beat and he could not stop the smile that instantly grew on his face. He wanted to kiss Tony right there again and make Tony’s legs feel as shaky as Steve’s were.

Steve wobbled over to Tony’s side and probably was only able to stay upright due to the way the other man’s gaze never broke from his.

“Tony –,” Steve suddenly whispered but his throat thankfully sealed as Tony’s fingers brushed against his.

“Hm?” Tony asked, lightly pulling Steve back into walking.

Steve swallowed his words and adjusted the basket in his arms. He whispered, “It’s nothing…sweetheart.”

Tony snickered but reached over and lightly pinched his arm, whispering, “You’re adorable.”

Steve smiled at him but, internally, his heart was hammering a mile a minute and all his mind could say on repeat at that moment was: I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you!

If he opened his mouth it’d all come spewing out and Tony would probably run for the hills and call off their arrangement. So, he just smiled at the man and they silently made their way back into more crowded areas where neither of them could say or do anything relating to their relationship. His heart slowed down, his blush faded, and the declarations of love stopped threatening to break free.

Tony went to do his duties with Panzer and Steve was about to go to his room to drop off the coal when Tony suddenly pinched his arm again. He whispered, “I’ll see you later…”

Their arm pinches they shared started to feel as intimate as their kisses. Steve felt a light flush creep into his cheeks again and he whispered, “Yeah, I’ll – I’ll see you later…”

Tony winked at him and sauntered off, leaving Steve with a racing heart again.

---

It was arguably the longest day of Tony’s life.

Panzer gave him simple things to fix so he was done in a jiffy leaving Tony with endless amounts of time to just think and imagine…and fantasize.

When Steve asked him to spend the night, Tony nearly popped a boner right there.

Captain America….Steve – that friendly, nice, joyful guy, was interested in him. He was seeing Tony for Tony, not what the media tarnished or his history blemished. He wanted to sleep with Tony…for being Tony. It wasn't for a chance at fame or adding an infamous ledger to his book. He
wanted to be with Tony for just being Tony.

It was extremely surreal and definitely something out of one of his greatest fantasies. He never thought it possible to find someone who knew nothing about his past and perceived him differently because of it.

Since he was in the past, he didn't have to worry about his image with Steve. It was refreshing. However, as he thought about it, he realized he took a lot of things for granted in the future and he really didn't know how much he valued things until he was thrust into this era.

Pepper would have been the first person he’d gush to about all of this. She was his unofficial gusher and, as the day progressed, he really missed her. She’d listen to his inanity and, sure, she may berate him for the jeopardy and risk to the future…but, once she had vented all the obvious wrongs, he could see her admitting to being happy for him...She knew firsthand how lonely Tony was...

He also missed those rare, gentle smiles she’d give him when he did right…because he was doing right by Steve. It’d been years since he’d approached a relationship with another person as seriously as he was doing now and she’d be proud of him.

Tony's chest ached. How long had it been since he last saw her? He'd seen her the morning he left for France so it had been what...Three weeks? Almost a month?

He rubbed at the area just below his arc reactor to try and dispel the feeling but it lingered. He’d been hunched over too long and the tight bandages around his chest seemed to be straining the muscles around his reactor. Ever since he started wearing it, his chest has slowly beginning to feel…tighter. Not the good tight, like he was fit…but the kind that was beginning to hurt...It was a manageable pain but he couldn't wait until he was free of the wrappings.

Maybe if Steve kissed the area around his reactor, it'd feel better.

Tony grinned to himself and he was reminded of Steve's proposal.

What would it be like to sleep with him? He bet he was a cuddler. If Tony slept over, he wondered if he'd wake with Steve's arms around him.

“Wow…I must be feeling deprived of love if I'm fantasizing like this,” Tony laughed to himself.

For some reason, Tony paused for a response but he was met only with silence. He was alone in his corner and the Beta Jarvis wasn't near enough to reply.

The actual Jarvis, whom Tony unconsciously listened for, did not reply as it wasn’t going to be created in another 40 some years.

Tony's fingers strayed to his aching chest and found it aching for a whole new reason.

“Tonight, I'll have Steve,” Tony reminded himself in a quiet whisper.

His heart, however, continued to ache at its other losses.

---

“Why are you smirkin’ like an idiot?” Bucky asked Steve with a raised brow.

Steve purposely curled the corners of his mouth even more and Bucky’s brow seemed to twitch higher. Tony was sitting across from them and he ducked his head to hide his smile. They were
playing cards in the cafeteria and it was after the dinner rush so there were a few groups hanging or playing cards like them in the cafeteria.

“Maybe I got a good hand,” Steve teased.

“You certainly got a big head right now,” Bucky observed.

Steve chuckled and his gaze slipped back to Tony, smiling happily.

When their gazes met, Tony's smile twitched larger and his eyes danced.

“Alright, I ain't blind. What's going on between you two right now?” Bucky asked, putting down his cards.

“Nothing,” Steve retorted, placing his cards face down.

“You're no good at fibbing, especially to me,” Bucky stated. “And you've been making goo-goo eyes at each other all day.”

“Lieutenant, are you sure you want to know the dirty details?” Tony asked, putting down his own cards and smirking at Bucky with teasing smile.

“Well, when you put it that way…” Bucky sarcastically murmured. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at both of them. He stated, “I'm not asking for details. I just want you two to swear to me that yous are being safe.”

“Are you giving us the birds and the bees talk?” Tony gleefully asked.

“I know Stevie don't need it. You telling me you –?”

Tony laughed and said, “Nah! Nope! That ship sailed a long time ago! We're both big kids now, practically adults! I think we got it covered.”

“I just don't want you two to get discovered,” Bucky muttered. His gaze flickered over to Steve and he asked, “Feeling lonely?”

Steve smiled at his best friend and his not very cryptic way of asking how Steve felt about Tony. Steve replied, “Far from it.”

“Okay, good,” Bucky said. “Then I’m gonna leave before the going gets good.”

“What about the game?” Tony asked.

“I've been feeling like the third wheel for like an hour now. I think it's time for me to turn in. Goodnight fellas.”

“G’night,” Steve replied.

“Night!” Tony said, tossing his cards on top of Bucky's.

When Bucky was gone, they turned back to each other and smiled knowingly at each other.

“I’m surprised he didn't throw much of a fit,” Tony murmured.

“It's 'cuz he likes you,” Steve replied, smiling warmly at the other man. It made Steve happy to know Bucky liked Tony.
“Yeah?” Tony leaned on his hand, scooting himself a little closer to Steve across the table. “I’ve got Bucky Barnes’ approval to date his Stevie? Today must be lucky day to get that and to have accomplished my wooing you.”

Tony was so tantalizingly close. Steve so badly wanted to just leaned forward and kiss him. Even Tony's gaze was burning into his, teasing and daring him to so.

“It’s getting late,” Steve whispered.

“Oh huh,” Tony replied, his hot gaze still locked on Steve.

“We should go.”

“Oh huh,” Tony said huskily, his eyes practically burning at this point. God, he was so hard to resist.

“Before people notice…” Steve whispered breathlessly, so desperately wanting to touch Tony.

“Should we leave separately to make people less suspicious?” Tony suggested with a sly grin.

It probably would've been a wise thing to do. Steve glanced around the room and saw no one paying any particular attention to them and it was because of that, that he decided, “I don't want to delay another moment.”

“Mon Capitaine, so bold,” Tony purred getting to his feet.

Steve followed and they walked parallel with the long table between them until they met at the end. Tony pinched his arm and they both grinned with the secret flirtation.

When Steve had slipped away with men before, he’d mostly meet them in bars. They’d size each other up and go down an alley or, if Steve got lucky enough, they’d spend the night in a hotel. However, it’d always been impersonal.

It was completely different with Tony.

As they walked toward Steve’s room, they walked close together, smiled every time their eyes met, and whispered excited flirtations whenever able. Steve’s heart felt full and he actually had to fight the urge to hold Tony’s hand.

He gave into lightly pinching Tony’s arm as they rounded the corner into Steve’s hall.

“Almost there,” Tony whispered.

Steve nodded, not trusting himself to open his mouth.

Luckily, no one was in the hall so neither had to account as to why Tony was going into his room. They walked quickly to his room and both practically jumped into the room as soon as the door opened. Steve swung the door closed and laughed when Tony jumped on him.

Tony smothered the laugh with his mouth and Steve melted into the kiss. Tony pressed him into the door and explored Steve's mouth like he'd never been there. Steve wound his arms around Tony, pulling him as closely as he could, and Tony carded his fingers into Steve's hair, pulling slightly on it so he could tilt his head more and deepen the kiss.

They just kissed at first. There was no mad dash to remove their clothes. Just like they had been doing in the forest, their hands explored: touching, caressing, and teasing. Only this time Steve didn't
want to stop kissing him, he didn't even want to breathe if meant ending the moment.

It was everything Steve had wanted and they weren't even naked yet. Kissing Tony alone made Steve feel like he was free falling into an endless sky of the universe.

Steve never wanted to leave his orbit.

Tony broke their kiss with a breathless chuckle and dragged his hands from Steve’s hair to cup his jaw. He gasped against Steve’s mouth, “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Aren’t those supposed to be my words?” Steve laughed. This relationship was a miracle to Steve.

Tony smiled sweetly at him and lightly kissed his cheek before moving his hands down to Steve’s shoulders and then grasped his hands.

He gently pulled Steve away from the door and whispered, “The most marvelous man in existence invited me into his bed and is looking at like I am the answer to everything…and I still can't believe this is real.”

Tony sat down on the bed and kicked off his shoes. Steve also toed off his shoes but never stopped staring down at Tony. He was mesmerized by the warmth of his gaze. Steve also felt like he was in a dream. This was too perfect.

Tony opened his legs and Steve stepped between them but they only touched by their carded fingers. Steve whispered, “Right now, you are everything to me Tony…”

Something unknown flickered in Tony’s eyes that Steve was unable to interpret. Steve slid one knee onto the bed beside Tony and cupped the back of Tony’s neck to pull him into another kiss as he hunched over him. Tony pressed himself into Steve and Steve’s arms immediately secured Tony to Steve’s person, trying to get as much of Tony’s body in contact with Steve’s as possible despite the fact that Steve was still standing with one foot on the ground. Tony pressed one hand to the middle of Steve’s back to keep their kiss going and then the other to his behind to encourage his hips to move against Tony’s stomach.

Their breathing became harsher as they kissed more enthusiastically and Steve began to slowly move against Tony in a hapless, wanton nature.

Steve’s hands bunched Tony’s shirt and they broke the kiss to pull the shirt over his head. Tony’s hands then grabbed Steve’s shirt and he wordlessly pulled it off. Steve wore an undershirt and Tony had on an undershirt in addition to the bandages he had wrapped around his chest. Biting his lip, Steve pulled off his undershirt and Tony whistled.

“Nice,” Tony supplied, making Steve flush.

He grasped the edge of Tony’s undershirt and murmured, “Your turn.”

Again, Steve helped Tony remove the piece of clothing. Steve ran his hands along Tony’s chest, looking for where the bandages were tied off. Tony observed, “You know, when you first put them on me, I never could have imaged us in this current situation.”

Steve chuckled and agreed, “I can say the same…”

He found the knot and pulled it out. The tight bandages unraveled easily once they were no longer taunt and Tony’s light was revealed. Steve stared at the light blue glow in wonder and carefully touched the glass. The reactor vibrated lightly beneath his touch.
His fingers then strayed to the red marks left by the bandages and whispered, “Does it hurt having such tight wrappings?”

“I’m fine,” Tony promised, picking up Steve’s hand from his chest and then kissing it lightly. His kissed his knuckles first and then opened his palm and kissed the center of it thereby distracting Steve from Tony's red skin as Steve’s heart lurched. Steve pressed that same palm to Tony’s cheek and drew him in for another kiss.

Tony slowly fell back onto the bed, never breaking their mouths, and Steve settled himself on top of Tony, stapling his knees on either side of Tony’s hips.

His mouth moved from Steve's and started kissing his neck while his hands ran down Steve's sides and finally landed on his pecs. Tony's thumbs brushed over his nipples and Steve hissed sharply.

He felt Tony's lips twitch into a smile against his neck and he began to focus more of his attention on Steve’s chest.

“Christ, Tony,” Steve gasped as the man beneath him tugged on his nipples, making his cock throb from the sensation. Steve lightly rutted against the time traveler in retribution, making Tony chuckle.

Two could play at that game. Steve bent over Tony and trailed his kisses down: licking along the pulse in his neck and nibbling at his collarbone. He stopped at the reactor, not knowing how to proceed and, as he looked at it, he noted some bruising.

“You are hurt,” Steve murmured, gently kissing the purpled skin around the reactor.

“I’m more horny than hurting right now,” Tony groaned. Steve leveled a look at his lover and Tony grinned saucily at him. Tony supplied, “Though one could argue my dick is in pain.”

Steve snorted, sounding very unsexy, but he pressed his hips to Tony's and the teasing sparkle in Tony's eyes disappeared as it was burned away by their growing lust.

Tony’s hands lowered and latched onto Steve’s trousers on either side of his hips and then slid along the seam to meet in the middle where he unfastened them. Steve reached down and did the same to Tony, his fingers shaking slightly. They divulged each other of the last of their clothing and finally they were both naked.

They crawled onto the bed together and simply lay there for a moment. Steve’s eyes took in Tony’s nude form and obvious arousal before finally settling on Tony’s face. Tony too was checking him out and, when his gaze returned to Steve’s, he smiled at him.

Steve’s entire system was overflowing with endorphins and other emotions and...he felt so happy. He was used to a quick fuck and maybe some baseless kissing with the men he’d been with before. But Tony was different. He was so different from everything Steve once knew and it made him so happy.

Steve ducked his head as he was overcome. He hid his face in the crook of Tony’s neck and breathed evenly to try and control his emotions.

“You okay?” Tony murmured, cupping the back of Steve’s neck.

“Yeah,” Steve replied, huskily. He nodded and repeated in a clearer voice, “Yeah. Yeah, I am...” He scooted closer to Tony and pulled him into his embrace. He held him for a moment, thankful he somehow made it into Steve’s life.
Tony seemed to get what was up and murmured, “Hey, hey, big guy, I… I’m grateful too. No need to hide it.” Steve picked up his head and tucked his face next to Tony’s. Tony’s eyes were so warm and loving and it was all directed at Steve. This was all so unreal and amazing that it had to be a dream. Tony flushed and murmured, “Can you be any more remarkable?”

“I can try,” Steve joked, making Tony laugh.

They went back to kissing again. At first it was innocent little pecks but, with their unclothed states, their bodies began to move and rubbing against each other in what felt like seconds.

Steve had left out a jar of Vaseline on the floor by the bed. He reached down for it and Tony took his moment’s pause to rut against Steve, causing his entire body to spasm. With the Vaseline in hand, Steve glared at his lover but the man just grinned back unabashed. Steve slicked up his hands and then outright grabbed Tony’s cock with it, shutting the man up quickly.

For three seconds…

“Holy shit, ohhh, yes, this is very good,” Tony gasped in a rush. “Yep, continue, Cap - Steve, please. Pretty please.” Steve began to move his hand and Tony gasped, “And there’s the cherry on top! Yes. So yes…”

“You’re as talkative making love as you are in everyday life,” Steve observed with a smile and Tony grabbed onto Steve’s arms tightly as Steve’s fingers moved over the head of his cock. He pressed his own dick to Tony’s and began to rub them together. Tony gasped, “Yes, and you are clearly more of a fantastic tease. And what the heck are you rubbing all over us? Don’t stop rubbing!!! Just making conversation! If I don’t talk I moan and I moan like a moose in heat. It ain’t pretty, but you’re pretty, so pretty.”

Steve kissed him to silence the inane babbling for a moment and then he chuckled, “You are ridiculous.”

“I am being ridiculously ravished right now by a ridiculously handsome man with a ridiculously perfect body and some ridiculously smelling lube.”

Steve laughed until Tony’s hands wrapped around Steve’s. They jerked each other off together and Steve leaned in to continue kissing him until they unraveled. Tony came first and Steve quickly followed with a few quick jerks.

Steve fell onto his side next to Tony, huffing as he caught his breath. Tony was also breathing deeply and Steve’s eyes were drawn to his chest to watch how he breathed with the reactor sitting in the middle of it.

It was only at that angle did he notice very faint veiny lines surrounding the reactor. Steve searched his memory to the first time he saw Tony without his shirt on and he was positive they were not there before. He lightly touched one and asked, “What is this?”

“My reactor?” Tony asked in confusion, he’d already explained to Steve why he had it before.

Steve scooted closer, laying his head on Tony’s shoulder, and traced out the lines as he murmured, “No, these veiny things. They weren’t there last time.”

Tony looked down at his chest and repeated, “Veins? What veins? You mean my scars?”

The more prominent ones were on the sides and under the reactor so Tony probably couldn’t see them.
“I’ll go get my shaving mirror,” Steve said and began to push himself up.

Tony’s hand shot out and grabbed Steve’s arm, he whined, “No, don’t go. I want to post-ejaculate cuddle and then use your smelly lubricant to get some penetrative sex going.”

Steve settled down next to Tony with a flush. Tony burrowed his face into Steve’s chest and then Steve wrapped his arms around Tony and settled into their embrace.

“Don’t you want to see the veins?” Steve asked, tracing his finger around the rim of Tony’s reactor. “What if they’re something bad?”

“It’s probably my skin overreacting to being smothered by the bandages all the time,” Tony brushed it off with a light sigh. Steve never had seen skin react like that to an irritant but, then again, he’d never seen someone with a machine imbedded in their chest either...

He brushed it off too, trusting Tony's knowledge in the subject, and settled into their cuddle with a happy sigh. He observed, “This is the first time I have ever had a ‘post-ejaculate cuddle’.”

“They’re the best,” Tony replied.

Steve adjusted his arms around Tony and then lay his head on top of his lover’s. Holding Tony like made Steve’s entire being content and he couldn’t help but agree, “Yeah, they are…”
You know, Marty, I'm gonna be very sad to see you go. You've really made a difference in my life. You've given me something to shoot for. Just knowing that I'm going to be around to see 1985. That I'm gonna succeed in this!

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! The new chapter is here! Real life and working on the monster of a chapter that was August 21st have kept me busy, BUT I promise the next chapter will definitely come out much sooner!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve woke like he always did with the rising sun.

The vast difference this time from all those other mornings was that he woke with his lover at his side.

Overnight, Steve had curled onto his side and around Tony with his face buried into Tony’s hair. He hardly moved as he sleepily came back to his senses and he enjoyed those few sparse minutes simply laying with Tony. He tightened the arm he had across Tony’s chest and then deeply inhaled his scalp, trying to commit the scent and moment to memory. Tony didn't wake and continued to slumber as Steve stared adoringly at him.

He was experiencing a lot of firsts with Tony and this was one of them: simply sleeping together and waking up in each other's arms.

And as he stared at Tony, he realized it was also the first time he looked at another like this. He wasn’t just trying to commit this to memory. Simply looking at Tony made him happy. It made him so happy that he could barely keep his smile off his face.

Steve was 100% head over heels for the guy.

And he was completely alright with it.

After a night of love making, both of them were filthy and the bedsheets were in just of a bad state. Steve was already imagining warm baths and lots of bubbles that weren't possible…they could take semi-warm “baths” in the tin tubs the Army provided…

It won't be as relaxing…but he could scrub Tony's back.

Steve grinned to himself as he imagined Tony grumbling in the small bath like the first time.

He played with Tony's hair, parting it from his face as an excuse to touch it. His hair kept bouncing back so Steve had the perfectly endless excuse to keep touching him. To Steve’s delight, Tony continued to sleep.

When the horn sounded for the morning's first watch, Steve knew he couldn't let Tony sleep anymore. They only had so long until Colonel Phillips called everyone out and Steve would be expected at the head of the charge.
For the first time in his life, Steve regretted the responsibility that came with his post as Captain America...

He'd so much rather stay in bed with Tony.

Running his fingers through Tony's hair, Steve murmured, “Tony, hey, Tony?”

“Ughhhhh,” the other moaned back. He scrunched his face as if to escape the new day by tightening his eyes.

Steve grinned and murmured, “Time to wake up, sleepyhead.”

Tony grumbled unintelligibly and shifted on his side and closer to Steve, burying his face in Steve’s pectorals. He leaned into Steve with a content sigh and his breathing began to even out as he returned to sleep.

Steve’s heart clenched and he tightened his arms around Tony to keep him in his embrace. Such a move on Tony’s part made him extremely tempted to let him sleep a little bit longer in his embrace. If it had been a normal day, Steve would have let him...

“We have to get up, soldier,” Steve said with a chuckle and lightly ran his hands gently over his back to try to wake him up.

Tony picked his face off Steve’s chest and squinted open his eyes to glare at Steve. He groaned, “I will never get used to this ungodly hour. The Army is Hell. Pure and simple.”

Steve chuckled and lightly caressed his fingers down Tony's cheek. He whispered, “And good morning to you too, sweetheart.”

Tony's eyes warmed with the endearment. He lifted his hand and cupped Steve's jaw as he whispered, “Good morning, beloved.”

Steve bent down and gently kissed him. When he pulled back, Tony was smiling sleepily at him.

Steve knew he’d said it hundreds of times already but Steve was so grateful for him. He said it again, “Thank you.”

With a warm gaze, Tony replied, “No problem.”

Steve went to sit up but Tony grasped his arm and playfully murmured, “Where are you going?”

“We’re going to move out soon. I need to get ready,” Steve replied but he didn't move away, waiting for Tony to let go of him.

Tony pouted, “But don't you want to make love again?”

Lust rushed through his body at the thought and Steve crawled back over to Tony. Tony was grinning madly up at him and fell back onto the bed when Steve hovered over him.

“We have to be quick,” Steve stated, pulling the sheets back from Tony's naked body.

“Hard and quick,” Tony whispered, his warm gaze now no longer tired but burning with hot desire.

Steve cupped his face and kissed him as hard as Tony suggested. The older man groaned into his mouth and dug his fingers into his flesh as he dragged them over Steve's back.
Since they had to be quick, they didn't have time to prepare each other but Tony showed him how to stimulate sex by humping each other between slicked up thighs and it was near close enough. They each took turns pounding into each other until they both were sated messes and back to laying on the bed, smiling at each other and their filth.

“This bed should be burned,” Tony laughed, rubbing Steve's come off his stomach and onto the sheets.”

“I can't begin to imagine what the next person who uses this room will think happened here,” Steve laughed.

Tony snickered and asked, “How are we going to get that pathetic excuse for a bath up here?”

“I'll get it,” Steve murmured and lightly kissed Tony's cheek before slipping out of the bed.

“Since my man has worn me out, I am going to fall back to sleep until you get back,” Tony stated, burrowing his head into his bent arm.

Steve was pulling on his pants but grinned and pressed another kiss onto Tony's cheek.

He felt an excited thrill from Tony's statement.

That's right, he was Tony's man and Tony was his and his alone.

Steve pulled his undershirt on and practically skipped out of the room.

Most were just getting up and packing up their gear before heading to check in with their commanders or grab breakfast so the halls were relatively empty. Steve made sure to walk fast so most wouldn't note his disheveled appearance.

The quartermaster was alone with the main supplies. His team had yet to arrive to start packing, so Steve was able to get a tub with the promise to bring it back within the hour.

He ran back to his room but was careful enough that the water didn't slosh as he moved.

Tony was right where he left him, dozing away on top of the blankets, unashamed of his body on display. Steve gently put down the tub as his gaze raked over Tony's form. He was so handsome and rugged it made Steve want to crawl back into bed and make love again and again until he didn't know where Tony's body began or where Steve's ended.

But he couldn't…they only had a small window for their bath and then as only an infinitesimal amount of time left to them alone together before they headed out.

“Do you want to go first?” Steve offered as he grabbed his washing kit out of his bag.

Tony grumbled something unintelligible in response and buried his face deeper into the pillows.

“So I guess that means I go first?” Steve reasoned with a smile.

Tony held up a thumbs up and Steve smile stretched a little wider. Tony, he discovered, was not a morning person but it was really cute.

He wanted to share more mornings like this with him.

Steve stripped and stepped into the tub the best he could and scrubbed off the sweat, semen, and leftover Vaseline from his body. He crossed his legs to fit but they were so large that they were
sticking out over the rim. He had to work hard to keep most of the water in the tub. The Army
regulation soap was unscented but a good cleanser and he felt freshly clean in no time.

He carefully stood and paused to let the water drip down his body and let the air dry him as much as
it could. Tony heard him get up and turned on his side to watch him. He smiled flirtatiously and
murmured, “What a view.”

Steve flushed but, in lieu of covering himself up, he placed his hands on his hips and smirked
wantonly at Tony.

“I beginning to see why Bucky calls you a punk so much,” Tony yawned and pushed himself out of
the bed. Steve didn’t move as Tony dragged his feet over to him. He felt exposed but also turned on
by the way Tony’s eyes slid over his body.

“Need help drying off?” Tony asked, still smirking.

“Only if I get to help you too,” Steve replied without missing a beat.

They chuckled under their breaths and Tony picked the towel off the ground and slowly dragged it
up Steve’s side. Steve stood still as Tony took his time wiping up the moisture from Steve’s skin.
Tony somehow made drying off alluring with his heated glances and teasing touches. Steve became
aroused and Tony, of course, left his cock to dried off last.

Tony grinned wickedly at his hardened member and stated, “I don't think I'll need the towel for this.”

Tony dropped the towel, lowered himself to his knees, and...Jesus Christ...Steve nearly fell to the
floor. Tony gave him no other warning. One moment he was grinning wickedly at Steve and the
next he was sucking his cock.

Steve clutched Tony’s head with one hand and bit deeply into the other hand to muffle his moans
because...Jesus...his mouth... He'd been blown before but all of those instances had been nothing -
nothing - like this!

Needless to say, Steve came very quickly.

And then Tony actually swallowed it. Steve finally let slip, "Fuck..."

Tony ran his thumb over his lips to clean up and teased, "Such a dirty mouth...Now, are you going to
get out of that bath or am I going to have to blow you again?"

Steve snorted and they tried to keep quiet as they changed places but it was hard because they did so
while trying to touch each other as much as possible.

Steve pulled on his undershorts as Tony settled into the tub. When he turned back to him, they
exchanged smiles and Steve sat down next to him. He murmured, “Well that and night was nice.”

“It was more erotic than simply nice,” Tony teased, scooping water up to cover his arms. Steve
cupped more water behind him and help pour some over Tony’s back. His eyes trailed over Tony’s
back, taking in the bruises left by his fingers.

He gently ran his fingers over the marks and whispered, “I’m still getting used to my strength. I didn’t
hurt you any, did I?”

Tony leaned back into his touch and assured him, “I’m fine.”
Tony began to lightly scrub at his skin and talk about the amazing bathtub at his home in the future. Steve silently listened as he continuously scooped water over Tony. Tony's home sounded amazing and Steve wondered how outdated or slow everything in this timeline felt to Tony.

“Huh…That's weird,” Tony murmured, poking at the skin above his arc reactor. Steve leaned forward and saw he was poking one of the raised veins Steve saw the night before.

Steve had never seen anything like it before so he asked, “What is it?”

“My skin must be irritated or something,” Tony murmured thoughtfully. His brow pinched with concern and Steve sat up straighter, his spine tingling unpleasantly at the look in Tony’s eyes. But then Tony laughed unexpectedly and murmured, “I usually slather my body with ridiculously expensive soaps and creams so I guess this is my skin’s way of complaining. I used to put this honey-milk, Japanese seaweed extract thing around it. My doctor recommended it and looks like she recommended it for a reason! Plus, I never smothered my reactor quite like I'm doing now…I’ll see if I can grab some skincare creams from medical and keep an eye on it.”

“It’s not bothering you?” Steve asked in concern.

Tony stopped touching it and smiled at him warmly. He murmured, “No, it’s fine, Steve.”

He looked to Steve with a sly grin and asked, “Help me dry off?”

Steve was all too glad to assist and Tony’s odd skin irritation was forgotten.

---

“This is so boring,” Tony moaned.

He was sitting next to Panzer in one of the loading trucks, watching the formations of the 107th march out so slowlyyyyy.

“We’ll probably move out in another 20,” the older man gruffly stated and then went back to reading his book. He wasn't much of a talker, he was one of those guys who communicated through action over words.

Tony was the exact opposite and he was dying.

He was originally going to move out with Steve and the Commandos but he didn’t want to get in their way. He also doubted he could keep from flirting with Steve or resist touching him so soon after their spectacular night and morning of love making. Being in such close corridors with the Commandos and other soldiers would mean they’d get noticed right away. Tony knew himself well enough not to risk it.

Not to mention his ass ached something fierce and it was a bitch to sit on...

Tony dramatically flopped the upper half his body out of the window and sighed heavily.

“Everything alright in there, soldier?”

Tony sat up excitedly as Steve walked alongside their truck. He hadn't seen the super soldier since they parted that morning. If he were able, he’d lean down and steal a kiss from the man for finding Tony in his hour of need. Instead, he smiled warmly at him and said, “Just bored.”

Steve nodded and said, “The 107th is a big unit, it'll take us awhile to collectively move out but, once
we’re all moving, it’ll go by faster.”

“Here’s hoping,” Tony grumbled.

“I-I’ve got you something,” Steve murmured shyly, his cheeks flushing slightly.

Tony tilted his head and asked, “Oh, yeah? What is it?”

Steve reached into his pocket and pulled out a small jar. He held it up to Tony and said, “I hunted down Howard and told him I was looking for a cream for my skin. I figured he’d be the only one in camp with a ‘ridiculously expensive’ cream like you used to use…but the label doesn’t say what it contains so I don’t know if it has the same Japanese seaweed stuff in it like your other cream.”

The breath caught in Tony’s throat. Steve had been running around like crazy today and even Tony could see he was taking on way too much but…but he still took the time out of his busy schedule to get Tony some over-extravagant cream just because his skin was a little irritated.

Whenever Tony bought his dates some fancy jewelry, many times they’d tell him they felt ‘touched’ by the gesture. It had all been empty conjecture but…at that moment, Tony felt the true meaning behind the metaphor. He felt his heart palpitate from the feeling.

Tony accepted the jar from Steve and murmured, “Thank you, Steve.”

Steve response was to smile with a large and genuine grin. The man was an open book to Tony and he could tell the super soldier found absolute pleasure in providing for him.

He never so badly wanted to kiss someone than at that moment.

“The Colonel has some more tasks for me to do so I will not be able to distract you anymore. But, when the Commandos move out on their next mission, I promise we won’t forget you,” Steve swore, his grin bordering on flirtatious.

“Thank you, darling,” Tony sighed and did so over-dramatically to draw attention away from using the pet name in front of Panzer. His boss didn’t seem to notice but Steve did. Luckily, their jeep was raised a few feet off the ground so Panzer wouldn’t be able to see Steve unless he stretched across Tony’s lap because Steve became ridiculously bright red.

Tony smiled teasingly at him and winked. Steve shook his head and began to step away but he teasingly mumbled under his breath, “You’re going to be the death of me…”

Steve walked on so he didn’t see Tony’s reaction to his offhand comment. His face contorted and he felt sick. Tony wasn’t going to be the cause of Steve’s death. He knew that but that still didn’t stop the guilt. He knew exactly when and how Steve was going to die.

And how soon it was going to be.

He’d originally was accepting of it.

But, at that moment, it completely and utterly horrified him.

Steve was amazing. He was sweet, caring, loving, and…and was just a bundle of perfection. He was a great person who did not deserve the fate history had written out for him.

It wasn’t fair that he was going to die so young with his life barely lived.

Tony looked at the jar of lotion in his hands and his heart palpitated again, this time more painfully.
He tightened his hold on the glass container as that pain surged through his entire body.

It wasn’t fair that he was going to die just as Tony was opening his heart to him.

---

After squirming into several different positions, Tony finally found one he was comfortable in and fell into a barely conscious nap. He opened one eye when Panzer turned on the car but closed it as soon as they started moving and let his doze reclaim him.

The car rocked him to sleep and its rough engine was his lullaby. With every bump, he was jostled near consciousness, however, the pull of unconsciousness was strong enough that his mind began to drift and dream.

Probably because he was holding onto his father’s skin cream, the first thing he dreamed of was the broad stretch of his father’s back as he concentrated more on his work than Tony. His father’s taunt back loomed in front of him like a fearsome, impassable wall. Tony reached out to touch him but the man struck him away and hissed, “Not now, Tony! Later! We’ll have all the time we need in the future!”

Abruptly, Tony fell back with his father’s words and landed roughly in a stiff seat. In front of him were plane controls for an older plane and a beautiful blue sky. He relaxed. Flying a plane was a better experience than dealing all his bottled-up childhood regrets.

“What does the future hold for us, Tony?”

Tony’s head snapped over to the voice and his eyes focused on Steve. His heart dropped as his mind connected the dots.

Steve’s hands were on the pilot controls but his eyes were not on the sky. He was smiling sadly at Tony.

It was only then that Tony felt the tilt of the plane. They were going down.

Tony was at a loss for words.

Steve’s eyes trailed over to the windshield just as the plane broke through the last of the clouds. The ground was fast approaching and he gently asked, “Will you be there for me in the end?”

“I’m there in the end,” Peggy’s voice called over the radio in front of them. That’s right, Aunt Peggy was there for him at the end. The heartbreak of their romance and final moments were as well known as the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet…

Now that he and Steve were involved…when Steve died, was it going to be Tony on the other end?

Steve reached out to him and gasped in a broken, scared voice, “Tony.”

Tony jerked back and broke away from the dream.

He inhaled sharply and then gasped to catch his breath, clutching his chest tightly as it burned from the exertion.

“You alright?” Panzer asked, lightly grasping his shoulder. Steve and the plane were gone and they were driving through the woods with the rest of the convoy around them. Tony gasped, “J-just a dream.”
He was convincing himself more than Panzer.

Because holy hell, what a nightmare…opening up with the obvious trauma of his childhood neglect and then diving into the shit storm that he was headed toward with no warning.

The major factor weighing down on his subconscious was easily apparent:

Steve.

Tony had gone into the relationship thinking he could handle it like he handled his usual, flimsy relationships…but he did not factor in the fact that Steve was not made to be a one-night stand kind of guy. He was made to love and cherish and…and grow old, smiling that genuine smile of his at his significant other for the rest of their lives…

And he did just that with Tony.

Steve should have been given the chance to love somebody unconditionally…Tony tried to give him a limited version of it but…in his haste he didn’t consider how he himself would factor into the relationship.

Nor how his heart would react to such an amazing man who actually cared for Tony as a person and not the name or reputation or money he had.

“Shit…” Tony murmured to himself.

“What’s that, kid?” Panzer asked.

“Nothing!” Tony quickly murmured and looked outside his window to hide his astonished expression.

Soldiers marched in step with their jeep. Tony did not recognize any of them. Most were assigned to protect Panzer’s squad but Tony spent so much time with Steve and the others that he didn’t have much time to get to know the mechanics and engineers of the 107th. He unconsciously looked for Steve before he realized what he was doing.

“Shit.”

When did this happen?

He could barely remember the last time he reacted to another like this. His college sweetheart? She broke his heart and he swore off love.

And then there was Steve…

His heartbeat picked up just thinking of him.

And then his heart twisted as the remnants of his dream came back to him.

How was it possible Tony ever assumed he could shoulder Steve’s death without it affecting him?? They’d just entered the serious territory of their relationship and Tony already didn’t want to let him go.

Should he just end it now and save himself from the heartache?

His heart ached at the very thought of seeing Steve’s smile even diminish a little…and Tony did not want to leave him. Steve’s company was the only reason he was surviving the past. He’d gone crazy
by now if it weren’t for him.

He was completely enamored with the super soldier.

But Tony couldn’t change Steve’s fate or he’d change history.

He also couldn’t imagine standing idly by as Steve’s plane plummeted from the sky.

It was a horrible conundrum that scared the shit out of him.

…Because Tony was not sure exactly what he was going to do.

---

They traveled all day and left behind the forest to open, bumpy country roads. It was all open fields and some ruins of buildings that looked like they’d been burned down recently. The only people in the area were the 107th. Tony darkly wondered if it’d been so desolate before Hydra decided to move their base there.

They did not stop until the sun was beginning to set. The men jumped into action preparing their tents for the night and searching the area for enemy troops. Tony stood aside, not knowing what to do. He was supposed to be playing the part of an army man but he had no idea where his tent was nonetheless how to pitch it. With Steve still weighing heavily on his mind, Tony decided to search for him to have something to do and to not stand out.

With his newly discovered and unexpected frame of mind, Tony wasn’t sure how he was going to react to his lover. He still wasn’t sure how he was going to handle his scheduled death. He pushed it out of the forefront of his mind but it was still lurking in the background.

The only thing he was absolutely positive about was that he cared for Steve and that was what he was going to focus on when he finally found him.

He asked around camp and got turned every which way but eventually made it to the command tent. He could hear Colonel Phillips inside with his loud booming voice directing his subordinates where to set up what. Steve should be nearby... he was a part of the chain of command.

“Edwards? What are you doing down here?”

Tony spun around to see his Aunt Peggy looking at him in question. Tony still couldn’t get over how young and beautiful she was.

He tried not to gawk as he replied, “Just looking for Steve.”

Tony could tell she was studying him as she tilted her head a fraction. Whatever she observed made her smirk and she nodded down a row of tents, saying, “He’s getting ready to bunk down for the night. You’ll find him down there setting up his tent.”

“Thanks!” Tony replied and quickly followed her direction to avoid her inquisitive gaze.

The Commandos had lined up their tents together and already had a fire going. When Tony appeared, most of them cheered and Bucky announced, “Now the gang’s all here!”

Tony’s eyes immediately focused on Steve who was tying off one of the larger tents. Steve jumped to his feet and happily gasped, “You’re here!”
Tony’s heart flip-flopped in his chest and he strolled over to Steve, smiling flirtatiously as he said, “Was I supposed to get an invitation?”

Steve flushed and said, “You’re a Commando. You belong with the group.” Steve stepped closer and whispered to Tony alone, “And with me…”

Steve’s words pretty much obliterated whatever worries were festering inside Tony.

All the rational Tony had, had gone out the window when it came to Steve and his utterly perfect smile.

He smiled warmly at Steve and agreed, “Yes…Yes, I do…”

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Jarvis had followed its master in stealth mode all the way from the base. It watched the exchange between the two men and, when its master smiled at the Captain, the suit slumped forward as it suddenly powered off with an unexplainable power surge. The armor shuddered and its armor’s optics spasmed with several different color variations, making the armor visible for a few seconds. The armor shifted and its surface area changed as metal moved and implements grew or shrunk. The changes to the suit were minute but were enormous on a quantum scale.

A second later, it stood back up without noticing a disruption or the changes that had occurred.

…Or that a new inscription had appeared on its chest where MK 15 once was.

Chapter End Notes

What exactly has happened to the future and the suit will be revealed next time! Thanks for reading! :)}
One by one, the Commandos slipped away from the fire and bunkered down for the night until only Steve and Tony remained. They smiled knowingly at each other from across the dying fire when they were completely alone.

Tony got up and rounded the fire until he came to Steve’s side and sat beside him.

Tony rested his hand beside Steve’s and Steve lightly touched his hand with his pinky. He whispered to Tony, “I missed you today.”

Tony smiled warmly at him and carded his fingers into Steve’s as he replied, “Me too.”

Steve squeezed his hand and leaned in like he would kiss him but he stopped himself.

“…We shouldn’t be sitting so close,” Steve reluctantly murmured, moving his hand from Tony’s. He dropped his head and sighed, “Someone could see…”

Tony looked beyond the fire to the sea of dark tents and dead or dying fires like their own. It was so quiet it felt like they were the only ones awake…but Steve was right…someone could see them…They were one of the few things being illuminated by the last of the light.

Tony sighed heavily and leaned away from Steve. He teased, “If no one could see us, I’d not only hold your hand but also suck your tongue into my mouth and have my way with you!”

Steve snorted but Tony’s toes curled as Steve’s gaze burned into his with the same desire he saw last night.

“This is worse than torture,” Tony groaned, falling back onto the trodden grass. “And I’ve actually been tortured so I am sort of an expert in these things…”

“…You were tortured?” Steve asked, a horrified edge to his voice.

Tony carded his fingers over his stomach where some of his scars were and murmured, “You saw all of me the other night. Don’t tell me the reactor distracted you from the rest of me?”

“I thought…I thought they were shrapnel and surgery wounds…” Steve murmured, his eyes trailing over Tony’s torso with an unhappy frown.

“Most are,” Tony replied with a shrug. He sat up and said, “But it’s all in the past…well, future… or my past which has yet to occur, because ‘Hello, Space Time Continuum!’”

Steve was still frowning and Tony pressed, “I’m fine now. In fact, it was a wakeup call. It made me turn my life around for the better. If it hadn’t happened I probably never would have found that base and made my way to you…”

“Can you tell me more?” Steve asked.

“…About?”

“Your past,” Steve elaborated. “You’ve held so much back because you’re afraid it’ll affect the future but I’m missing out on pieces of you. I want to know all of it…I swear I won’t tell a soul or let
Tony smiled ruefully at him as he remembered both Steve and Bucky’s impending deaths. He doubted the super soldier wouldn’t be influenced by those events. He asked, “What do you want to know?”

“Well, what was your childhood like?”

Tony chuckled darkly and murmured, “That’s a sore subject…”

“Really? Your dad didn’t give you a flying car for your 16th birthday?”

Tony shook his head and murmured, “He wasn’t even there for it…not that I noticed, at that point in my life I stopped caring what my dad did in his free time…He wasn’t really there for me…”

Steve’s brows pinched with concern and Tony pointed to it and said, “That was what I didn’t want to see. Next thing I know, you’ll be going to Howard and giving him parenting advice when he hasn’t even met my mom yet.”

“…He just doesn’t seem like the guy to do it. He’s just so passionate so I figured he’d be just as passionate about his family.”

“He can be passionate about only so much…” Tony sighed. Tony stood up and kicked ash and dirt over the fire until the flames withered and died. With only the embers to faintly illuminate them now, Tony turned back to Steve and said, “My dad has always been a sore subject for me…It’s been made worse by the fact that I can run into an overly energetic, younger version of him at any moment…Let’s stop talking about him. Let’s go back to us and flirting and barely resisting touching each other.” Tony stepped back and murmured, “Better yet, why don’t I go to bed and you hang out here for another few minutes before going to bed yourself…And maybe tonight you’ll get just as good of sleep as you did last night.”

Tony winked at the super soldier and Steve smiled warmly at him as he stood up. Tony smirked coyly at his lover once last time before slipping away into the darkness.

Steve had helped him find a tent and they set it up beside Steve’s. He ignored his in favor of going into Steve’s tent. Tony sat down on his sleeping bag and started to strip immediately.

He tossed his shoes, pants, and boxers into the back corner. He kept his shirt on to block out the light of his reactor. He lay across the bedding and supported his head on his angled arm. He only had to wait for thirty seconds more before Steve came in.

Steve slipped in and snapped the tent door closed when he saw Tony laying half naked in front of him. He tied it off tightly and he gasped, “This is stupid.”

“Probably,” Tony said with a shrug. It was dark in the tent and he could just barely see Steve as he turned to Tony.

Steve crawled away from the flap, tearing off his bomber jacket, and gasped, “So very stupid.” Steve jumped on top of Tony and cupped his head to bring their mouths together in a hot, needy kiss. Tony ripped off Steve’s shirt, popping off a few buttons. Steve trailed his kisses down Tony’s neck and Tony bit down on his larynx and hushed, “Shhhh, we need to be quiet.”

“I know,” Tony grumbled under his breath. “But I’m usually quite vocal so this will be hard…”
“We can stop,” Steve suggested.

“That’s the last thing we should do,” Tony stated and found Steve’s belt. He unbuckled it and slipped his hand in his pants. Steve began to breathe shallowly and trembled in Tony’s hold as he stroked him.

Steve’s breath hitched when Tony pumped his head but he mostly remained silent. He lay down beside Tony and Tony took the opportunity to maneuver himself lower and then dip his head down to blow the super soldier.

“Oh!” Steve hissed loudly, finally making a noise. Tony kept at it and Steve’s trembling intensified and his shallow breathing became more ragged. Steve put a hand over his mouth to smother any sounds that might escape and Tony stopped bobbing his head to give special attention to the head of Steve’s cock. A needy sound vibrated through Steve’s throat that was so deep and hot that Tony felt it in his own cock. Tony moved his tongue faster and he felt Steve tense. Eventually, Steve started to hiss, “I’m going to – I’m going to come – Tony – I’m going to –.”

When Steve finally did come, he literally stopped breathing and his entire body became tightly tensed to keep from crying out. Tony swallowed the best he could but as he pulled back he still had to cough to help clear his throat. Steve heaved in deeply for his next few breaths and clutched the sleeping bag tightly in his attempt to keep quiet.

Tony crawled back up his body and playfully bit on Steve’s bottom lip. Steve carded his hands into Tony’s hair and pulled him into a deeper kiss. Steve grasped Tony’s cock and jerked his into fruition. Tony moaned into Steve’s mouth and Steve pulled on the back of his head to smother his mouth more from making anymore sound.

Tony collapsed on top of Steve and they lay there panting lightly together. Steve’s heart beat frantically beneath his ear and it was like a resounding assertion of his being alive. Tony pressed his face deeper into Steve’s chest to feel his heartbeat better and remind himself he hadn’t lost his brave soldier yet.

“That was stupid,” Steve chuckled lightly.

“I think it went pretty well,” Tony whispered, kissing the side of Steve’s jaw.

“We can’t do this every night…the boys will start to notice if we wait until they leave…and one of them might notice you slipping into my tent or hear us…As it is, I bet Bucky is gonna give me an earful in the morning.”

Tony sighed lightly and played with Steve’s dog tags. He murmured, “I know…but, I’m just a man of my time. I can’t help it. I want to be with…with the person I care for…”

Steve inhaled sharply and Tony probably wouldn’t have heard it if he were not so close to him. Steve slowly whispered at a lower volume, “…I care for you too, Tony…” Steve enfolded him into his embrace and murmured, “I wish I could have been the one to travel to your time…then this would have been so much simpler…”

For the briefest second, Tony imagined Steve sitting next to him in his workshop as they shared a tranquil kiss. Being discovered would be the last thing on their minds. The vision faded and Tony ruefully agreed, “It would have…”

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When Steve woke that next morning, his arms were unpleasantly empty. He sat up with a small
frown as his heart ached for the man sleeping a few feet away from him in the neighboring tent. They couldn’t risk Tony being spotted leaving his tent in the light of day so he left late last night.

Steve slipped on his clothes and then rolled up his sleeping bag. He stuffed it into his rucksack and then slung it over his shoulder as he slipped out of his tent.

Only Monty was up and he was poking the fire back to life. He nodded to Steve and he waved back before dropping his rucksack and taking down his tent. It took him only a few minutes to tear down and roll up. He tossed it and his rucksack beside where Monty had tossed his own.

Steve asked him how he slept and it somehow led Monty into the topic of tea quality and how the American Army needed to get “proper” kettles. This was when Bucky stepped in to join them. He too packed up before settling at the fire and, as soon as he was level with them, he glared at Steve.

Well, that answered the question if he heard Steve and Tony last night…

“Slept on a few rocks there, old chap?” Monty asked of Bucky’s sour face.

“More like a couple of damn owls kept me up last night with all their hooting.”

“Oh? I didn’t hear them?” Monty murmured.

“Probably, because they were right next to my tent…”

“Lucky you,” Steve teased.

Bucky’s glared narrowed more.

One by one, the rest of the Commandos woke and packed up. They sat around their fire and boiled water for their rations of instant coffee. When it was done, they wordlessly shared the hot water and passed it along the group. Each man filled up his own mug and their freeze-dried, powdered beans turned into a cup of joe. Steve missed the fresh coffee from the Hydra kitchens already...

It was the faint smell of coffee that roused Tony and he crawled out of his tent with disheveled hair and a grumpy frown.

Steve watched him with a fond smile as Tony dragged himself over to the fire and plopped himself on the ground beside Steve. He ridiculously felt more happy by the fact that Tony was drawn to his side when he was barely conscious.

Tony’s barely opened eyes searched for a mug and Steve murmured, “Your mug and coffee rations are in your rucksack.”

Steve had packed him one before they left and it should still be in his tent.

“Oh yeah…” Tony grumbled and got back to his feet with a groan.

As Tony walked away, Jim chuckled, “His drill sergeant probably popped a blood vessel with that one…”

Steve cast an uneasy glance to Tony. Tony wasn’t acting like the rest of the men who’d been drilled to work through their exhaustion. He hadn’t even put down his tent yet.

Did the others begin to suspect? Were they wondering why Tony did not act like a typical soldier? Or did they attribute it to the eccentric nature usually found in the 107th mechanics?
Steve glanced to Bucky and saw his best friend was eyeing Tony with the same uneasiness Steve felt.

Bucky got up and groaned, “I’ll help the punk function…”

The others laughed at him as he marched over to Tony but Steve smiled at his friend, grateful for his nurturing albeit concerned nature. Bucky pulled Tony out of the tent and whispered to him, probably telling him off for being such a civilian. In moments, Tony’s tent was down and they were working together to get it rolled up.

When Tony returned to his side, his frown was a little deeper but he had his mug at the ready and his eyes zeroed in on the hot water in Gabe’s hands.

“Gimmie,” Tony murmured, making grabby hands at the water. The water was passed down the line of men and Tony finally poured the water in his mug and sloshed it around to better mix in the powdered coffee. He sighed, “I miss real coffee…”

“That’s gonna be one of the first things I do when I get back to Brooklyn, buy a decent cup of joe,” Bucky stated. "There’s this Colombian grocer who sells the best coffee in the early morning down the block from our old place...Remember him, Steve? He had the best stuff this side of the East River..."

Tony suddenly started coughing up his coffee. Steve lightly pat his back and, between coughs, he gasped, “I’m fine…Went down…the wrong hole…”

“One would think you were enjoying it,” Bucky teased.

Tony looked at Bucky morosely and murmured, “No…far from it…”

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Pepper would try to be shaking some sense into him by this point.

Rhodey would be cursing up a storm and trying to convince him out of it.

But Tony...Tony was alone in this timeline and he was presented an impossible puzzle. His friends would have wanted him to turn from it but Tony was invested.

So…how does one change the future of two men fated to die without changing the future itself?

It was the coffee comment that finally did it…that and seeing Steve just smile at him for no reason… other than existing. Yeah, Tony didn’t have to double think anything. His sweet, sweet super soldier didn’t deserve to die.

And he didn’t have to…

When they separated, Tony lightly squeezed Steve’s hand but so badly wanted to kiss him in departing instead. Tony went back to the Jeep with Panzer while Steve returned to the Colonel.

It was there he crossed his arms over his chest, closed his eyes, and began to do what he did best: think.

There was never a no-win scenario to Tony. He had to save them.

As always since coming to the past, his mind went to his favored resource of time travel, the Back to the Future Trilogy. Doc managed to end up preventing his Wild West lover from plummeting to her
death and not change the future much other than changing the name of a gorge.

Tony could do the same.

Bucky would be the easiest. Using the suit’s stealth technology, Tony could catch the man before he plummeted to his death without anyone noticing.

Steve would be a little tougher. He’d be in a plummeting plane and facing off against the Red Skull…but it was still possible for him to swoop in.

The Tesseract would be in the plane with Steve so all Tony would have to do would be to grab Steve, then the creepy blue cube, then grab Bucky wherever he had him stashed away, and then they could all skedaddle back to the future.

And then…

Then Steve could be himself…he could be happy…and Tony could be happy with him.

Tony smiled to himself and imagined the look on Rhodey’s face when he introduced him to his newest conquest.

The more Tony thought about it, the more it seemed plausible. Saving them would be easy. He just had to swoop in. It was a hell of a lot easier than what Marty McFly had to do…

The excitement in him grew until he could barely contain it. As it was, he was smiling widely at nothing.

He didn’t have to deny himself with Steve other than keeping their relationship a secret from the others. They had a chance at a future together and Tony could open his ridiculously shut in heart to the man.

Tony was so excited that he had to bite down on his lip to keep himself from saying something about it to Panzer.

He kept his gaze pointed out the window and started mapping out a new, tentative future…with Steve. He’d never imagined settling down with someone…he never thought it possible…but now, the future seemed limitless.

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Just before sunset, when the sun was still on the horizon and dusk had yet to darken the sky, they arrived at a small town. The buildings were in shambles but, as the army, rolled through, the French citizens cautiously began to peek out at them.

Tony caught the eye of a trio of kids and decided to be as stereotypical as possible and tipped his head and called out, “Howdy!”

Needless to say, Tony credited the townspeople emergence to his cliché American greeting. Jacques would accredit it to the fact that he called out French greetings but Tony would come to disagree with this.

The soldiers began to disperse and the vehicles were being directed to park. Excited to see Steve again, Tony turned to Panzer and said, “You can park this beast by yourself, right?”

Panzer snorted like Tony said something funny and murmured, “Get out of here, kid.”
Tony grinned and hopped out of the jeep while it was still rolling.

The quiet, seemingly abandoned town was now busy with activity and soldiers began to set up a perimeter and the villagers were jumping from soldier to soldier (and from what Tony was able to translate with his meager French vocabulary) they were asking questions about their mission or the state of the war.

Tony went in search of his super soldier and wondered if they’d be able to sneak away into one of these abandoned buildings tonight. Knowing Bucky, he had probably scolded Steve like he was a petulant child so they would have to be double cautious when sneaking away as Bucky would probably be waiting on them to make a move and ready to scold some more.

He and Pepper will get along nicely.

Tony strolled among the troops and was beginning to spot out men he recognized. He grinned and nodded to them as he passed.

It was easier to find the Commandos this time around now that he knew what to look for. He spotted Steve with Bucky, their heads bent close together as they discussed something in secret. Tony grinned, wondering if he was the current topic of discussion.

He sauntered up to the men and murmured, “Well fancy seeing you two here.”

Steve lifted his head with a smile and, with a voice warm enough to melt butter, he said, “Tony.”

Bucky was more curt in his greeting and crossed his arms as he grumbled, “You got a look in your eye that tells me I gotta tie Steve to me or else you’re gonna drag him off and get him in trouble.”

Tony snorted and mirrored Bucky by crossing his arms across his chest as well. He teased, “Trouble is my middle name.”

Bucky groaned and mumbled something about punks.

“You wouldn’t believe how hard it is for me not to do something as hold your hand right now,” Tony murmured to Steve, leaning closer to him.

“…The feeling is mutual,” Steve whispered, his eyes dancing.

“We’re really discussing this in front of me?” Bucky groaned.

“Steve and I can continue this elsewhere,” Tony teased and pinched Steve’s shirt arm, lightly pulling him in his direction.

Bucky grasped Steve’s other arm and said, “Oh, no, no, no! You two are not going anywhere alone and in broad daylight!”

“Buck, we wouldn’t do anything foolish,” Steve admonished his best friend.

“Maybe you wouldn’t,” Tony corrected him with a sly grin.

Bucky stuttered shocked noises in response and Steve laughed. His eyes were as warm as his voice and it made Tony’s heart palpitate ridiculously.

“Mr. Stark, I require another charge,” Jarvis’s voice came out of nowhere making all three of them jump.
The other two were looking around them nervously, obviously scared someone had overheard the AI, but Tony...Tony was thrown off.

Why was the AI calling him “Mr. Stark”??

Tony’s eyes swept over the area until he saw the slight distortion in the air that was his suit. Had he heard it correctly?

“Come again?” Tony inquired to the empty patch of air.

“I will not be able to hold the reflective fields up for more than an additional five minutes, sir,” the AI retorted.

Ok, J used “sir.” That was more normal and Tony’s tense shoulders loosened a little more slightly.

“How in the hell do you even charge that thing?” Bucky murmured, shifting uneasily on his feet.

“Want to see?”

Steve’s eyes widened with interest and he murmured, “Can we?”

Tony turned to Buck and jutted out his bottom lip and whined, “Pleaseee.”

“Ugh, I hate you two,” Bucky sighed, clearly in defeat.

Tony grinned victoriously and spun around on his heel, stating, “On the way here, I saw a couple of abandoned buildings that I was considering for hook up points for Steve and I, but they’ll do for a temporary charging station as well.”

Tony was walking ahead so he didn’t see Bucky’s reaction but he could feel his glare burning into the back of his head. Tony grinned, glad he was still able to tease his teammate. He barely noted the heat of his glare as it was coupled with the ever-effervescent warmth of Steve’s smile. He glanced to his side and was correct in presumption, Steve was smiling warmly at him.

Damn, he loved that smile.

They walked at a quick pace. Tony was confident the AI was following them and he kept a mental counter of the minutes to make sure the suit’s systems didn’t shut down in the middle of a busy encampment.

They went into a quiet neighborhood that was in ruins. Tony’s eyes scanned the perimeter until he saw a decent structure that would hide them from any prying eyes.

It looked like it had once been a small cottage but only a single room remained being held up by a once sturdy fireplace that was tilting dangerously toward the wrecked yard. Light leaked in from the roof and walls but it was private. Tony did a full circle around the room and then began to unbutton his shirt as he said, “Alright, J, this spot looks as good as any. Exit stealth mode.”

Tony heard the suit’s filaments lightly hissed as they powered off and he turned to his invention as he undone his last button.

His fingers jerked when his eyes landed on the suit. He blinked a few times, unsure if he was really seeing this. Slowly, but steadily, his heart began to drop as he took in the glaringly obvious changes to it.

It was still the stealth unit but the armor had more weapon inserts, making it look more bulky. The
eye slots had a more pointed look and its head was larger. The most glaringly obvious change to Tony though was the moniker on the suit’s chest.

It was no longer blank.

But it also no longer read: MK 15.

It now read: Stark & Son Industries.

Tony's eyes zeroed in on those words, probably the tiniest of the changes that had occurred, and his heart began to race at dangerous levels with the edges of his vision beginning to darken.

He began to breathe shallowly and Bucky said something but Tony didn’t hear it. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart.

“Are you alright, Mr. Stark?” Jarvis asked, tilting its head to the side.

Mr. Stark?? Mr. Stark?? Jarvis never called him that! It was Sir or Master Stark! That was how Tony programmed the AI.

“Tony!?” Steve gasped, grasping his arm. He caught Tony as he stumbled back from the suit, clutching at his tightening chest.

The future changed.

He freaking somehow changed the future! How?? And how much??

Stark & Son.

Did he have a fucking kid or…?

Oh God…

Could his father…?

And what about his mother?

Were they both…?

His heart clenched as he felt a sudden craving for his mother’s embrace. What made it worse was that he could have it if he returned to this future but…it wasn’t his future…it wasn’t his life…and how much more had changed?

“What else changed?” He gasped aloud. He looked between Steve, Bucky, and Jarvis and held Steve tightly as, with a bewildered voice, he repeated, “What else?”

What did Tony do?????

“Sir?” Jarvis intoned, stepping toward them with a concerned hunch to its shoulders.

“What else?” Steve repeated in confusion and protectively wound his arms around Tony. He was clearly more concerned by Tony’s state than Jarvis’s. Did he think this was normal?! Of course, he
did. He probably assumed changing armor was another quirk of the future.

Tony gulped but his throat was dry and bobbed uselessly. He gasped to his AI, “J-J, you look different from when I last saw you. Something in the future has changed.” Tony felt Steve stiffen as he finally realized what had happened.

Iron Man’s eyes flashed and Jarvis darkly murmured, “I see…We need to try to fix this immediately. What is the most distinguishable change?”

“The insignia.” Tony stated, ignoring the flashier changes to the weapons’ systems. Tony clenched his fists into Steve’s sleeves and asked Jarvis, “W-wh-who is Stark and wh-who is son?”

Jarvis looked down at the moniker on its chest and then gestured to it and asked, “Are you referring to the company’s logo?”

My company is fucking Stark Industries! Tony wanted to scream but he held his cool the best he could and shakily nodded. Steve put one of his hands over one of Tony’s and squeezed it reassuringly.

“Stark refers to your father and you are the ‘son’,” Jarvis replied. It tilted its head again. Jarvis never displayed so many ‘human’ inclinations while operating the armor. It was always ‘professional’ and seeing these human mannerisms sickened Tony. If his suit and AI changed this much what else happened??

Before Tony fully committed to the existential crisis that was about to overcome him, he had to confirm: “My father is alive in the future? In 2009?”

Jarvis inclined its head and murmured, “Yes, he was one of the last people we saw before we departed to France and were lost to the past.”

Steve and Bucky were deathly quiet but Tony dared not look away from his AI.

Tony was afraid to ask, “D-Do you still have all files prior to the lost connection with the main host?” Jarvis was originally programmed to save everything until it reconnected to the main host. Once the reconnect occurred, Alpha Jarvis would know exactly how to respond to Beta Jarvis’s systems. Had that changed too?

“Would you like to view the memory hologram of your father from the memory bank, sir?”

Tony nodded, still not entirely trusting his voice. His heart, however, began to pick up its pace again and his chest was beginning to hurt from the buildup of his anxiety and other emotions.

Iron Man’s eyes glowed brighter and it turned its head to the side to project the scene it had witnessed several decades in the future…

A future Tony had no part of…

The projection of his father was of an older version of him with an additional twenty years aging him that Tony never got to see. The widow’s peak of his hair went deeper and his eyes appeared more sunken in due to his wrinkles. He still held himself tall and wore a modern, well-tailored suit.

“Be careful…I know you want answers but sometimes they’re not always what you want,” the projection stated, reiterating the last words his father told the suit in the alternative future. Even his voice had aged and was rougher than what Tony remembered. Howard continued, “I know I have told you this many times…but Hydra is formidable. More so now than when it first formed.”
Howard paused and emotions Tony never saw before burned in his father’s gaze as he stated, “Tony, when you go out there, you need to remember one important thing about Hydra: when you cut off one head, two will always take its place. The fi –.”

Steve violently jerked behind Tony when the projection suddenly cut off.

No one spoke for the space of a few seconds until Steve finally gasped, “Hydra…You referred to Hydra in the present tense…” Steve’s grip was tight on Tony but he barely noticed because he was too focused on what Steve was saying. Steve gulped and whispered, “Hydra still exists in this future?”

Jarvis inclined its head and murmured, “Yes.”

“Fuck,” Bucky hissed. He began to pace and wildly grab at nothing and continue to curse, “Fuck, fuck, fuck! What did we fuck up?!”

“What is he talking about?? What was this other Tony looking for? What else was he going to say?” Tony demanded of his AI.

“The rest of the conversation contains sensitive information that could alter the future if heard by the persons present,” the AI warned.

“The future has already fucking changed, J!” Tony exclaimed with a hysterical edge to his voice. “Play the rest of the conversation! I want to hear it in its entirety!”

Jarvis stared at him with an unmoving frame. In a clear, undistinguishable voice, Jarvis slowly stated, “I will repeat this one last time, as it is vital: there is sensitive information in this conversation, especially so with the other persons present…Are you sure you wish to continue with them in attendance?”

“Hell, yeah, he does!” Bucky angrily retorted on his behalf.

Steve merely adjusted and tightened his hold on Tony, wordlessly letting Tony know where he wanted to be.

Frowning at his AI, Tony commanded, “Play it.”

For a moment, Tony thought the AI was going to disobey him. Its gaze slowly spanned over all of them and it said nothing more in rebuttal. However, it finally turned its head to the side and the projection returned.

The elder Howard flickered back to life. He was staring up at Iron Man with a serious gaze and he scratchily stated, “Tony, when you go out there, you need to remember one important thing about Hydra: when you cut off one head, two will always take its place. The first Cap ignored this…and we both very well know, because of this, he suffered a fate worse than death.”

The words sent a chill down his spine but what scared him more was the way Steve went still as a statue behind him. Tony’s fingers dug deeper into Steve’s flesh as if he could keep him tethered to Tony and safe from whatever this new future had in store for him.

What happened to Steve?

The projection of his father reached out to the suit and grasped its neck, emulating what Howard had done at that moment in the alternative future. Howard whispered, “I would die if the same thing happened to you. Beware of Hydra’s bite, Tony…” Tony felt a twinge of jealousy toward this
Howard. Why was he being so affectionate to his son? Howard continued, “Where there are two heads there’s twice as much teeth. Don’t you dare let that monster sink its teeth into you.”

“If you do, I’ll kick your ass, little punk.”

With the new projected voice, Steve inhaled sharply in Tony’s ear and Tony stopped breathing altogether.

Bucky froze in place and his cursing came to an immediate stop as the projection expanded to accompany the new figure into the memory.

The holo of Bucky Barnes stepped into the projection with a familiar, smooth gait and was wearing the same cocky smile Tony had grown used to in the weeks he’d gotten to know the man.

He looked exactly like the man standing only a yard away from Tony…In the decades that had passed, this futuristic Bucky seemingly hadn’t aged a day. He looked like the same old Bucky… except…

…Except he was wearing Steve’s Captain America uniform.
Obviously, the time continuum has been disrupted, creating this new temporal event sequence resulting in this alternative reality...

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! I’m sorry for the long hiatus. I have not posted in a while because my brother was at the Las Vegas shooting and we came very close to losing him. And then the same night he finally came home I got in a bad car accident... Needless to say, my family and I went through a lot of emotional upheaval and I’m just now getting back to my writing.

My brother and I are doing well, and I should be able to start posting regularly again. Thank you for your patience! Now enjoy the new chapter! :)

“St-Stop it,” Tony gasped. “Stop the projection.”

Iron Man’s eyes lost their bright glow and the hologram flickered away.

Bucky stepped forward and demanded, “What happened to Steve?? Why the hell was I wearing his uniform??”

“I cannot reveal that without changing the future,” Jarvis stated.

“It’s already fucking changed! Tell us so we can prevent it from happening!” Bucky argued.

“I…I-I-,” Jarvis’s eyes flickered and it stated, “Ch-Charge needed.”

The suit opened up with the last of its power and waited for Tony.

Tony was slow to react. His mind was still reeling from what he just learned and he didn’t want to let go of Steve. The super soldier made no move to let go of him either.

What happened to Steve in this new future? What...what horrors did Tony create for him?

Bucky turned to them and frantically gasped, “Tony? Steve?”

Steve twitched and then he regretfully murmured, “You need to charge it. We need to know how to correct the future…” He let go of Tony but, by his expression, Tony knew he didn’t want to. He couldn’t imagine what Steve was going through. This new future supposedly promised him a fate worse than death.

Tony had to stop freaking out. He needed a clear head to save his lover.

And he needed all the information he can attain from this alternative Jarvis unit.

With his chest still tight from anxiety, Tony stepped into the unit and it closed around him. In his ear, Jarvis stated, “Charge commencing.”

The screens opened and he saw Steve and Bucky standing in front of him with worried expressions. Tony’s eyes lingered on Steve. He bit down on his lip and then murmured to the other men, “I will need to be in here a while…you guys should make yourselves comfortable in the meantime. We’ll
figure out what happened when the suit is done charging.”

Both men nodded curtly but made no move to sit down. Tony spared one last look at Steve and then cut communication off to the outside as he commanded, “J, run a systems check.”

The outside world was obstructed by the files opening for the check. Tony started going through all the systems’ files, looking for even the tiniest of changes. He asked the AI, “How many hours of footage do you have before we came to this era?”

“The suit was disconnected at 8:07 a.m. Eastern Standard Time from the third charging unit in the main laboratory at the Avengers Mansion. Two hours were spent there and then there were an additional 5 hours of travel time before we reached the destination.”

“What’s the Avenger’s Mansion?”

“You are a part of the Avengers, a team of individuals sworn to protect the world from outside threat,” Jarvis stated. "Your parents' donated their mansion in upstate New York to be the team’s headquarters.”

“Ugh, Fury’s boy band,” Tony groaned as he finally remembered where he’d heard that term before. “I actually joined them in this timeline??”

“You are one of the founding members.”

“Greattt,” Tony sighed. “Who else is on it?”

Several files opened and Jarvis explained, “The team’s statistics are saved onto the hard drive.” The files were sorted in alphabetical order by the team member’s last names. The first was Dr. Bruce Banner and Tony quickly read over his file. He was impressive but didn’t seem to be connected to whatever happened to the time change.

The next member was James ‘Bucky’ Barnes.

Tony took a calming breath and then opened the file.

Tony read a few lines and then gasped, “What…What the fuck?”

Apparently, in this alternative future, Bucky was a super soldier because of the experimentations preformed by Zemo while he was held captive. Bucky…Bucky was the one to fly the plane and crash, not Steve. But whatever Zemo had done to him made it that he survived the crash. He stayed frozen in the ice for over 70 years until…

But Steve! He closed all the files and demanded, “What happened to Steve?”

Jarvis opened another file and Tony began to read and the tightness in his chest became even more tighter and he felt like he was going to break.

“Oh no…Steve,” Tony whispered, his voice breaking.

The others had their codenames as headers for their files. Dr. Banner’s had been “Hulk” and Buck’s was “Captain America.”

Steve’s was “Winter Soldier” and the name had no meaning to Tony but the bio about how Steve earned the name made his stomach curdle.

Since Bucky had never fallen to his death in this timeline, he was by Steve’s side when he went
racing after the plane with the Red Skull. Bucky was the one who tried to pilot the plane while Steve and the Red Skull fought. Steve disappeared with the Red Skull in the portal that had been opened by the Tesseract, seemingly dying with him.

That portal, however, reportedly led them straight back to the remains of Hydra and Steve’s doom was sealed. What followed was years of torture and experimentation on Steve’s mind until the man he once was, was completely destroyed…And all that was left was the Winter Soldier.

The information hit him like a pile a bricks to the chest, making Tony feel like he couldn’t breathe and he opened his faceplate, gasping for air.

Steve was there in an instant. He worriedly cupped Tony’s face and asked, “Are you okay?? What’s wrong??”

Tony grasped Steve’s cheek and stared into those concerned blue eyes. Steve was such a caring person…how long did they have to torture him to break that central characterization?

Tony’s fingers tightened into Steve’s flesh as he reminded himself that this was his fault.

A lot had changed but the first, major event that he noted as being different was Bucky’s survival. Because Bucky survived he was there in the plane with Steve, he piloted while Steve devoted his entire attention to the Red Skull and was dragged into the portal because of it…from there he could only speculate. Somehow his father survived and they created a whole new company together. If something significant like Howard Stark living to an old age or the Avengers actually happening…then what other major things had changed?

Tony still hadn’t answered Steve and his super soldier was beginning to appear more concerned. This all happened because Tony decided to take Steve as his lover and save both Steve and Bucky’s lives.

That’s right, according to the files, Bucky didn’t fall. Tony did that…but how’d they both end up on the plane? Why hadn’t Tony stopped them??

Tony would’ve done anything to stop them, even reveal the future so…so how did it still happen?

Could this plane crash be some kind of pivotal moment in the universe that couldn’t be prevented? Just contemplating such a thing gave him a headache.

Whatever the reason, he clearly couldn’t save Bucky anymore. Tony had to save Steve from this grisly fate as Hydra’s puppet but…

But his heart broke because that meant he had to let not only Bucky die…but, Steve, this amazing man, die too.

And also…

Tony lightly dislodged Steve’s fingers and whispered, “You shouldn’t touch me so intimately anymore…”

Steve jerked like Tony had slapped him, but he pulled back all the same. Steve’s expression faded into something unreadable, but his eyes glistened with pain. Most probably wouldn’t have noticed but Tony had spent many hours just staring at Steve’s beautiful eyes, even when their gazes were not locked. He could easily read Steve’s gaze by now. Tony continued to watch it as Steve stepped back and saw his heartbreak.
Tony clenched his fists wanting with all of his heart to pull Steve back to him and assure him they would all be alright.

But it’d all be a lie, something as unreal as this new future…

“I… I’m sorry, Steve,” Tony whispered, dropping his gaze. “I reviewed the files and us… we can’t…”

“I was right,” Steve chuckled sadly with a forced smile. “When we first started this, I joked about me not changing personally despite forming a relationship with you… but that obviously is the case now, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not you,” Tony vehemently stated. “It’s me! It’s all me! I was planning on changing something to—to make your future better…”

Tony was the one who wanted to change the future.

Tony was the one who was going to try and save Bucky and Steve…

Tony was the one at fault, not Steve.

Steve had just been himself. He let Tony into the embrace of his big heart and Tony stupidly jumped in blind, not thinking of the consequences…

“Oh, Tony…” Steve whispered morosely.

“I swear I won’t do it anymore. I won’t change the future but… we… we should probably end this now.”

The only sign of Steve’s distress were his brows pinched tightly together and the way his eyes glistened. He then tightly wrapped his arms around himself and Tony saw his knuckles turn white under the pressure. He nodded sharply in agreement but didn’t seem able to voice anything.

Tony wanted to hold him to try to comfort him but knew it was no longer allowed. Their affair was over now and they had to put a wall between them to prevent anymore change to the future.

“What did you find out what happened to Steve in the new future?” Bucky asked. He looked reluctant to come between them in such an emotional moment but his concerns for Steve’s future obviously overrode that.

Tony clenched his hands, not wanting Steve to hear but... he needed to... he needed to know why they had to give up so much.

”In this future…” He paused, considering his next words. He couldn’t reveal too much or he might clue them into their deaths. He slowly continued, ”In this future, Steve is thought dead but was really captured by Hydra and…” He gulped dryly as he imagined it and he met Steve’s eyes as he whispered to him, “They torture you... for years... they break you and make you their agent.”

Steve paled and Bucky grasped Steve’s arm sharply as if to pull him out of the way of this dark future.

”There’s no way in hell that’s happening,” Bucky growled.

Tony nodded and agreed, “No, we’ll stop them. The only monumental change that had occurred was our relationship so something must have happened because of it... Ending it will hopefully save
Steve dropped his head and murmured, “…How did my fate become so twisted from being happy with you?”

Tony’s entire body convulsed with a sharp emotional pain that seared into his heart.

Bucky whispered, “We should go…limiting ourselves interacting with Sneaky will probably help…”

Tony clenched his fists when he saw Steve’s shoulders slump further. He couldn’t hide the pain from his gaze as their eyes met. He didn’t want this and didn’t want Steve to leave…

But…it was the only way.

Tony nodded and whispered, “It’ll probably be best if I hang with Panzer’s crew instead of the Commandos too.”

Steve dropped his head and Tony couldn’t take it anymore.

He jumped out of the suit and straight into Steve’s arms. Steve caught him with a look of surprise and Tony gasped, “One last time.”

He wound his arms behind Steve’s neck and Steve pressed him into his chest in a bone crushing embrace. Their mouths met in a desperate kiss which Steve accepted with a repressed sob.

Bucky said nothing as they shared their passioned farewell. He just looked off to the side to give them their moment.

They dragged it out, reluctant to let go and finally end it all. Tony didn’t want to leave Steve. He wanted to stay with him…to care and be cared by him…he wanted to grow old with him. But these were his last moments with Steve and he was trying to make them count. He tried to pour everything into the kiss and it seemed like Steve was matching him in emotion. They would have prolonged it forever if they were given the chance.

But Bucky eventually cleared his throat, a sign the time had come.

Their lips parted but held each other close, looking into one another’s eyes with heightened emotions.

“I’m so sorry, Steve,” Tony whispered.

Steve smiled sadly at him and replied in just a hushed voice, “I’m not…”

Steve ran his fingers across Tony’s cheek one last time and then stepped back, leaving Tony’s embrace cold. Bucky returned to Steve’s side and grasped his arm tightly.

“We’ll…we’ll see you around camp,” Bucky murmured. “Let us know if anything changes…”

Tony nodded, unable to voice a reply due to his clenched jaw. He forced himself to stay rooted to the spot as the friends departed, leaving the decrepit house and Tony feeling just as decrepit as the building around him…

The suit slumped forward as soon as the men disappeared outside. All the systems turned off and Tony gasped, “J??”

The AI didn’t reply and Tony’s heart seized worriedly. After a few tense moments, the systems...
began to reboot and Tony could relax.

…Did that do it? Was letting Steve walk out of his life all he needed to do? Was J, the suit, and the future going to be back to normal?

“I won’t save them,” Tony promised whatever forces controlled the space time continuum. His already broken heart crumbled into a finer dust as he imagined losing Steve.

But he couldn’t curse him with such a future. The ghost of his father was right, it was a fate worse than death.

The boot up felt like the longest of his life. He stepped back into the suit and watched the BIOS systems run through all the vital needs of the CPU. He felt like he was watching a countdown do his execution.

What kind of future awaited him now?

The systems finally completed and Tony held his breath.

“Beta Jarvis Engaged.”

“Wh-What?” Tony gasped.

Several programs opened on his screen as Jarvis searched for a satellite signal.

“I am sorry, Sir. I am unable to connect to the server. Suit systems are returning to optimum function, but outside communication is very limited. I cannot get a reading on any satellites. It's like they are not there…”

Tony swallowed the dry lump forming in his throat as he remembered Jarvis saying those exact words when they first arrived in the past.

“J-J, relay the last hour to me,” Tony commanded. What had changed about the future??

There was a long pause and then the AI stated, “The requested information is not available on the RAM.”

The breath caught in Tony’s throat and he gasped, “Pull up the files from earlier! The ones on my teammates or adversaries!”

Tony heard two beeps as Jarvis tried to access the information and failed. The AI stated, “I am unable to access the data. All information not pertinent to the running of the suit seems to be gone.”

“You don’t remember?? Is there any memory stored on the RAM!?”

“No, sir,” Jarvis stated.

“J, I’m stepping out I need to look at your hardware!” The suit opened and Tony jumped out. His eyes instantly went to the chest shield and saw Stark and Son was gone…but MK 15 was still not there.

It was as blank as his suit’s memory.

Tony circled the suit, it still had the additional weapons upgrades from the alternative future but the moniker was gone. Tony opened several panels finding the hardware where it was supposed to be…but, upon closer inspection to the chips, he didn’t see any of the company names that were usually
It was as if…

“Fuck…” Tony hissed with realization.

They were in limbo.

The future was undecided.

The suit was a blank slate…waiting for Tony to take a step out of line.

Steve could still become Hydra’s tool.

“No! I broke up with him! I…I’m not going to save Steve! Or Bucky! I left him! The timeline should go back to normal! It should correct the future!” Tony argued with his suit.

Iron Man stared blankly at him as J chose not to reply.

Hell, J probably didn’t even remember who Steve was…

Tony’s chest felt more tighter than before as he stared back into his suit’s unflinching gaze.

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Steve tried to hold his head up high and rise above this but…

But his heart was slowly breaking.

He had to keep reminding himself to keep the slump out of his shoulders or to stop dragging his feet. Despite his efforts, he was quick to draw worried glances from all around him. People could tell something was bothering him and it was making them concerned or uneasy.

As Colonel Phillips went over the days deployment plans in the command tent, Peggy looked like she was dying to speak to him privately but Steve purposely stood near the front of the gathered group so she wouldn’t be able to get a quiet word with him so easily. He could even feel Bucky’s eyes burning two parallel holes into the back of his head but he did not acknowledge his best friend’s stare either.

Since he’d taken down his tent in the morning, he had absolutely no where to retreat for privacy and he started to crave it as the stares around him grew.

Bucky had given him a moment alone before they went back to camp. Steve had leaned against one of the empty houses and Bucky turned to give Steve some semblance of privacy. Steve stifled his mouth with one hand and with the other wiped furiously at his eyes to keep them somewhat dry as his shoulders shook and he shallowly gasped for breath.

He needed to unleash the emotional response all at once and had felt semi-cleansed from it but…but now he felt it building up again especially as his mind wandered back to Tony.

In all of his relationships, he’d never had been affected as much as he was now. Not even when he lost his virginity from a man who pretended not to know him the next day…

Tony was different. He cared for Steve. He *still* cared for Steve. It was that simple fact that was making all of this so difficult.
They both wanted to be together they just...they just couldn’t...

They could have shared something if only either one of them could have been born in different eras…

Steve would have loved to grow up in the era of wonder Tony described…and he would have been free to love Tony as well.

He’d been cheated out of many things growing up. Being both of poor health and poor wealth amounted to him missing out on a lot. He took it all though and shouldered it like it was a badge of honor for him to overcome but…but this was the one thing Steve didn’t want to shoulder.

It was so unfair.

Steve wasn’t ready to lose him yet.

The loss was like an open wound and the only thing to heal it would be Tony.

God…why couldn’t he have him? Why must they be such catalysts for the future?

“Steve…man, you need to step out,” Bucky murmured into his ear, lightly grasping his arm.

Steve mutely nodded, not trusting himself to speak properly.

They left the command tent and, unsurprisingly, Peggy was quickly on their shadow. Bucky led them away from the main activity of the camp and found Steve a quiet stump to sit on. Bucky shooed away the soldier on watch and took his spot, scanning the perimeter.

“What is going on?” Peggy demanded as soon as Steve was sitting. He buried his face in his hands and did not reply. He just closed his eyes and breathed steadily, trying to calm his heart into submission. The steady pain remained but the urge to falter lessened somewhat.


“Off?? Steve doesn’t do off, he has the serum!” Peggy retorted. She worriedly touched his forehead and whispered, “What’s wrong Steve? How can I help?”

Steve lifted his head and smiled sadly at his friend. He whispered, “There’s nothing you can do…”

He just…needed to be strong. He needed a chance to breathe and collect his thoughts and then, and only then, would he be able to face this without worrying his friends or the other soldiers.

Peggy looked questionably at Bucky when Steve wasn’t forthwith about his demeanor with her.

“It’s alright, Peggy, I just…” Steve began lifting his head to meet her eyes. The words died in his throat when he suddenly caught sight of Tony over her shoulder, walking through the camp and looking around as if he was searching for something…more likely someone…

This was going to be way harder than facing down Schmidt or a nefarious villain. With those guys it was actually easy, you fight and one wins. There was no winning for Steve or Tony when it came to what they wanted from their relationship.

Peggy followed his gaze and murmured a question Steve didn’t hear because Tony’s eyes found his and he was instantly enraptured. Tony’s gaze settled on Steve’s accompanied with a weary, small, and sad attempt at a smile and then he slowly made his way over.
Steve took a deep breath and pushed himself to his feet.

“Steve…?” Peggy murmured in confusion, looking between him and Tony with widening eyes.

“I need to speak with Tony privately,” Steve murmured to Peggy, lightly squeezing her arm. She jutted her lip but her expression held the promise of getting answers later. He nodded to her and then looked to Bucky.

Ever since they’d learned of this alternative future, Bucky had been in full-on protector mode. He shadowed Steve with an unhappy frown and watched him like he was about to combust. Even now, he was looking at Steve like he might be struck down at any moment.

“I’ll be right back,” he assured his best friend.

Bucky nodded curtly and moved next to Peggy, probably to make sure to stop her if she tried to follow them.

Tony paused a few feet away from them and Steve walked the rest of the distance. It felt…surreal approaching him. He wasn’t sure how to act and, unfortunately, his heart immediately filled with happy emotion with Tony’s presence. That same heart withered as he reminded himself that he couldn’t love Tony anymore…or, well, at least they couldn’t love each other anymore. Steve probably wasn’t ever going to stop. He was too enamored with the time traveler and he doubted that was going to change anytime soon.

“I…I’ve got an update,” Tony said, his gaze flickering between Steve and where Peggy and Bucky stood together.

Steve nodded and said, “Let’s take a walk…”

Steve stepped forward and Tony fell into step beside him. He was instantly reminded of all of the late night walks they took together at the Hydra base. Tony must have remembered too because they both were silent as they strolled away from eavesdropping ears.

Steve had the strongest urge to reach over and pinch his arm. They’d gotten into the habit of doing it whenever one of them wanted to hold the others hand but couldn’t do so because they were in public. That urge they’d developed was still there as were his feelings…

Tony came to a stop in secluded area that would give them the privacy they required. Steve’s emotions were at war with themselves as he stared down at the shorter man. He couldn’t help but think him handsome, even now as he was frowning unhappily at Steve.

Finally, Tony whispered harshly, “It’s stuck.”

“Hm?”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and he stated, “The future is stuck in a limbo state. That alternative future could still happen. The future is undecided. There…there must be something that is preventing the timeline to revert back but I don’t have the faintest idea what it could be…the only change I made was…” He sighed heavily and whispered, “Us…It was the only thing I had let change…We’re not going to be together anymore, so I don’t know what more I can do to change back the future…”

Steve’s heart palpitated painfully as he darkly wondered…what if the future wasn’t changing back because of Steve? What if he was the one? Was it because he was still struggling to let Tony go?
Because his heart latched on to loving Tony and was unwilling to let go no matter what Steve’s brain argued.

And did that mean Tony had already moved on?

The latter thought hurt more.

“We…We’ll just have to be extra careful and…and we probably shouldn’t see each other alone anymore…” Steve suggested even though it was the last thing he wanted.

“…I’m sorry, Steve,” Tony murmured gently. Tony reached forward and lightly took his hand. Steve curled his fingers into Tony’s and they both looked at each other with longing.

“Me too,” Steve whispered and dropped his gaze so he wouldn’t have to see the open emotion in Tony’s eyes. He was wrong to assume Tony had so easily moved on…He was hurting just as much as Steve was…

Neither one of them made any move to disconnect.

Tony lightly ran his thumb over Steve’s knuckles and whispered, “I will do all within my power to make sure you won’t suffer this new future.”

“I know you will…” Steve whispered back, gently squeezing Tony’s hand. Tony stared at him with a pained but determined gaze and Steve stared back, not wanting the moment to end and to have to let go of him.

But when Tony sighed heavily, they both loosened their grips and their moment ended. They let go of each other and Steve’s heart felt like it broke again as Tony’s hand drew away.

Again, Tony whispered, “I’m sorry, Steve…”

His throat felt like it was clogging up, but he managed to whisper, “It’s not your fault, Tony.”

Tony had done nothing wrong. Everything he did — everything he risked — was for Steve.

It was Steve’s turn to do everything he could to get Tony back to the correct future…even if he shattered his heart in the process.
The 107th continued to move and its soldiers went about their duties as usual.

Time passed slowly for Tony with nothing but marching, hunching over fires, eating unappetizing dry food, charging the suit, unpacking tents, and repacking them on constant repeat.

Worst of all, in all that time, the Mark 15 hadn’t changed.

He and Steve kept their promises. Tony had completely cut himself off from the Commandos and moved with Panzer and his team. And neither one of them approached the other.

However, one by one, the Commandos came up to him in the first week and asked him why he left. One by one, he lied to them all, saying he decided he wasn’t cut out for the Commando life after the firefight.

Tony could tell by the look Monty gave him, that he saw through his lie, but the Brit took it with a frown and had left him in obvious insult. Jim outright called him out on it whereas Gabe had been the most subdued and left Tony feeling like the worst human on the planet. Jacques tried to reason with him, reminding him how boring it was on Panzer’s team and Dum Dum…well, Dum Dum sat Tony down with his ration of alcohol and they didn’t talk about the Commandos. They talked about home and Dum Dum complained about how much colder it was here, even in the buildings. He talked about the strength of the American hearth and thick walls of most homesteads. At the end of it all, he left Tony with a nod and reminded him he was welcome back to the team at any time.

Dum Dum’s unconventional way nearly got him to go back.

But he was doing all of this for Steve. He had to save Steve.

Panzer didn’t question his move. He simply gave Tony more to work with which Tony was grateful for. It was just enough busy work to distract him from his conflicting emotions and the throbbing ache in his chest that wasn’t going away.

And, boy, did his chest ache.

Tony mostly attributed it to missing Steve, but he assumed part of it was also but to the effect of tight bandages around his chest. Tony had only been able to give himself rudimentary sponge baths underneath his sleeping bag to muffle the light of his arc reactor. His skin was sensitive around his reactor and he could still kinda see those odd lines around it. He couldn’t get a good look at it without leaving his sleeping bag because then his reactor would illuminate his tent with its blue light and everyone in the vicinity would know something peculiar was happening within it.

He used the cream Steve had gotten for him…even though his chest ached all the more whenever he pulled it out of his bag.

He hadn’t spoken to Steve or Bucky since the day the future had changed and he missed their friendship most of all…Steve especially.

The Commandos moved at the front of the pack and Panzer’s team was at the rear so he rarely saw
them too.

They were getting close to the French coast now. They could already smell the salt in the air and the men were getting anxious to reach the ocean and let off some steam in the cool waves. They were in Allied territory too and the men were more relaxed and talkative as they marched. The mood in the company was good. They passed more civilians now on the roads and they always greeted the Americans with a wave of the hand or smiles.

The day before they were predicted to reach the coast, they stopped for lunch, and the other soldiers migrated into small bundles of friends, while Tony isolated himself with a repair job on a tricky engine. He couldn’t help but wonder aloud, “How much longer can I do this?”

He had to stop interacting with these people as much as he could to right the future, but he was a social creature. He never before felt so very alone and isolated.

He missed Steve and the rest of the team…but he also missed Pepper, Happy, Rhodey, and his life in the future…

“How much longer can I do this?”

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin upon Peggy’s question. He pulled his head out of from underneath the hood of the car he’d been working on and found his aunt to be leaning against the car.

“I’m sorry?” Tony asked.

“You asked yourself how much longer you could do it? Do what exactly?” Peggy murmured with interest.

“It’s nothing,” Tony replied and knelt back down over the engine to avoid any more questions. He put his hands back on the pipes, but he didn’t do anything more than fiddle. Without looking at her, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“…It is about Steve, isn’t it?”

Tony hit his head on the hood this time.

He stood back up, rubbing his head as he glared at her. He demanded, “How—I—Wha—What do you mean?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and whispered, “I…I know Steve very well. We are very close and I know things about Steve that most don’t…so I know right now that he is very unhappy and you are the cause, aren’t you?”

Tony dropped his head and his heart sank just as low. He mumbled, “I’m sorry to hear that…”

He returned to the engine, but his heart wasn’t in it. He didn’t even attempt to fiddle with it. It upset him to know Steve was still hurting. He so badly wanted to know more but he knew if he pressed the issue, Peggy would press him for more information.

“Tony…I can see that both of you are hurting and I can tell that something was going on between the two of you…something most may have found improper,” Peggy stated, and Tony’s hands clenched. “I do not mean to alarm you,” Peggy assured him. “I won’t turn you or Steve in. I don’t think it is anyone’s business what you two get up to…yet, I can’t stand by when both of you are so obviously hurting. Steve won’t tell me anything but maybe you —.”
“No,” Tony interrupted as he glared at the car’s exhaust manifold, refusing to lift his gaze again.

Peggy paused then gently said, “I only want to help.”

“There’s noth –.”

Tony hit the back of his head a second time on the car hood when a sudden explosion jolted him upright.

Tony scrabbled back, clutching the back of his head, and saw the car two down from his was on fire. He bumped into Peggy as he stepped back and saw she had already drawn her pistol.

The 107th was quick to act and the soldiers grabbed their nearby weapons and took cover as the forest emptied of bodies. They were Hydra but were in mostly camouflage rather than their usual uniform. It looked like they were mostly fighting with regular guns and only a few scattered soldiers had the ray guns.

Tony focused on the closest soldier with a ray gun. He was firing at any moving figure and already destroyed two jeeps, killing the men inside. Tony moved without a second thought.

Peggy was already crouched down and firing at the enemy like machine. She didn’t notice him slip from her side. He reached into the trunk of the truck he was living out of and grabbed his own ray gun.

“Hey! Death Ray!” Tony yelled to get the man’s attention. The man’s head snapped over in Tony’s direction but he couldn’t tell if he understood his sarcastic call due to the oxygen mask covering his face. The man clearly noted Tony being on the enemy force as he fired at Tony almost instantly. Tony jumped behind an upturned Jeep and then lifted his ray gun and fired back.

Tony coughed as the air quickly grew thick with smoke and he warily lifted his head to see if his assailant had survived.

“Sir!”

Tony was shoved down and a beam of blue light shot from the smoke where his head was a moment ago. Tony fell down painfully from the force and looked up to see he’d been pushed by his own suit. Tony groaned, “J! Be careful! We may not be on the same cosmic time level right now but I’m still flesh and blood!”

“I’m sorry, Sir. I was just reacting to your life being in peril,” Jarvis retorted smartly.

“Well don’t! Help others! It’d look weird if you were only helping me!” Jarvis didn’t move immediately so Tony stated, “That’s an order! Go!”

Iron Man’s gazed flashed and then it blasted into the air and flew toward the front of the company where the fighting looked to be worse.

Tony sat back up with a grunt and hefted his gun back into his arms. His chest was burning and Tony ran his hand around his reactor, trying to dispel the pain that had flared from the impact. He couldn’t spare any thoughts to the feeling in his chest however, as the Hydra agents began to fire at him again making his Jeep shield shake ominously. He stayed ducked to avoid their initial fire and then jumped up and fired back in a volley of blue rays.

He stopped and waited for the smoke to clear. Most of the forces he’d been firing at were gone, either scattered or fallen.
He relaxed marginally and heard Peggy call out, “Tony!”

Tony turned toward her voice and, instead of seeing his aunt, he saw the blurred butt of a rifle butt coming straight at him. Tony instinctively fell back but he still got hit against his cheekbone. He felt like his face crumbled and he fell to his knees with a pained shout.

The Hydra agent raised his gun again as if to bludgeon in his head with a second hit. With one eye already swelling shut, Tony squinted at the masked man with a grimace and fired a single shot at him. His aim was off so it only clipped the man’s shoulder but a second shot to the back brought him down.

Tony fired again before the soldier could get up and the Hydra agent flopped back down and didn’t move.

Tony let out a breath of relief and leaned against the Jeep with a heavy sigh. The entire side of his left face was throbbing. One of his molars might’ve been loosened too. He kicked the dead man’s leg and groaned, “Thanks, buddy.”

Tony lightly touched the side of his face and hissed as the pain flared more.

Peggy was at his side in the next moment and crouched beside him. She turned Tony’s head to the side to see the wound and Tony moaned pitifully. She stated, “You’ll live.”

“Great,” Tony moaned sarcastically. Did they have Tylenol in the 40s? Because, if so, he was going to need like 50 capsules…

“Stay here,” Peggy commanded. “We’ve taken care of the forces in this area and are corralling the rest to the open road.”

“Not moving,” Tony assured the woman.

Peggy nodded and patted Tony’s shoulder, saying, “You did good. Now don’t move unless you have to. I’ll send a medic to you as soon as I come across one.”

“Go save the rest of the company, super-woman,” Tony joked, waving her away.

Peggy stood with a smirk and chided, “Honestly, all of you would be lost without me.” She clipped a bullet into her magazine and left him with one last nod.

Tony closed his eyes for a moment and let all the pain he’d been hiding wash through him. In that moment, he let himself miss his future, his friends, and his simpler life.

But mostly he missed that safe feeling he had found in Steve’s arms…

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Steve gripped the strap to his shield tightly as he watched the last of the Hydra soldiers being rounded up. Phillips had already made the call to make camp a mile up the road where they had better cover and the men could more easily search the area. Scouts were already alerting nearby forces of the attack. The Hydra officers were going to be questioned and the rest of the agents were going to be sent to a prison camp with one of their smaller units as escort.

Still restless with energy from the surprise attack. Steve walked through the line, checking on the soldiers.
Or…at least that was what he told himself he was doing.

He pretended he did not have a destination in mind. The forces thinned as he made his way to the back of the line. At the rear itself, were just the injured with their medics and a few soldiers trying to correct an upturned truck.

Steve had been positive he hadn’t seen Tony on his way over. Had the time traveler slipped into his suit during the fight? He saw Iron Man fighting too. Had that been Tony?

Steve kept walking, lost in his thoughts about Tony’s location, when he saw him.

Steve felt like the breath had been knocked out of him and his legs stopped moving.

Tony was laying against a decimated Jeep and there was blood covering the left side of his face.

He wasn’t moving.

Oh, God, he wasn’t moving.

Suddenly unable to breathe, Steve dropped his shield and raced over to Tony.

He practically fell beside the man and gasped, “Tony??”

Tony’s eyes flickered open and he lightly moaned, “Steve?”

Steve laughed, instantly overjoyed with relief, and he teased, “Did you run into the fight recklessly again?”

Now that he was next to him, Steve could see the blood was from a rough split along Tony’s cheekbone. It was already swollen red and looked very painful. Steve could’ve knocked himself over the head for his assumption. Head wounds always bled badly.

But he was alive.

Steve wanted to gather Tony in his arms and just hold him and feel his heart beat with life against Steve’s skin…but he merely smiled happily at the obviously grumpy, injured man.

Tony was frowning at him and murmured indignantly, “I could have easily avoided this if I used my suit…”

“Maybe you should try that next time…” Steve smartly suggested.

“Har har har,” Tony fake laughed. He then grumbled, “Help me up and get me to someone who can help me with this lovely shiner. I think it’s going to need stitches. Peggy said she’d find someone to help but it’s been a while and my head is killing me…”

Steve reached out to him without another thought. He helped Tony to his feet and then wound an arm around him to help him walk. Tony’s warmth seeped into his side, calming Steve further.

“Gabe can help you. He’s the Commandos’ medic,” Steve said. “He’s the best in his field.”

“Lead away,” Tony sighed, resting his head on Steve’s shoulder.

For a brief moment, Steve pressed his face into Tony’s hair and inhaled his scent deeply. He gave himself that one moment and, in that moment, he and Tony were together. There was no estrangement in their relationship nor risk to the future. It was just Tony and Steve. They both had
survived and were leaning into each other for support in more than one way.

But that moment ended, Steve picked up his head and murmured to Tony, “We’ll get you right as rain in no time.”

Tony hummed and leaned heavily into Steve as they began to walk.

Bucky met them halfway and, with one look at Tony, he wordlessly went to Tony’s other side and supported him too.

Steve expected Tony to protest but, after a few steps, Tony seemed to give up walking all together. The time traveler then moaned, “I feel sick.”

Steve’s heart seized with worry, but Bucky assured them both, “You probably have a concussion. That’s normal.”

Tony was quiet for a moment but then he whispered, “I’ve had concussions before…this is different…”

Steve and Bucky locked gazes over Tony’s head and they both wordlessly quickened their paces.

“Gabe will know what’s wrong,” Steve stated to assure himself more than Tony. Tony did not reply. His feet dragged in the loose ground, leaving behind twin parallel lines through most of the remains of the battlefield.

Phillips and the rest of the Commandos had already made their way to the new camp. Steve cursed up a storm when he realized Gabe went with them. He was probably helping set up the medical tents at that very moment.

Peggy was still there and she rushed over to them, gasping, “I sent a medic his way! Did he not reach him?”

“What’s it look like?” Bucky snapped back. He untucked himself from beneath Tony’s arm and pushed him toward Steve. Steve took on all his weight as Bucky said, “I’m gonna get us a Jeep.”

Steve nodded and bent down to get an arm under Tony’s lax legs. He hefted his light frame into his arms and Tony groaned lightly. Steve murmured to Peggy, “Your medic probably got pulled in to help another…we have a lot of injured…Bucky…Bucky thinks he has a concussion.”

Peggy sighed and gently brushed some of the hair off Tony’s face. She whispered, “I wanted to get the two of you together again but not this way…”

“Peggy,” Steve whispered discouragingly.

“Steve,” Peggy countered, his name coming out as sharply as a bullet.

“I may not feel good but that doesn’t mean my ears stopped working…” Tony dryly stated and then nuzzled his face into Steve’s shoulder.

Without pausing to think about it, Steve dropped his head close to Tony’s, so their faces were inches apart, and whispered, “Do you still feel sick?”

“Yeah…” Tony sighed tiredly.

Steve bit down on his lip and wordlessly cuddled the man closer to his chest as ran his fingers through Tony’s hair.
Peggy politely cleared her throat and murmured, “Stand like that any longer and you might draw a few stares…”

Steve flushed and straightened so it no longer looked like he was embracing Tony as tenderly as he had been. Tony chuckled in his arms, “Smooth, Cap…”

Bucky pulled up in the Jeep and had come to such an abrupt stop that made Steve jump. He hadn’t seen him coming because he was all eyes for Tony.

Peggy took the passenger seat and Steve jumped in the back, settling Tony down gently in his lap as he sat. Bucky revved the engine as soon as they were settled and they reached the camp in a couple of minutes. Bucky parked them right outside of one of the few tents that were already up, the medical tent.

Steve didn’t wait for him to come to a complete stop. He slid out of the car as it was slowing to a roll and went straight into the tent with Tony in his arms. There were already some soldiers laid out on small cots, groaning or biting their lips as the medics looked over them. Steve’s eyes quickly spanned the tent and then fell on his friend. He practically sprinted toward Gabe and called out, “Jones! I need your help!”

Gabe handed some bandages to another medic and gasped, “Is that Tony?”

“Yeah, he got hit on the head and now he’s feeling sick, but he says it’s not concussion sick so can you look him over?” Steve gasped out the words in one breath and had to inhale sharply after getting it all out.

“Yeah – Yeah, of course!” Gabe said, waving them toward the back of the tent. He pointed out a cot and Steve laid Tony out on it. Tony finally opened his eyes and turned to Gabe, saying, “Hey, man, good to see you again.”

“Wish it was under better circumstances,” Gabe stated ironically. He gently turned Tony’s head to the side and inspected the wound. As he looked, Bucky and Peggy came into the tent and went straight to them.

Bucky asked, “Got a prognosis yet, Doc?”

“Just started…” Gabe observed to Tony, “The bleeding has pretty much stopped but you are going to get a little scar.”

Tony grinned and said, “War wound? The ladies will swoon.”

Gabe chuckled and pulled a small flashlight from his bag and held it up to Tony’s eyes. He flashed it back and forth a few times and then murmured, “Your pupils seem fine…”

“Said it wasn’t a concussion…” Tony stated smartly.

Gabe pulled out his stethoscope and reached for the first button in the V of Tony’s shirt. Both Tony and Steve jumped and gasped simultaneously:

“Wait –!”

“No –!”

Gabe stilled, and he pulled the stethoscope out of his ears. He stated, “I need to listen to check everything, including your heart and lungs. We need to rule out everything.”
“I’ve got a heart condition so there will be a murmur and I smoked a fuck ton as a kid, so my lungs are probably trash too,” Tony quickly said. “The results will be shit.”

Gabe’s brows pinched together in confusion and he looked from Tony’s face and back to his chest and confirmed, “Heart condition?”

Steve’s gut dropped at Gabe’s words. He quickly looked to Peggy and saw the confusion in her eyes too as she processed Tony’s words. He then looked to Bucky and Bucky met his gaze with alarm growing in his expression.

He was probably thinking the same thing as Steve: How were they going to explain this?

In a cautious whisper, Gabe asked, “How did you get into the Army, Tony? Heart conditions mean immediate dismissal.”

Tony’s eyes widened as he realized his mistake and he looked to Steve for confirmation. Steve minutely nodded to him and his mind raced trying to come up with a way to explain away Tony’s slip.

“Did I say heart condition?” Tony said in a lighthearted voice. He tapped on his chest and said, “I meant – *Fuck* –!” He clutched the area he just tapped with a paling face.

Gabe acted immediately, pulling Tony’s hands back and demanding, “Tony, were you injure – injured…”

His words trailed off as he stared at the small trail of white smoke beginning to rise from Tony’s chest in the parting of his shirt. Everyone else’s eyes focused on the smoke, except for Steve. As soon as he saw the smoke and he looked to Tony.

Despite the predicament he was in, Tony had always been brave and all smiles. He never expressed any worry to Steve about his wounds and even before than, since he arrived in the past, Tony did not show much worry about his predicament. But now…but now Steve could plainly see the fear in Tony’s eyes.

Steve’s heart clenched.

If Tony was scared...this was bad.

Steve’s voice trembled slightly as he commanded, “G-Gabe, we need privacy. Bucky go – go get Tony’s toolbox. And Peggy…” He turned to her and she looked at him with a plainly shocked expression. “Go find Iron Man.”

“Iron Man?”

Steve clenched his fists and glanced apologetically to Tony. Tony was still too shocked and scared to respond. Steve looked back to Peggy and explained, “Iron Man may be able to help Tony with his chest…they both have similar devices.”

“…What?” She and Gabe were staring at Tony with flabbergasted expressions.

“Aunt Peggy,” Tony said, grabbing her attention. Steve relaxed immensely at the sound of his voice. “You didn’t think the Iron Man suit was empty, did you?”

Gabe cursed under his breath and fell back from Tony in his surprise.
With wide eyes, Peggy looked down at Tony and her eyes seemed to grow larger as she made connections with this new information. Steve gently picked Tony back up and her gaze followed them as he stood up. Steve implored, “Peggy?”

“I—I, yes, I’ll go,” she gasped, somewhat startled. “Use my tent. It should be empty and if there is anyone in there tell them I said to leave.”

Steve nodded and then he turned to Gabe, saying, “I’ll meet you there?”

“Y-Yeah,” Gabe said. “I’ll grab my bag and some other supplies…”

Steve nodded and without another word stomped out of the tent. Peggy had a smaller Command tent set up for the British liaisons part of the company. Mostly the espionage for the company went through her so she needed the privacy to hold onto the secrets they had. It had enough room for a 4-person table and a few lockboxes to hold her coded paperwork.

Peggy had yet to use the tent so the table was empty and Steve didn’t pause to lay Tony down on it. With his arms free, he leaned over Tony and cupped his face, running his thumbs over his cheekbones. He was so worried for him and Tony looked so scared, neither of them really thought about it. As soon as Steve’s hands were on his face, Tony wound his arms around the back of his neck and pulled him in. They kissed passionately as their fear obliterated their reason and they kissed more for comfort than for passion.

Tony broke their kiss with a light curse and clutched his chest. Steve pulled back and worriedly undid his shirt. Steve could see where the reactor was beneath the bandages thanks to a smudgy circle beneath on the once stark white bandages. Steve couldn’t remember the number of times he’d taken these bandages off Tony but they never looked like that… His hands moved automatically but they shook as the loosened bandages released more smoke and Tony tightly gripped his shoulder as the smoke billowed more thickly.

“Oh, my God,” Steve hissed as Tony’s skin was revealed. He removed more bandage and more metallic-black veined skin appeared across Tony’s chest. As the horror grew, he kept hissing, “Oh, my God. Oh, my God, Tony…”

Tony watched it all with a clenched jaw and his tight grip on Steve’s shoulder remained constant.

Steve was made more uneasy by Tony’s silence. To break it, he asked, “Has this ever happened before?”

*Please, say it’s an easy fix.*

“No,” Tony breathlessly replied. “No, I have never even seen this…I need to look inside…but I’ll have to remove the reactor and I don’t know what’s wrong so I might pass out so we’ll have to wait until Jarvis gets here so he could take over…”

Steve nodded and grasped Tony’s hand tightly and cupped the side of his face again and pressed a kiss onto his forehead. He assured Tony, “Everything will be ok.”

Tony clenched his jaw and nodded tightly. He turned his head to the side to press it against Steve’s and Steve nestled in closer to provide as much comfort as he could to Tony.

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“Oh, my God.”
It wasn’t Steve to gasp the sediment to the Lord this time. Tony turned to find Gabe staring at him with large, white eyes. He hadn’t seemed to notice their cuddling but only the reactor in his chest. Hell, it was more noticeable to Tony too. He never before felt its weight or its unnatural place in his chest like he did now.

“From the future,” Tony promptly reminded Gabe. He looked to Steve and asked, “Help me sit up. I feel useless laying down like this…”

Steve helped Tony up and took off his bomber to make a makeshift pillow for him to lean against in addition to Steve’s body. Steve seemed to unconsciously rub at Tony’s arms which Tony took comfort in. The super soldier asked Gabe, “Have you seen anything like this?”

“I think he’s referring to my skin condition and not the fact that I have a glowing reactor embedded in my chest,” Tony sarcastically grunted and bumped the back of his head against Steve’s stomach as he leaned into him.

“Tony,” Steve groaned, his voice hoarse with worry.

Gabe slowly walked up to the table, his eyes locked on the light on Tony’s chest, but, as he took his place by the table. He began to look at the rest of him. He lightly touched one of the bigger veins and, with the sudden burst of pain, Tony hissed, “Oh –! That’s sensitive!”

“How long has this been happening?”

“Didn’t really notice it until…well, a couple of weeks after arriving here in the past,” Tony murmured. “It wasn’t this bad when we left the Hydra base. I haven’t been able to really look at it because it…well, as you can see my reactor’s a little bright so even in the privacy of my tent I couldn’t look at it without someone noticing…”

“With this swelling…this looks like some kind of reaction to an infection, specifically in your veins,” Gabe murmured thoughtfully. He put his medical bag on the table and rummaged through it. He pulled out a small bottle with a clear liquid and then stuck it with a syringe.

“What is that?” Tony asked nervously. Didn’t they take a lot of weird drugs back in the day that they thought were good like cocaine and other hallucinogens?

“Penicillin,” Gabe stated. “It’s a new drug that our boys made last year while we were out here fighting. It helps with infections.”

Tony relaxed significantly and murmured, “Okay, good. Yeah, give me the good stuff, Jones.” He held his arm out to Gabe who proceeded to inject the drug into the appendage.

As Gabe slowly pushed the plunger of the syringe into Tony’s arm, Bucky came in next with the tool bag Tony had claimed for his own since joining Panzer’s team.

“Jesus Christ,” he swore loudly as his eyes locked onto Tony’s chest. He stomped over to beside Steve and he demanded of Tony, “What the hell did you do to yourself??”

“Varicose tattoos? Not into them?” Tony tried to make a joke of it, but Bucky just frowned and dropped the bag on the table within reach of Tony’s hand.

“Why didn’t you tell us this was happening??” Bucky demanded, ignoring Tony’s weak attempt at a joke. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Tony, waiting for a serious response.

“I…I didn’t think it was this serious,” Tony murmured, his voice no longer as jovial as he was
reminded of the state of his chest. Tony turned his head to the side and listened to Steve’s faint heartbeat. Tony’s heart twisted as he remembered waking up to that same sound and feeling so happy…how could that already feel like it occurred centuries ago?

Peggy and Jarvis arrived a few moments later and Jarvis went right up to Tony without a word. Iron Man’s eyes glowed brightly as it took in the damage to its master.

“Something is wrong with the arc reactor,” Jarvis observed.

“No shit,” Tony scoffed. “I’m going to take it out, but I need you to be ready to save my life if something goes wrong.” Tony paused as he considered his next command, feeling the very idea leech the warmth out of his limbs as he considered it.

In Mandarin, he told his AI, “If I die, find a way to take my body to the future whether it’s through the time machine or by just waiting out the decades…I want my friends to know what happened to me.”

Iron Man tilted its head in a slight nod and murmured, “Of course, Sir.”

“What’d you just tell it?” Steve asked.

Tony smiled sadly at him and murmured, “Future stuff.” He around at the gathered company. Everyone looked shaken, Peggy and Gabe most of all. Tony said, “Alright, let's get this thing started! Ready to help, Gabe?”

“I…I think?” Gabe replied in a strangled voice.

“Good enough!” Tony said, “Alright, no one freak out. Because if any of you freak out, I will freak out. People usually freak out when they see me take this thing out.” Tony put his hand on his reactor and turned it clockwise. It released with a light click but then also released a small puff of smoke.

Yeah, Tony would freak out if anyone so much as whimpers at this point…as it was his anxiety was burning through his blood like acid. The only thing preventing him from having a panic attack was all the adrenaline coursing through him at that moment.

As the hole in his chest was revealed, Peggy was surprisingly the first to curse with Bucky joining her by agreeing, “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Tony pulled out the wireless reactor and was glad to see the exterior looked fine. He had another five minutes until he went into heart failure to figure out what was wrong.

The Iron Man suit knelt down to his level and peered with him as he prodded at the device.

“…D-Do you have a heart?” Gabe asked breathlessly.

“Yup,” Tony replied dryly, he hadn't been the first to ask and won't be the last...well, Tony hoped he wouldn't be the last...

Tony didn’t look down at his chest cavity like everyone else was. The smoke was definitely coming from the inside of the reactor. Which was a big fucking problem because that was where the more fragile and complicated materials were…

Tony opened the core and another burst of smoke was released.

“Sir, your increased heart rate will make your window of time without the reactor smaller,” Jarvis
“Shut up, J, I’m human,” Tony grumbled. The palladium core to his reactor was revealed, but, it was no longer the white-silver insert he had installed. It was almost entirely covered in a reddish-brown rust. His core was literally the core of the problem. Tony gulped, “Y-You wouldn’t happen to have a backup palladium core on you, J?”

Iron Man raised its head to meet his gaze, but Jarvis did not reply.

Tony gulped and looked down at the death trap in his hands and gasped, “Yeah, I didn’t think so…”

Chapter End Notes

_August 21st_ is done and I can finally concentrate on this fic alone! BUT I probably won’t be posting anything new until after New Years because my life will be filled with holiday nonsense! After that, I will start posting new chapters weekly! Until then, Happy Holidays to everyone and who else is feeling the urge to gift Tony a new core for Christmas? :D
Tony’s mind raced. Palladium was hard to get in the future. He knew for a fact that something as bountiful as aluminum was rationed in World War II so palladium would probably be totally impossible to get in this era.

And even if he did find a replacement core, it still didn’t fix the most basic and problematic failure with the reactor.

The only thing that could have done this was neutron damage from the reactor wall. The palladium metal of the chip couldn’t handle the strength of his reactor and was breaking down under the pressure. It was leaking into his body, poisoning him.

Every time he used the armor, even to just charge it, the core was tested and then more and more poison was pushed into him.

Had he not gone to the past, it would’ve taken him months, maybe even years to have noticed it. But, because he was forced to charge the suit so regularly, the poisoning must have been accelerated.

Tony’s mind was scrambling to come up with a solution but, even if he had the future’s technologies, he was blanking.

He was only positive about one thing…

He was going to die.

Tony swallowed this information calmly and put the reactor back in his chest. It clicked in and then he flinched. A wave of sharp, tingling flowed over the majority of his chest as a fresh dose of palladium pushed into him.

“Don’t put that back in you!” Steve gasped, aghast. He reached toward the reactor as if to stop Tony.

Tony gently grasped his outstretched hand, taking comfort from Steve’s touch, and whispered solemnly to Steve, “If I don’t, I’ll die within the next few minutes…I need it to survive.”

“But we need to get you a replacement piece for whatever is in your chest, right?” Steve demanded, squeezing Tony’s hand tightly in his worry. “Tell us exactly what you’ll need and we’ll get it.”

“Steve…” Tony began, his voice already defeated. He lightly rubbed the back of Steve’s hand with his thumb, trying to wordlessly comfort him from the action.

“–It was pa-palladium?” Steve drove on, not wanting to hear it and he repeated what he heard from Tony’s sarcastic question to Jarvis. Steve did not let go of Tony, but turned to Peggy and asked, “Do we have anything like that? Maybe Howard?”

Peggy shook her head and Tony lightly shook Steve’s hand as he pressed, “Steve.”
Steve turned back to him with his brows pinched and his eyes glistening. Tony could tell by the way the super soldier was clenching his jaw that he was steeling himself for whatever Tony was going to say. Tony gently held Steve’s hand with both of his and whispered, “Even if this was my era…I wouldn’t be able to fix this…Palladium was the only stable element that I could find to balance my reactor…I had thought it was strong enough to handle the reactor’s neurons. Clearly, I miscalculated…”

“Sir, you do realize…” Jarvis began.

“I do, J,” Tony said quickly, not ready to hear it said aloud just yet, especially from the soothing, familiar voice of his AI. He repeated breathlessly, “I do…”

Steve was clenching his jaw so tightly Tony was surprised his teeth weren’t popping out yet. He was barely keeping it together. Without looking at them, Tony said to the others, “Guys, can you give us a minute?”

“Yeah,” Bucky replied. He lightly tapped Steve’s back in passing and then to the others said, “Let’s step out.”

Peggy nodded with a pinched expression and Gabe followed but he looked between Steve and Tony in confusion. He clearly was the only one who had yet to grasp the level of their relationship yet. The Commando whispered to Peggy, “Wha-What is going on??”

“I have a feeling Bucky can fill us in, right, soldier?”

Bucky sighed heavily, being the last to exit the tent, he tied off the flaps and said, “It’s a damn long, gay story, but I’ll try ta fill ya all in…”

The last thing Tony heard was Gabe mumble, “…Gay??” as they stepped away from the tent. He would have laughed at it in any other situation. Jarvis had gone with them, leaving Tony and Steve completely alone.

They were quiet as the company left and the silence continued for a few more moments after they were gone. They didn’t break eye contact the entire time, but Steve did reach out to him with his other hand to hold both of his. He rubbed his thumbs over the back of Tony’s fingers and Tony let himself relax into the intimate gesture.

“You…You can’t just give up like this,” Steve stated tersely, tightening his grip on Tony for the briefest of seconds.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” Tony replied ironically, squeezing gently back.

“Tony –,” Steve gasped, sounding nothing like the man Tony knew. He sounded small and scared. But mostly he sounded like he was breaking.

And it broke Tony.

What was worse, it was only at this horrible moment, that Tony was able to see how much Steve cared for him…and how much Tony cared in return.

He didn’t deserve Steve’s affection or care, but he had it…and it was the most precious thing he…he ever had.

Hell, he was going to change the future to save him. It was a declaration of how strong his feelings
were for the man.

Steve was practically crying. *Fuck.*

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The sight alone made Tony feel like his own predicament was little in comparison to the glistening in Steve’s eyes.

Tony pulled Steve closer and cupped his face. He smiled sadly at him, making Steve bite his lip with an unhappy frown.

“Right now, I just wanted to say, without a doubt, you completed me. I never before felt an ease like I did when I was with you, Steve,” Tony whispered.

Steve’s face broke and he pressed his forehead to Tony’s and tightly held his hand as he gasped, “Don’t talk like you’re going to die…”

“We all do eventually,” Tony pointed out. Tony ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, reminiscing with its texture, and sadly whispered, “Just some do sooner than others.”

And Steve was going to die with more heartbreak than he would have originally had. Tony royally fucked up this up.

He only wanted to make Steve happy…how did such an innocent want come to this?

He pressed a kiss onto Steve’s cheek and whispered, “I’m sorry…”

Steve pulled him into a tight but gentle embrace and wetly gasped, “Why are you apologizing? You’re the one who’s –who’s –.”

He didn’t seem able to voice it and Tony didn’t want to say it either so he gently cupped Steve’s jaw and led him back to Tony’s face. Tony’s future was screwed no matter what so he did not really think much about the consequences as he brought their lips together. They gently kissed and held each other, almost afraid to let go. But the kiss ended and then Steve buried his face in the crook of Tony’s neck and tightened his arms around him.

He was shaking slightly so Tony knew the super solider needed a moment to regain his composure. He wound his arms around Steve and rested his head on top of his. He closed his eyes and was forced to consider the other implications the palladium poisoning meant, namely what it meant for his future.

The hope he once had for returning home was unraveling as quickly as a falling ball of yarn. He was never going to see his friends again. He was never going to say goodbye.

He dug his fingers into Steve’s flesh and pressed his face into his shoulder and let himself give into despair for a few seconds.

But he was Tony Stark. He wasn’t going to let a little thing like death keep him down. He might be dying but he could delay it at least. Maybe give himself enough time to right the future so Steve won’t be cursed to become the Winter Solider and…maybe even give himself enough time to reach the future and say goodbye before the palladium finally did him in...

Tony gently pushed himself out of Steve’s embrace and he felt Steve’s fingers spasm slightly, like he almost was going to pull him back. He hated the idea of giving Steve false hope, but he stated,
“There may be a way I can fight this…not totally stop it but stall it long enough for me to get back to
the future.”

And like that, he saw hope flare into Steve’s eyes like a mighty inferno, burning away the despair,
and Tony’s heart pinched with guilt. Tony couldn’t tell him that it was utterly hopeless. He couldn’t
let Steve die with it on his conscious. The super soldier gasped, “Yes! What??”

Tony would never have attempted this in the future. He would’ve just created new cores, he
would’ve never used a damaged one like he was forced to do now.

But he had no choice so…

“You wouldn’t happen to know if the Army carries baking soda, would you?”

---

Steve rushed out of the tent and exclaimed, “Baking soda!? Do the cooks have it??”

“Yes, but why –, ” Peggy began.

Steve opted to run to the nutrition supply truck instead of replying. His heart raced faster than it ever
did before and he prayed devoutly to God:

*Please let this work. Save him. Don’t let him die! Please God!*

The truck caring their food supply had fresh bullet holes marring its side. Soldiers were unloading the
supplies and checking for damage. They came to attention when Steve ran up to them.

“I need baking soda,” Steve commanded, his tone hinting at no questions asked.

“Yes, sir,” one retorted and quickly hurried over to a wooden crate. He pulled out a tin of Blue
Ribbon Baking Powder and asked, “Will this do?”

“Yes, perfect!” Steve snatched it and quickly gasped, “Thank you!” He ran before they could reply.

When he returned to the tent, everyone had already filed back in.

Iron Man stood to Tony’s right, Gabe was on his left and had his fingers on Tony’s wrist, counting
his heartbeat. The other two stood at the foot of Tony’s makeshift cot. Tony was in the middle
of saying to Gabe, “- type of metal. So anything to counteract metal poisoning I guess…”

“I’ll look into options for you,” Gabe promised. “Right now, though, I think the Penicillin is your
best bet…”

“That and baking soda,” Tony murmured with a smirk, looking to Steve.

“You gonna make us lunch?” Bucky asked skeptically, looking at the can in Steve’s hand like it was
useful as a sack of potatoes.

“Nah, little trick I learned when restoring cars,” Tony said. “It’s easy on the metal but gets the rust
and other contaminants off good. It’ll do for now…can you open that can for me?”

Steve wordlessly tipped off the top and Tony groaned, “God, you make opening baking soda look
hot…”

Steve flushed and Gabe, it seemed, finally seemed to notice something going on between them
because he wildly looked between them and went, “Wait, what?”

Bucky must have somehow neglected to mention their relationship when they stepped out to talk. Steve flicked an annoyed glare in his best friend’s direction. He was probably trying to do it to protect him but if Gabe could keep Tony’s secret, he could just as easily keep Steve’s.

“I like to flirt with super serum men, but only if they have blue eyes. Gotta love those blue eyes,” Tony teased, his last statement was more directed at Steve than Gabe.

It felt weird flirting back in front of an audience, but Tony had already done it so he replied, “Not as nice as hazel.”

The shock in Gabe’s expression doubled and he gasped incredulously, “Y-You two are an item?”

Steve paused before answering because he wasn’t really sure how to explain everything to his teammate. He didn’t even know how to define what he shared with Tony…

Bucky, however, interceded for them.

“They’re not,” He said pointedly, “Something like that can change the future, right guys?”

Tony sighed heavily in reply, and Steve nodded slightly to Bucky. He pulled back from Tony even though his heart was crying to return to his side and comfort him however he could.

Why must their fates be so twisted?

He looked away from Tony and his eyes found Peggy’s instead. She stared at him with pity and a newfound understanding. After days of pestering him about it, she knew now why he and Tony stopped seeing each other.

And Steve’s heart had to accept it too.

He needed to stop letting his heart dictate how he was going to react. He’d been doing so ever since he saw Tony covered in blood after the attack. He needed to be calm and collect to make sure Tony survived until they got him back to the future.

Now, not only was the future was at stake…but Tony’s living future as well.

Gabe was an asset to keeping him alive, even the baking soda would help, but there was one more thing Steve could do that was probably going to piss off Tony because it’d change the future, but he had to do it. Every little thing would help at this point and Steve was willing to take any risk.

There was no way in Hell, Steve was going to let Tony die.

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The Iron Man suit shuddered and for the briefest of seconds, a new insignia almost appeared, but the surface area quickly returned to its blank state

The fate of the future, however, narrowed a bit more.

Chapter End Notes
I hope everyone had some happy holidays! I am back and I come with the promise of weekly updates! No more holidays or other fics delaying this one! In other words, we'll find out the fate of the future and these two before you know it! Thanks for reading! :D
Tony removed his arc reactor again and applied the baking powder to the ruined chip. He then scrubbed it off with a wire scrub brush from his tool kit and was able to remove most of the rust from it. But the chip itself was extremely degraded and it didn’t look like it would survive another baking powder washing.

Tony pushed the chip back in and was relieved to see the reactor accept it. It’d work for now but, it felt wrong to put such a damaged piece of equipment into the reactor.

But he had no choice…

Tony returned the reactor to his chest with a heavy sigh and then looked to the Iron Man suit. He solemnly stated, “I can’t charge you anymore, Jarvis.”

“I concur,” Jarvis agreed. “I suggest putting the suit to sleep until you need it to return to the future.”

Tony nodded and murmured, “Then, I guess this is goodbye until…”

Until Bucky died, and then – and then Steve dying a week later. Until his father recovered the tesseract and the government gave up on looking for the lost super soldier.

It was only a couple of months until Bucky’s death…it’ll be close, but, he might be able to make it…well, physically make it. He didn’t know how he was going to handle losing two friends and doing nothing to stop it. Especially for Steve…

“The most secure location will probably be with the time machine itself,” Peggy stated, interrupting his thoughts. “We have a full battalion there and the fort is secured. It would be more dangerous for the suit if it was stored in one of the 107th’s wagons. A stray shot could damage it.”

“Do you have enough charge to get there?” Tony asked Jarvis.

Jarvis nodded and stated, “I estimate I will have a remaining 5 hours of charge if no events happen that force me to use more energy.”

“Okay then,” Tony murmured, feeling a little emotional. “Go now so you don’t waste anymore charge.”

“Should I set a timer to wake me if things go wrong on this end?” Jarvis asked.

“…The beginning of May,” Tony whispered. He couldn’t remember the exact date when the war ended in Europe, but he knew it was in May because Steve was going to die in April and it was another dark irony to his story that he passed before seeing the war end.

Jarvis nodded curtly and said, “Very well. I will need the coordinates for the location and an order for the soldiers there so they know not to bother the suit while it hibernates.”

“I can provide all of that,” Peggy volunteered. She stepped out of the tent and Jarvis went to follow but paused beside Tony.

“I am positive we will meet again,” Jarvis stated to him. “You are the smartest man of your century, possibly even this century, and you have a drive in you that defies logical inklings.”
“Thanks, J,” Tony whispered, his voice breaking a little. “I’ll miss you too.”

Jarvis wordlessly grasped his shoulder and nodded to him. The suit turned and, just like that, his AI was gone.

And Tony was alone, so very alone.

“You okay, Tony?” Steve whispered, gently running his fingers through Tony’s hair.

Tony leaned into Steve’s touch, grateful for his unwavering support. He wasn’t completely alone… …For now.

Because he couldn’t change the future and his sweet super soldier had to die or he was cursed to become Hydra’s puppet.

Tony leaned back, slipping out of Steve’s gentle clasp. He felt exhausted, so he whispered, “I think I need to sleep…”

“We’ll wrap you back up and you can sleep on the comfier cots in the medical tent,” Gabe offered.

“Yes, please,” Tony all but groaned. He couldn’t help but yearn for the bed he’d shared with Steve. He glanced at the man and saw Steve already looking at him. His eyes also reflected a similar yearning.

Forget the bed, Tony would probably find more comfort from Steve’s embrace.

Tony broke eye contact and felt guilty…what was he doing? A few stolen kisses and he was already imagining cuddling with Steve? He needed to put a stop to this before the future changed for the worse again…

He just needed to get some shut eye and think this all over with a fresher mind.

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Steve helped Tony with his bandages and he bit down on his lip every time Tony flinched from Steve applying too much pressure to his sensitive skin. His heart hurt from inflicting pain on Tony…but his resolve grew.

He was going to help him despite the consequences...

With the bandages back in place, Tony's reactor's light was hidden and they were free to move. Steve carried Tony to the medical tent and Gabe informed the other medics that Tony had an injury to his chest that Gabe was personally monitoring. Both Gabe and Bucky left them alone as Steve helped Tony settle into the cot and tucked him in.

Tony teased, “Are you going to read me a bedtime story too?”

“Yeah, it’s about a time traveler with a big head,” Steve sarcastically retorted in a quiet whisper.

Tony chuckled lightly and murmured, “I hope it has a happy ending…”

Steve so badly wanted to run his fingers through Tony’s hair. Instead, he lightly grasped his arm and promised, “It does, he may have a big head but he’s also a good man. He’s going to grow old and grey and invent many amazing things.”
Tony took a moment to reply. He was looking at Steve but he seemed to be elsewhere. He finally whispered, “Sounds lonely…”

Steve’s heart throbbed with an unbearable sting and he whispered, “Not all endings are perfect…”

Tony closed his eyes and grumbled, “Stupid space time continuum…”

“Stupid indeed…” Steve agreed and watched as Tony’s face finally relaxed as he gave into his exhaustions.

Steve sat with him for a few moments, watching Tony as he fell asleep. They were in full view of strangers so he couldn’t reach out and touch him like he wanted. It was harder now knowing how easily Tony could die. The chip he put back into his body looked like it was barely held together. He could go at any moment.

Steve clenched his fist and promised to the unconscious man, “I won’t let you die.”

With his resolve set in, Steve got up and left the tent before he could change his mind.

Bucky and Gabe were waiting outside and, as soon as he appeared, Gabe went back in, probably to keep an eye on Tony.

Steve kept walking and Bucky quickly fell into step with him. He asked, “How are you?”

“What do you think?” Steve grumbled deviating from the command tent.

Bucky’s steps faltered as he realized Steve wasn’t going to the Commandos’ area. He quickly returned to Steve’s side and said, “Ummmm, where are you going?”

“To Howard,” Steve replied gruffly.

“Howard!?” Bucky exclaimed loudly, drawing the eyes of several soldiers. They kept walking and those eyes individually filtered away. He leaned in closer to Steve and said in a lower, accusing voice, “Why are you gonna see him at a time like this??”

“You know exactly why,” Steve retorted and picked up his pace when he saw the enigmatic inventor’s tent.

Bucky tightly grabbed his arm and pulled him to a violent stop. Bucky hissed, “One of the first things Tony warned us about was saying anything to his dad! I wasn’t raised by him like Tony and even I know that man would abuse the knowledge he’d gain from the future!”

“He’s the richest, smartest, and most resourceful man on the continent!” Steve retorted with a harsher whisper, “He may be able to get Tony his Palladium…or even find a way to help him. He’s like Tony, he understands this stuff.”

“You could become Hydra’s pawn,” Bucky begged, digging his fingers into Steve’s arm.

Steve clenched his fists and his own fear from self-preservation made him waver for just a moment… but he remembered this was for the man who taught him to love and his decision was easy.

“I’m not going to let Tony die,” Steve whispered apologetically and gently dislodged Bucky’s ironclad grip.

“Steve!?” Bucky went to stop him again, but Steve wouldn’t let himself falter and kept striving forward. Bucky’s grip on him broke but his stride don’t break. Bucky followed close behind, cursing
Steve’s stubbornness under his breath.

Steve found Howard busily directing his minions in setting up his tent. It was even bigger than the main command tent and had two openings. One for people to use and the other was large enough to fit the back end of a 15-foot truck. One was currently parked in this entrance and Howard’s projects were being unloaded.

“Did he say if it’ll be tomorrow or the day after?” Howard groaned to the woman beside him. “Tell Phillips I agreed to only so much field time and I am reaching my limit!”

His secretary nodded and rushed out of the tent, pausing only to smile at Steve. Steve didn’t notice and went over to Howard.

Bucky vainly tried one last time, hissing in warning, “Steve-!”

But Steve caught Howard’s attention and the inventor turned to him, asking, “What are you doing here, Cap?”

“Palladium. Do you have any?” Steve said, jumping right into the heart of the matter.

“Palladium!” Howard gasped, taken-aback. “How the hell do you know about Palladium?”

“So do you have it?” Steve pressed.

“Not here, it’s rare and costs a pretty penny. The Russians used to be the go to guys for the metal, but supplies have dwindled since the war started…Why do you need it, Cap? Want to make your shield shinier?”

“Iron Man needs it,” Steve replied.

Howard’s fingers spasmed on the clipboard he was holding and he fully faced Steve, giving him all of his attention. He gasped, “It can be used as an element in a catalyst converter too. Are you telling me that robot has a catalyst converter in it?? What else is it made of??”

Steve shook his head and replied, “I have no idea if that’s its function, but…maybe you can look it over and determine for yourself?”

Howard’s grip on the clipboard became white and Bucky grasped Steve’s arm and tried again, “Steve, the future –!”

Steve dislodged Bucky’s grip and continued, “It’s not in the suit however. It’s embedded in something called an arc reactor. It’s in the chest of the suit’s occupant, your future son, Tony.”

Howard dropped his clipboard and stuttered, “M-My - my?”

His eyes rolled back into his head and he promptly fell back as he fainted.

Steve sighed heavily, running his hand through his hair and murmured, “That could have gone better…”

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They brought Howard over to a workbench and reassured his workers he was fine. Steve used the clipboard to fan him and Bucky paced behind him.

“So fucking stupid!” Bucky cursed, “This will definitely change the future…unless, do you think he
“He didn’t hit his head, Buck…” Steve sighed and continued his fanning. Of all of the reactions he imagined from the man, he never expected Howard to faint like one of those petite dames in the movies.

Howard moaned as he came too and Steve stopped fanning him. He lightly touched Howard’s shoulder and quietly said, “Howard?”

Bucky stopped his pacing and stood over Steve’s shoulder, peering down at the inventor with a tense demeanor.

Howard’s eyes pinched and then slowly opened. He saw Steve and his brows crunched together. He grabbed his head and groaned, “Cap? What happened?”

“You fainted,” Bucky said bluntly.

Howard groaned some more and then sat up. Still rubbing his forehead, he groaned, “My mind was spinning with the implications of the Palladium but then you mentioned there was a man in the suit too?”

“Yes,” Steve replied cautiously, wondering if he’d faint again. “Your son, Tony…”

“And that’s what made all of my cognitive functions detonate…I was hoping I misheard you. Holy shit, I’m gonna have a kid.” Howard stopped rubbing his head and ran his hand through his hair. His expression was more open than he’d ever seen it. Gone were the teasing eyes and sardonic smile. Howard was shocked with a scared gaze that couldn’t meet anyone’s eyes. He gasped, “The timelines match up…it’s – it’s the Commandos’ Tony, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Steve replied.

“Christ…” Howard suddenly leapt to his feet, scaring Steve, as he lifted his arms in the air and cheered, “I sired a genius!”

“…What?” Bucky said, taken-aback.

Howard proudly dusted off the dirt from his earlier fall and explained, “Tony is a genius and I’ve been trying to figure out how I hadn’t heard of him before but it’s obvious now, he got it from me! To think, my son, the first time traveler. I wonder if I helped him build his suit? And what about this arc reactor you mentioned? You said he keeps it on his chest? Like 24/7?”

“More like ‘in’ his chest,” Bucky corrected.

Howard’s eyes surprisingly got larger and he gasped, “What?”

“We’ll show you,” Steve said and nodded for him to follow.

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Tony didn’t sleep well. The constant ache in his chest and uncomfortable cot were reminiscent to when he had been held captive by the Ten Rings. It made for uneasy dreaming.

He opened his eyes to a gentle grasp of his shoulder. He saw Steve’s concerned eyes first and he almost relaxed into those cool blue depths.

Almost.
Because then he saw his father standing behind Steve’s shoulder and he was looking at Tony like he was the Nobel Peace Prize in Applied Sciences with his name stamped into it.

Even as a child, Tony had never seen his dad look at him like he was…special.

It was immediately disconcerting.

Tony didn’t even see Bucky beside his dad because he pushed himself up to his elbows and zeroed in on Steve as he gasped, “What’s going on?”

“I asked your dad for help,” Steve explained.

Tony’s heart plummeted far into his chest, farther than he ever thought possible. Steve was looking at him with an apologetic expression, but it took Tony several long seconds to believe what had clearly happened.

One of the first promises Steve had made to him was to keep his secret. Tony trusted him more than he trusted anyone else in his life so he never thought he’d go back on his word. Even when they had to reveal it to others, Steve always looked to Tony to make sure it was okay…except now.

Steve knew his father would abuse the knowledge he gained.

Steve knew Tony and his father had a tough relationship.

But Steve betrayed him anyways…and this betrayal hit him harder than anything other deceitful actions made toward him in his entire life.

And he said ‘dad.’ He told his father of their relation.

He said Howard was here to help so he clearly wanted him to help with the reactor.

He revealed everything to Howard.

The fate of the future was up in the air now.

Steve could have just cursed himself to Hydra in addition to betraying Tony.

Even his impending death hadn’t hit him this hard. He felt his eyes well up, but he adopted the blank mask he used for most scandals and didn’t let them see how affected he was… He was so angry and most of it was directed at Steve. Why did he do it?? It did more harm than good toward Tony and Steve’s own future.

“Tony,” Steve whispered in question. He reached out to touch his face, but Tony flinched back.

He was able to keep his face blank, but he could not keep the emotion out of his voice as he gasped, “What did you do?!?”

Steve slowly pulled back his hand and whispered, “I had to, Tony. He’s the only one that can help you right now.”

“This is the opposite of help!” Tony hissed and sat himself up fully to better meet Steve’s eyes. He refused to look at his father and this position was better to avoid his gaze. Tony continued, “I fixed the initial problem! I have done everything I could to fix it in this era! Howard can’t do anything more!”

“You don’t know that,” Steve countered. “For all you know, he could’ve had access to Palladium!”
“But he doesn’t, does he?” Tony countered and Steve bit his lip.

“Palladium…Palladium. Why do we keep mentioning it?” Howard asked, peering at Tony thoughtfully over Steve’s shoulder. “Where’s this reactor? Is it really in your chest?”

The impalement of the betrayal twisted itself a little deeper into Tony’s heart and he gasped to Steve, “How much did you tell him??”

“Everything I could to help you,” Steve pressed, grasping his hand.

Tony ripped his hand out of Steve’s grip and hissed, “This is the opposite of help! And Jarvis is gone by now so we’ll have no way of knowing what you just did to the future! I can still die but you could’ve damned yourself, Steve! Everything we did—! Everything we gave up—! It would have been for nothing!”

You are supposed to never go back on your word!

Why did you do this??

Telling Howard of all people…

Howard chose that moment to clear his throat. Tony finally looked at him and found Howard studying him with an intense gaze. He stated, “What’s done is done. I know now and there’s no way I’m going to be ignoring this…you – you’re my son from the future.”

Tony clenched his fist and grumbled, “Yes…”

“Is it really so bad that I know that?” Howard teased, obviously trying to defuse the tension between him and Steve.

“Unquantifiably,” Tony retorted.

“Let him look at the reactor at least,” Steve pressed, grasping Tony’s shoulder again.

Tony shook him off and hissed, “Don’t touch me. I am so pissed at you right now!”

Steve tightly clenched his jaw as he pulled back his hand and, in a measured voice, stated, “I did this for you. I couldn’t do anything for my Ma when she slowly died from cancer, but I could do this for you. I am not going to watch you waste away when there is something I could’ve done to help you. I… I love you, Tony. I love you so much and I know I am going to lose you, but I refuse to let it be to death. You are going to go back to the future and fix your reactor and live out the rest of your life building amazing inventions and bringing wonder to the lives of people around you like… like you did for me. Be pissed at me, but that won’t change how I feel about you. I would have still done it knowing how you feel now.”

That knife in his heart was twisting and thrusting all over his chest. His emotions were going haywire and…and Steve loved him? Like in love – love?

Something so pure should have made him happy but it hurt more.

Tony couldn’t even consider his feelings in the matter because he wasn’t going to be in this era much longer, he was either going back to the future or dying from Palladium poisoning.

Each option meant leaving Steve.

Leaving the man who loved him enough to risk his own future…
Tony dropped his head in his hands and gasped, “Why’d you say that?”

“It’s how I feel,” Steve whispered, his words heavy with emotion. Steve lightly touched one of Tony’s forearms and Tony did not flinch back this time. Steve continued, “I love you, Tony Stark…”

How was his heart still beating? The knife seemed to twist deeper every time Steve uttered the word “love.”

“Why do you two fuckwits gotta do this in the middle of the Goddamn medical tent!?” Bucky hissed.

“We…ah…can take them to my tent. No one can intrude on…whatever is going on here?” Howard volunteered, clearly a little confused by the turn in conversation.

They all looked to Tony and he refused to meet any of their eyes. He didn’t know what to think anymore. He was a mess of anger, resentment, depression, and…and well whatever it was he was feeling to hear that Steve loved him. It was mostly confusion, but…but he was also a happy-sad too which he didn’t even know was an emotion until that moment and…it hurt more than everything else…

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and decided it’d be best to work with one of the emotions he did know: anger. He grumbled, “Howard fucking knows who I am, so he might as well look at the reactor now and tell me what I already know. The future is clearly already fucked so what’s a little more fuckery?”

“Brilliant, let’s go!” Howard said, sounding way too fucking happy. It made Tony’s mood fouler.

Steve wordlessly picked him up and Tony made no move to help himself into his arms. He kept his arms crossed over his chest, his frown in place, and his gaze pointed elsewhere.

Steve was just as silent as Tony as they walked out of the tent but, once they were out of the hearing of the others. He privately whispered, “I’m sorry, Tony…for everything. I just want to make sure you make it back to the future…and…”

Steve didn’t continue and Tony waited several long seconds before he said, “And…?”

Steve dropped his head and murmured in an even lower voice, “I’m – I’m sorry about confessing to you like that…”

Tony should have reassured him. He should have told him that he was pretty sure he was in love with him too. He should have told him Steve was the only person who ever made Tony feel content which was a feat in itself since he was stuck in the past.

He should have said so much.

But his conflicted heart made him bite down on his lips and the knife in his heart twisted more, making it near impossible to breathe, nonetheless reply.

The rest of the way to Howard’s tent was heavy with silence and, since first meeting Steve, he regretted ever investigating the Hydra base. He should have stayed home and kept upgrading his armor.

Then maybe he’d free from all this heartache…
Why Don't You Make Like a Tree and Leave?

After giving his father a terse explanation on how it worked, Tony held out the reactor to his father and Howard hovered before it with wide eyes. His face was centimeters from it, but he made no move to touch it. It felt so wrong showing this to his father. He wanted to snatch it back before the man could steal its design. This was Tony’s invention but, by the way Howard was studying it, he darkly wondered if this would change in the future too…

Howard gasped, “It’s beautiful.”

“And it’s killing me,” Tony stated gruffly, shoving the reactor back into his chest. It stung again as a fresh dose palladium rushed through him. This time he became a little dizzy. Tony closed his eyes until it passed to fight back the nausea. When he reopened them, he saw that Howard’s eyes had slid over the rest of his chest, taking in his dark, inflamed veins and settled on Tony’s hand that was still clutching the reactor with a tight grip.

“You’re in pain,” Howard observed.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Tony chuckled darkly. He let go of his reactor and stiffly pulled his shirt back on. He slowly did up the buttons and Howard watched it all with a speculative look on his face. When the reactor was covered, Howard finally asked, “Did Gabe give you anything for the pain?”

“He gave me stuff to fight the infection and that’s all I need. I can handle the rest…”

“Just like you handled all those scars on your torso?” Howard asked, cocking his eyebrow in question at where his shrapnel scars were hidden under his shirt. Tony paused on the top button and dropped his hands as he met his father’s overly inquisitive gaze. Howard quickly pressed, “If you tell me how they occur I can make sure it’ll never happen –.”

“End of conversation,” Tony said. “We are not going to change the future just so I could get my beach body back.”

“It could spare you pain –,” his father began to argue.

“Howard,” Tony hissed, silencing the man with a swipe of his hand. “I am not changing the future anymore and that is final.”

Howard looked pissed and looked like he wanted to argue further but Tony murmured, “Let’s just get down to why we are here in the first place and get it over with…”

“So we are going to ignore the fact that you are my son and that you are going to be grievously wounded enough to have scars covering your entire chest years later?”

“Yes,” Tony stated, crossing his arms over said chest.

“I am your father!”

“Not yet,” Tony retorted with venom. He so badly wanted to add, And not in the future either, but forwent his teenage issues with his dad in favor of saving whatever future was left to him.

“So…?” Howard said expectantly. When Tony simply rose an eyebrow in response, Howard pressed, “If we are going to ignore the white elephant in the room then let’s focus on the pink
canary.” Howard pointed at his chest and asked, “What’s it made of?? What does it do??”

Tony looked around them. They were in Howard’s personal, private tent. It was a big upgrade from the one Tony had been using with the Commandos. It was much larger and could probably sleep six more people. Instead, it contained Howard’s large cot and several suitcases. Tony’s attention was most drawn to the cot since he was sitting on it and it felt like it had a 40s version of a memory foam travel mattress in addition to thick blankets instead of sleeping bags.

Tony was on the closest thing to a bed in weeks and he was using all of his will not to sink into the bed and sleep.

His father had ordered everyone out, including Steve and Bucky, leaving them alone. No one would overhear them but he still felt uneasy talking about it after being silent about it for so long… He hadn’t even talked to Steve about the finer details because even the tiniest of details could’ve changed the future.

But Steve had forced his hand by involving his father.

Still feeling bitter from Steve’s betrayal, Tony reluctantly explained, “It…It’s a self-sustaining electromagnet. The output is three gigajoules per second which is the chemical energy equivalent of 30 barrels of oil a minute.”

Howard whistled, clearly impressed. He asked, “Which of us came up with this?”

Tony rolled his eyes and sighed heavily with frustration. His father was digging for more unneeded information and Tony could easily deny him but…Tony crossed his arms over his chest and haughtily stated, “You came up with the idea, but I actually made it into reality.”

“Just to rub it in your old man’s face, I bet,” Howard teased and Tony leveled a glare at him.

Howard sat before him with a sigh and smiled at him. Tony hesitated to think it but…he looked almost proud?…Of Tony?

The Howard he remembered was a cold, calculating man and, as a child, he seemed he wanted to be rid of Tony, so much so, that Howard’s happiest day was probably when he sent Tony off to boarding school.

This beaming man, with all of his attention on Tony, wasn’t the Howard Tony grew up with…

And…Tony sighed again, slightly shaking his head. His mind was coming up with all sorts of wild theories and foolish ideas. But his father was looking at him like this, not because he was his future son, but because he was a key to an advanced knowledge.

“So why do you have this embedded in your chest cavity?” Howard inquired.

“I have shrapnel in my bloodstream. The reactor keeps the metal from getting any closer to my heart or doing further damage,” Tony stated.

Howard’s eyes widened with understanding and then he whispered, “That explains the scars then…” Howard’s eyes focused on the light in Tony’s chest and whispered, “Ingenious…”

He started to smile again and it made Tony more wary of the man. He hadn’t seen his father smile this much growing up like he just did in the last hour. Their eyes met and Howard’s smile didn’t waiver and it took all of Tony’s will not to look away.
Tony finally grumbled, “What?”

“Look at you,” Howard said. “I still can’t get over the fact that you’re my son! You are the promise of a future! It’s strange to think but I’m going to get married…settle down…I have a family…Pass on my work to you…I’m – I’m still flabbergasted by all of it!”

Howard sounded so excited by it and it made Tony uneasy. Howard may have been enthusiastic but…This was not the father that had raised him. He was going to change in the coming years. Many events in the coming years will make him a more bitter man.

In the future, after Howard had died and Tony took over his company, Tony had wanted to ask him so many things. He had wanted to better understand the man that had been his father. Especially, after his plans to shut down the weapons sector, he wanted to know how his father would’ve felt about that. Mostly though, he wanted to know if the man was ever conflicted, if he had doubts…Or if he was every inch the man the world remembered him as from his newsreels: the charismatic genius that seemed to have no doubts that could stop him.

He had that chance now but…but Tony was also scared to hear those answers. Especially from this man who was nothing like the one he had known in the future…

Tony didn’t let himself dwell on it and got right down to business, stating, “Alright, any hypothesizes you can come up with to help?”

“The Palladium is the root of the problem,” Howard stated without falter. “So we just need to pull out the weed and replace it with a healthier alternative.”

“Did you forget the bit when I told you there is no other element I could use for my core?” Tony asked dryly, referring to their conversation right before he pulled out the arc reactor.

Howard chuckled, and Tony was reminded of the father he knew when Howard haughtily retorted, “We’ll obviously just make a new element.”

Tony scoffed and rolled his eyes at the man’s joke. But Howard didn’t drop his nose and he rose his eyebrows in question as if he were wondering when Tony was going to start spewing praises.

“Create a new element? Just like that? Of course, why didn’t I think of that?” Tony sarcastically stated. “Oh, I know why! Because it’ll be impossible!”

“Everything is achievable through technology,” Howard stated confidently.

“And the technology today is barely functional at best,” Tony retorted with a snort.

Howard leapt from his kneeling position and countered, “And you’ll learn all your genius from those of us from this era, you little whipper-snapper! Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything! In the meantime, you get some rest like Dr. Jones ordered. I’ll be back in time to wake you for dinner!”

“Yum,” Tony moaned, not looking forward to the freeze-dried food. He sarcastically added, “And good luck with creating the impossible.”

Howard paused at the door of the tent as Tony settled down into the bed. Tony looked at him questionably and Howard said, “Rest well…son.”

“Please don’t start patronizing me,” Tony groaned, leaning back into the bed. No, this wasn’t a bed it was a piece of seventh heaven. Howard was never getting it back.
“Daddy will be back to check in on you!” Howard retorted with a grin before dashing out of his tent. Tony sighed heavily and rubbed his face to help himself relax.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep to the once familiar scent of his father’s aftershave.

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Steve waited outside Howard’s tent and jumped on the man as soon as he stepped out. Howard raised a finger to his lips, indicating to be quiet. Steve kept his mouth shut in a thin line and followed Howard stiffly as he walked away from the tent.

When Steve felt they were far enough away, he asked, “Well?”

“To put it plainly…Tony is in deep shit,” Howard replied.

“But can you help him?” Steve asked with a note of exasperation.

“Maybe…It’ll be hard but I’m going to try. He has all of my attention now and, as soon as we reach the new base, I’ll be able to really concentrate on it. I’ll probably not follow the 107th for their next mission and Tony probably shouldn’t too.”

The breath caught in Steve’s throat at Howard’s suggestion. Steve probably wouldn’t see Tony after that then. Howard and his team would take over and help Tony get back to the time machine as soon as they had the tesseract.

Steve wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

But…it was the best option for Tony to survive.

Howard was heading toward the Command tent and Steve asked, “Are you going to Colonel Phillips?”

“I need to have a solid timeline now,” Howard sighed. “I can’t help Tony if we are always on the move and in the field. I am limited here. I need access to a proper lab now and chemistry books. Otherwise, all I can do for him is let him sleep on my cot and that won’t fix the reactor.”

Steve nodded and murmured, “I’ll also have a word with the Colonel and see if we can move out any faster.” Steve paused and then added, “And thank you, Howard, I know this must be crazy to you.”

Howard paused before they got any closer to the Command tent and turned to Steve with a grin. He sarcastically said, “It certainly is a little crazy to meet your son who has ten plus years on me and a cybernetic implant in his chest…but, I’m glad you guys told me in the end. I get to be a part of one of the most important moments in history now. I will be a part of the time travel saga. I get to know what kind of man my son becomes, and I have the chance to save him…It’s amazing so, Cap, thank you for all of this.”

Steve murmured, “We will save him…”

Howard clapped his arm and agreed, “Yes, we will.”

They entered the tent and Steve stood off to the side as Howard plowed forward and interrupted the Colonel in the middle of speaking with one of his subordinates. Phillips’ face soured as soon as his eyes landed on Howard and that sour look became more pinched as Howard began to talk.
Steve winced and Peggy covertly stood beside him and murmured, “He’s as smooth as a jagged rock.”

“He knows what he wants,” Steve murmured back. Howard was brash and didn’t let a little thing like army rank stand in his way.

“…This is for Tony, isn’t it? He’s never confronted the Colonel personally about the 107th’s movements interfering with his schedule. He usually uses his lackies for that…”

“Yeah, it’s about Tony…” Steve sighed. “Howard said he needed a centralized location…him being in the field will make him useless for Tony…”

“But he thinks he can help?” Peggy pressed.

“Yes…” Steve whispered, wishing he could ask Tony himself about his father’s opinions but…but Tony probably wanted nothing to do with him at that point.

Peggy must have been able to read him like a book because she stated, “Tony and Bucky may disagree, but I think you did the right thing.” Steve turned to her but saw her eyes were on Howard. She continued talking to him, however, and whispered, “If I was in your shoes, I would have done the same thing…”

“Thanks, Pegs,” Steve murmured, dropping his head as he was overcome by his emotion. He felt so broken by hurting Tony so but he was still glad he did because it was the only thing he could do to help save him.

Peggy wrapped an arm around his waist and leaned into his side. Steve leaned back and dropped his head on top of hers and she whispered, “Don’t thank me…You two are falling into a tragic love story and I can see it all enfolding and there’s nothing I can do to stop it…”

Steve’s heart clenched at the word "love" and his mind replayed Tony’s gasp after Steve’s confession...

“Why’d you say that?”

Tony didn’t feel as strongly toward him as Steve did and it didn’t lessen Steve’s love, but it certainly made it feel tragic like Peggy suggested.

Peggy pulled on his arm and he stumbled back and out of the tent. He gasped, “Wait, Peggy! I wanted a word with the Colonel after Howard.”

“Trust me,” she murmured. “You don’t want to speak to the Colonel after Howard. No one will. But you do need to speak to Tony right now.”

Steve stopped letting her pull him and came to an immediate halt just outside the tent. He squeaked, “What??”

“Now that he’s alone you can properly apologize,” Peggy stated smartly, pulling him off to the side to make their conversation more private.

“He…He wouldn’t even look at me when I was carrying him. I doubt he’ll speak to me…” Steve murmured dejectedly.

“He’s angry with you right now but he clearly loves you too,” Peggy said and Steve’s heart clenched at her misguided notion.
Tony didn’t love him.

She gently grasped his hand and whispered, “You shouldn’t part with this looming over both of you…Tony is really sick. If you wait too long…”

“He’s going to be fine,” Steve stated before she could finish the thought. “If Howard can’t find a solution then Tony will go back to the future and get help there.” He repeated with more vigor, “He’s going to be fine.”

Peggy cupped his jaw and made Steve met her caring eyes. She whispered, “He’s not fine now, Steve…”

Her stark words gutted him.

“Tony…He – He just wanted to be a part of the Commandos!” Steve laughed but it was broken and he had to pause to catch his breath before he completely broke down in front of the Command tent of all places. He whispered, “He was like a gift from God, Peggy. I wanted to love him while I had him. It was so innocent…I never imagined it to becoming this: loving him so deeply, the future changing because of it, and Tony…Tony dying…” He rubbed harder at his eyes and gasped, “Oh, my God, he’s actually dying.”

“Make up with him,” Peggy urged. “Or you might regret this for the rest of your life… Go to him now while Howard is preoccupied.”

“I – I can’t…” Steve began.

“Captain Steven G. Rogers,” she admonished. “I thought the word ‘can’t’ was not a part of your vocabulary.”

His lips twitched into a small smile. Peggy smiled too and lightly rubbed his arms. She whispered, “Go to him. That tough kid from Brooklyn shouldn’t be so scared of this Manhattan wannabe.”

Steve snorted and smiled wider at his friend. He said, “Alright, alright, you got me. I’ll go.” He was afraid of how Tony was going to react to him but…he also wanted to be with him, now even more so because Peggy was right…

Tony could die and it would destroy Steve if they were still estranged like this when it happened.

Steve parted from Peggy without another word and ran to Howard’s tent. He was happy no one else was hovering by. Word was already spreading throughout the camp that Tony had been inflicted with a mysterious injury. Jacques and Dum Dum had already inquired with him about Tony’s condition and he knew the remaining Commandos were not going to be far behind.

It was quiet in the tent and Steve entered stealthily. Tony was laying on Howard’s cot with the blankets drawn up just enough to cover where his reactor would be under his shirt. His eyes were closed but his brows were pinched. Steve walked up to him and then silently sat next to him on the cot.

Tony opened his eyes, his gaze looked a little fevered, but he groaned heartily when he saw who had joined him.

Tony turned onto his side, facing away from Steve, and grumbled, “Go away, Steve.”

Steve frowned unhappily and Tony’s back. He wanted to reach out and touch him but clenched his hands together instead. Steve dropped his head, focusing on his hands, and spoke from the heart. He
whispered, “I don’t want there to be any conflict between us. The future is uncertain and I know I’m to blame but…I’m not afraid of it. I’d sacrifice myself to Hydra a million times over if it meant saving your life. I only got a glimpse of the future thanks to you, but I’d still make those same choices even if I had the complete knowledge of what awaited me. You’re important to me, Tony. I’m sorry I told your father about you but I’m not sorry for trying to help you…”

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Tony’s insides churned with a bitter hurt that left a sour taste in his mouth. He was torn from being angry at Steve for his betrayal…to wanting to fall into his comforting arms and let his presence take away all his fears about his ailing body.

He listened to Steve’s words and those churning emotions began to flip flop faster inside of him.

“Tony?” Steve whispered and lightly ran his fingers through Tony’s hair. Tony nearly melted into Steve’s gentle touch. He turned back around, pressing his head into Steve’s hand and finally met the super soldier’s sad eyes.

“I…” Tony sighed and restarted, “The only thing I really want – no, need from my friends, is their trust and you broke that, Steve.”

Steve clenched his jaw but did not break his eyes away from Tony’s accusing gaze. He stated, “And I will regret that for years to come…”

Tony’s heart twisted more at the words.

No, you won’t, Steve, not years. You don’t even have half a year...

“I understand why you did it,” Tony whispered, hating seeing such pain in Steve’s eyes. Hell, he was willing to change the future to save Steve but ended up damning him to Hydra instead. But still… “It still hurts. I wish you spoke to me – even tried to convince me – before involving my father. What’s worse, you knew we had a rocky relationship and – and you forced him upon me! The way he looks at me…his excitement…it hurts because I know it’s not the man he will be with me. I am reliving so much of my miserable childhood and I can’t reveal how much of a bad dad he was because he’s so excited to see the man I’ll become!” The words rushed out of him so fast in the end that he had to gasp for breath. He couldn’t say anything to Howard, but he didn’t keep anything from Steve except…except that fact that he and Bucky were going to die soon.

He just wanted to scream. Everything that could go wrong was going wrong. Steve and Bucky were going to die; Tony was dying; and now Howard was meddling in his business thanks to Steve.

Tony clutched his head and let out a much needed, “FUCK!”

Steve jumped slightly from the sudden exclamation. Tony dropped his hand and his eyes latched onto Steve’s focus.

“I’m still really pissed at you,” Tony stated but he grasped Steve’s hand and carded his fingers with Steve’s.

Steve smiled sweetly at him and, for a moment, Tony forgot why he was mad at him. Steve curled his fingers around Tony’s and whispered, “Thank you…”

“Soooo pissed at you,” Tony moaned in exasperation, but he didn’t let go of his super soldier. He was angry with him but…but he was more scared of losing him.
He wanted to hold onto him forever and never let go.

He scooted back on the cot, making room for Steve and pulled on their connected hands, commanding, “Join me.”

Steve did so without question and even slid under the blankets with him. But, as soon as he lifted the comforters, the light from his reactor illuminated both of them and Steve paused as his eyes were irrevocably drawn to the lines on his chest peeking out from his shirt collar.

Steve couldn’t hide the soul crushing sorrow in his expression as he took in Tony’s poisoned flesh.

“So…” Tony sighed, pulling on his hand again. When Steve’s glassy gaze met his, Tony whispered, “Hold me.”

Steve nodded stiffly and slid the rest of the way into bed. He wrapped his arms around Tony and pulled him tightly into his embrace. Steve pressed his face into Tony’s shoulder and gasped, “Don’t die.”

Tony wound his arms around the super soldier just as tightly and had to bite down on his lip to keep himself from asking the same of Steve.

When Steve finally pulled back, he sniffed loudly and lightly pressed a few kisses on top of Tony’s head.

At that moment, Tony reconsidered everything: he was going to tell Steve everything, save his life, he would kiss him, make love with him, and share a future with him.

Just as Tony leaned back to meet Steve’s gaze in his confession, he leaned forward and pulled one of the muscles in his chest and couldn’t hold back a hiss of pain as one of the veins felt like a bolt of lightning striking him in the movement.

Steve worriedly cupped his face and gasped, “What’s wrong??”

Tony put his hand over Steve’s and ironically gasped, “Timing.”

If they’d only met in his era…

If they’d only met years before the other was destined to die…

“Seriously, Tony, what can I get you?” Steve demanded, wanting to help.

Tony rested his head against Steve’s chest and sighed, “Just stay here. You’re all I need…”

Steve settled back into the cot and wordlessly draped his arms over Tony. As Tony’s eyes closed, he heard Steve whisper, “You’re all I need too…” And then Steve pressed one more kiss on top of his head, making Tony clutch his shirt tightly enough to wrinkle it. He didn’t let go and fell asleep holding on tightly to his super soldier.

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Tony woke to Steve slipping out of the cot. Tony moaned and reached out to him to come back but, a moment later, Howard stepped into the tent and was probably the reason Steve left him in the first place. He was as glad he did it because there was no way he was getting in that awkward conversation with Howard.

“Sleep well, son?”
“Ugh,” Tony groaned, turning in the cot to face away from the absolutely ridiculous, younger version of his father.

“Hey, Cap, thanks for keeping Tony some company,” Howard said, stepping beside Steve where he had sat himself on the edge of the cot.

“I was glad to,” Steve truthfully replied. “How was the Colonel? Is he going to comply with your request?”

“We will be moving out tomorrow and we will first go to the southern French base but from there we will go the Allies’ stronghold in Switzerland so I can get the resources I need for Tony and be able to help the Commandos if need be. Phillips says you’ll be based out of there until you verify the information on Zola.”

Tony’s heart lodged into his throat and he spun around and gasped, “D-Did you say Zola??”

“We got information that he was hiding in Switzerland,” Steve confirmed, turning slightly on the cot to face him.

Tony’s mouth went dry and all he could think was: Zola, train, Swiss alps, Bucky, and, inevitably, the worst of all...

Death.

Bucky's death.

Bucky was going to die still.

If these events were still in motion, Tony's future might not have changed and may occur after all, but...

Steve's warmth was pressed into Tony's leg. He was living and Tony may still be angry with him but that did not change how he felt about him.

Tony might survive to reach the future but if these events still played out, Steve wouldn't.

Tony wanted nothing more at that moment than to curl back into bed with Steve and never let him go.

He knew this would happen but his heart was nowhere ready for it.
Bucky never before felt so torn in his life. On the one hand, there was Steve, his best friend and the last person on earth he could call family. He would do anything for Steve and he knew it’d be the same vice-versa. Keeping Steve alive had been his main goal in this war for Bucky.

But, on the other hand, was Tony. A man out of time whose future was now tied with theirs in more ways than one. Steve had been so obviously attracted to the man that, when Tony showed interest, Bucky practically shoved Steve in his direction because his best friend deserved to love and be loved in return at least once in his life.

But apparently, Steve and Tony falling in love was a game changer and they were forced between choosing to stay together or changing the future…a future in which Steve was tortured into a pawn for Hydra.

The choice was obvious, but it was far from easy. Bucky hated to see both men struggle with the resulting emotion pain and recent events made it so much more worse…

Steve had been a wreck when they first broke up but now he was a shadow of himself.

The 107th was breaking down the camp around him like nothing was amiss. Yet Steve wasn’t a part of it like he usually was. Bucky easily found him at Tony’s side. He had probably been with him all night.

Howard had spent the night with his secretary, his current not-so-secret-affair-in-progress, so the two probably had the tent to themselves. Before, Bucky would have been a worried wreck about this. He would’ve wondered if they had sex, were too loud, if anyone heard…but now he simply worried for Tony surviving the night and Steve’s heart not breaking more with every passing moment for not being able to do anything for him.

Howard’s tent hadn’t been broken down yet and, when Bucky stuck his head in, he saw exactly what he expected. Tony still asleep and Steve sitting next to him on the cot. Steve had been gently petting the side of Tony’s face but pulled back his hand guiltily when he saw Bucky.

“Heya, Buck,” Steve whispered, sounding tired and sad.

Bucky entered the tent and secured it shut. He walked over to Steve and whispered, “How was he through the night?”

Steve looked down at Tony and lightly ran his fingers through the time traveler’s hair. Steve whispered, “He tossed and turned all night. He finally settled down a few hours ago…”

Bucky sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. He felt useless as he stared at the two men. But what could he do? Originally, he could’ve protected the future by nagging Steve and Tony to death but…he could do nothing against Tony’s illness.

Tony was his friend and the situation he was in was tearing Bucky apart.

If Bucky felt like this, he couldn’t begin to imagine what Steve was going through.
“You didn’t sleep at all, did ya, punk?” Bucky tiredly teased.

“Couldn’t,” Steve sighed. “Had to keep an eye on him…”

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck, feeling older than he should, and commanded, “Go take a nap in my Jeep. I’ll keep an eye on him until someone comes to break down Howard’s tent.”

Steve bit down on his lip, like he wanted to refuse and stay. So Bucky quickly added, “You’ll be useless to him if you’re dead on your feet. Go.”

Steve sighed heavily but acquiesced and pushed himself to his feet. He asked, “If anything happens, please let me know?”

“Of course, now go to sleep!”

Steve smiled sheepishly and slowly lumbered out. Bucky watched him go until he disappeared and then finally turned his attention to Tony.

The time traveler remained sleeping but his expression was pinched as if he were having a bad dream. Bucky sighed like Steve had but did as Steve wanted and stood at watch, keeping an eye on Tony. Usually, he had the entire horizon when he had watch duty so he felt extremely confined to be focused on just one prone man. He grew bored quickly and felt a little weird staring at Steve’s fella so. His gaze began to shift around the tent and he wondered if Howard willfully choose the design on his ugly suitcases.

Tony woke with a startled gasp that made Bucky jump and his adrenaline immediately burn away any boredom he had been feeling.

He rushed over to Tony and hovered worriedly over him. Their eyes met and Tony broke their eye contact almost instantly. He sat up, his eyes trailing over the tent, and asked, “Wh-Where’s Steve?”

“I made him take a nap,” Bucky explained. “He was up all night with you.”

“That certainly sounds like him,” Tony halfheartedly chuckled.

“You can go back to sleep,” Bucky said. “Steve said you didn’t get much…”

“Nah…I’m up now and I…” Tony’s gaze flickered to Bucky for barely a second and then he asked, “I doubt I can go back to sleep now anyways…”

Tony tossed the blankets off his legs and got off the cot with a groan. He was moving so stiffly that Bucky swooped in to help him straighten. Tony tensed at his touch but relaxed and let Bucky help him to his feet.

“I – I’m sorry,” Tony murmured, slipping out of Bucky’s support.

“It’s okay,” Bucky intoned reassuringly. Tony sounded more upset than he should have for getting a little help up. Tony still wasn’t really meeting his gaze. He must have felt guilty for being a burden. He seemed like the kind of guy who wanted to stand on his own two feet by himself. Bucky smiled ironically to himself…he’s just like Steve…the little punk always tried to take care of himself whenever he got sick.

Tony meet and held his gaze, his eyes searching Bucky’s for some unknown factor. Bucky murmured, “What is it?”
Tony broke their locked gazes and rubbed his forehead. He sighed, “It’s…nothing. Can…Can you help me wrap up my chest so the reactor doesn’t show? I need to get out of this tent…”

The blue glow was leaking through the loose shirt he’d slept in. Bucky nodded in agreement and Tony motioned to the new bandages Gabe had left on top of one of Howard’s bags. Tony wordlessly took off his shirt and Bucky couldn’t help but stare at the lines webbing across his skin.

Growing up, he’d seen some bad rashes on Steve, but Tony’s sickness was painful just to look at. Bucky quickly wrapped him up and helped him back into his shirt. All of Tony’s movements were stiff but he moved faster as he began to move around.

“Gabe’ll want you to check in with him,” Bucky suggested and Tony silently nodded.

Bucky frowned, not liking this quiet Tony. He wished there was something he could do to change that…he felt useless for both him and Steve…

Bucky walked with Tony to find Gabe. Tony eventually grumbled, “I don’t need a chaperone.”

“Promised Steve I’d keep an eye on you,” Bucky smartly retorted. Tony grumbled something more under his breath that didn’t sound pretty but Bucky didn’t catch all of it to make much sense of it.

Gabe had been on their way to them, carrying his medic bag. He nodded them over to a Jeep and sat Tony inside as he took his vitals. He gave him another injection of Penicillin and asked, “Any change since yesterday?”

“Nah, not really,” Tony murmured.

“Okay, then you’ll be riding with me the rest of the way so I can keep an eye on you,” Gabe stated.

Bucky rose his eyebrows and said, “Really? What about the rest of the team?”

The rest of the Commandos had no idea what was going on. Tensions were high and the other men knew truths were being withheld from them. With Tony traveling with the group, it’ll be much harder to keep quiet about the truth of his condition.

“We will need to risk it…Tony is my patient and I need to keep an eye on him,” Gabe retorted.

“Jeez, you make me sound like an invalid,” Tony joked. To Bucky, Tony assured, “It’ll be alright. I’ll complain and demand attention and the others will get over it and think it’s me just being a diva as usual.”

“And if something serious happens?” Bucky asked unhappily.

“We’ll take it a moment at a time…I’ve been doing it since I’ve arrived in the past and it’s the only thing that keeps me sane,” Tony said with a small smile. He dropped his eyes and whispered, “Thinking anymore about what may or…or what will happen….” Tony carded his fingers together and tightly twisted them. He continued, “It could break you more than anything physical like this…”

Tony motioned to his chest and frowned unhappily at the ground.

Bucky and Gabe exchanged glances. Tony’s statement was loaded and Bucky couldn’t help but wonder what it was Tony knew about the future that bothered him so.

Together, the three of them went to where the rest of the Commandos were. Bucky wasn’t too thrilled to see Steve awake. Unsurprisingly, Steve and Tony’s eyes locked and stayed so as the distance dwindled between them.
“Tony!” Jim exclaimed, “How are you, man?”

Tony finally broke eye contact with Steve to meet the gaze of the approaching Commando. The others jogged over to see how Tony was doing. Tony grinned at all of them and replied, “I’m good! A little banged up but Dr. Jones here fixed me up!”

Jim crossed his arms over his chest and murmured, “The way Steve was going on, I thought you were about to die…”

Tony spared Steve a short, sad smile, but looked back to the team and assured them in a lie, “I am fine.”

Bucky clenched his hands, his nails digging into his flesh, and, as the others teased Tony, he watched Steve. Steve did not join the others in circling Tony and stood off to the side alone and looking at Tony as if he were unreachable.

A few hours later, they were moving out. Tony and Gabe were in a Jeep alone and Bucky and Steve drove behind them. They were both quiet as they joined the lineup. Bucky drove and Steve was leaning against the window. His eyes were focused dead ahead and Bucky wondered if he could see Tony in the side-mirror’s reflection of the other car.

Bucky eventually asked, “Did Tony seem…weird today?”

Steve turned to him and questioned, “Weird?”

“I don’t know, he just didn’t meet my eyes and was saying weird things…”

“He’s unwell,” Steve said with a shrug.

Bucky leaned into his chin and thoughtfully stared ahead at the line of soldiers marching. Tony was definitely shell-shocked and his ailing health may be affecting his judgement but…

But Tony had acted differently only with Bucky. He was the same old Tony with the others. Maybe Steve was right, maybe Tony did act differently with Bucky because Bucky knew almost the whole story about his time traveling.

He just couldn’t shake this feeling that something was off. The few times Tony met his eyes, he could tell something was wrong by the way he looked at him.

Bucky was probably overreacting. He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel and replied to Steve, “Yeah…Yeah, it’s probably because he’s sick…”

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They reached the French base by the end of the night. The soldiers of the 107th were given 48 hours of leave on the base to recuperate until they moved out again.

Bucky usually enjoyed the time off by scouting out the local villages, seeing if there were any bars open, or a pretty dame looking for a date with an American soldier.

Bucky didn’t even consider it this time.

He spent the time mostly with Steve.

And Steve spent most of that time trying to help Tony. Whether it was checking in on his health with
Gabe or discussing materials with Howard that he would need, he was always thinking about what he could do for the man.

Bucky did what he did best: support Steve.

He helped his friend with his usual missives as leader of the Howling Commandos and worked with Peggy in Steve’s stead to figure out the best route for the Commandos to use when in Switzerland.

But mostly he was simply there for his friend.

Steve spent as much time as he could with Tony and he kept up a brave face for the man to support him. Tony went on like nothing was wrong and went right back to Panzer, looking for work. Steve sat with him and helped him where he could, smiling encouragingly all the while.

But, with Bucky, that brave façade disappeared and a weariness slumped his shoulders like a heavy burden. Alone, he poured out all his worries to Bucky about his former lover.

Growing up together they’d always been each other’s support. They were stronger for it. Bucky listened to Steve’s fears, held his hand, and reminded him that, no matter what happened with Tony, Bucky was there for him…til the end of the line.

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The 107th moved out to Switzerland with no fuss.

Howard, however, was very obviously on edge.

The unit was too large to move by train so they were marching to the base. Under normal conditions, it’d probably had taken them a week…but, since they were traveling through a war-torn countryside with Axis and Hydra agents possibly hiding behind every corner, they had to move much slower.

It was estimated it’d take them a month.

“A MONTH?!” Howard exclaimed at the meeting.

Bucky winced and he and Steve exchanged exasperated glances.

“A month,” the Colonel bit back. “I will not endanger my men because our specialist is impatient to get back to his toys.”

“I want a viable lab to do more than play!” Howard countered, “I have pressing work that needs my attention!”

“And I have over two thousand souls following my direction!” Colonel Philips spat, “I will not endanger my men on your fancy. It will be a month and I will not hear another word about it from you, is that understood, Stark?”

Bucky expected more of a fight from Howard. Howard’s face changed several different shades of red and he was clenching his jaw so tightly, it looked like he may pop a tooth. Instead, the man stormed out of the meeting and it was the last the Colonel heard of it from Howard.

Bucky followed Steve after the meeting so he was there when he told Tony the length of the planned march.

The time traveler paled considerably and he repeated in a breathless gasp, “A month?”
Steve lightly grasped Tony’s shoulders and whispered, “Do you think you can make that?”

Strangely, Tony’s eyes flickered to Bucky but then guiltily looked down as soon as their eyes met.

“I should be fine,” was Tony’s breathless reply.

Steve’s brows pinched together in worry and he looked like he wanted to hold Tony. Bucky stepped in before Steve exposed themselves to a quarter of the 107th and said, “We’ll set up a contingency plan in case something goes wrong.”

Steve grasped Bucky’s shoulder and said with a voice loaded with gratitude, “Thanks, Buck. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

For some bizarre reason, his statement made Tony look more guilty.

Bucky surmised he was feeling guilty for making them worry or have to go above and beyond like make contingency plans.

He couldn’t think of any other reason for Tony to feel so shamed.

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The journey to Switzerland was uneventful as they moved through mostly protected territory.

Bucky kept a close eye on Steve like he always did but he also kept an equally close eye on Tony. Even though the journey was an easy one by a soldier’s standards, it was not so on the time traveler. As the days went on, he started to notice small changes in the man. He was getting thinner and moving slower. The change was gradual but, to those of them who were looking for it, to was glaringly obvious.

The strangest change was how Tony acted with Bucky. One day he wouldn’t be able to meet his eyes or hold up much of a conversation with him and then the next day he’d go above and beyond to help Bucky out.

“Maybe it’s his way of dealing what’s happening to him,” Steve glumly surmised. “If he dies, he knows you’ll be the one I turn to for comfort…”

Bucky hated seeing his best friend frown like that and commanded, “Don’t think like that. He’s doing great. The others still think he’s being overdramatic about his injury and he’s still able to help Panzer. He’s strong, Steve. He’s got this.”

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After all those weeks of travel with no sign of enemy forces, Bucky wondered if their journey was fated to be a lucky one. They had two more days of travel and they’d reach the base. Runners had already brought them missives about updated information on Hydra and Zola. The Commandos were brimming with excitement. They were going to be bringing down the Red Skull’s right-hand man soon.

They set up camp with big smiles and were loudly deducing what kind of state they’d find Zola in. Most depictions were of a scared, filthy man, an image Bucky tried hard to imagine because every time he closed his eyes all he saw was Zola standing over him with a needle or electrodes or a gas mask or…

Bucky stomach turned and pushed back the memories of Zola’s experimentations on Bucky’s body.
He took a measured breath to slow down his racing heart and reminded himself that he was no longer strapped down to that metal table.

He was free and soon Zola wouldn’t be.

Strangely, Bucky wasn’t the only one unaffected by the Zola talk.

A frowning Tony poked at the fire Jacques built with a long stick. Bucky walked over to him and in that time Tony’s stick caught aflame and he dropped it into the fire. He stared at the flames, deep in thought, and didn’t notice Bucky standing beside him.

“Is everything alright?” Bucky inquired, making Tony jump.

Tony clutched his heart and looked at him with wide eyes. He managed to garble, “Yeah – I mean, yes, all good.”

“You looked very serious just now,” Bucky commented. Voicing one of his fears, he whispered, “…Is it about Zola? Will we…will we not catch him?”

Tony paled slightly but assured Bucky, “Zola will be captured!”

Bucky nodded, feeling some tension lessen in his muscles, and stated, “Good. I’ll be the first in line to testify at his war crimes trial. The man deserves to go away for life.”

He shuddered to himself as he remembered the bodies of the other men Zola had experimented on. Bucky was his only surviving victim…

As he thought back, he missed the range of emotions that passed over Tony’s face.

They both stared at the fire and lost themselves to their own dark thoughts.

“Jeez, you two look like a couple of saps mourning over an old ex,” Dum Dum said as he trotted up to the fire, holding a stack of MREs.

“Oh God, why’d you put those images in my head?” Bucky groaned, now imagining Zola’s face on the body of one of his exes in Brooklyn.

Dum Dum laughed heartily and said, “Happy to oblige!”

The rest of the Commandos came to the fire and the team settled down for their evening “meal.” Bucky was slow to dig into his MRE and he wondered if the Swiss base had a mess hall like the Hydra one had…

The conversation ultimately steered straight to Zola again and they talked freely about it with no fear of anyone overhearing their plans. They camped just far enough away from the main body of the 107th to still see them but not be within hearing distance so they could begin their planning.

Steve passed the new missives along and each man read the information as they ate. Even Tony looked at the information and his expression hardened from whatever was relayed. Bucky was dying with curiosity to ask him what he thought. Was the information good? How soon were they going to get their hands on Zola?

Because he and Tony had been standing together when the rest of the team joined them, they had ended up sitting together too. Steve was Bucky’s other side and Gabe was on Tony’s other. Gabe, however, had been wrapped up in a conversation in rapid French with Jacques so Bucky was the
only one to hear the sharp and sudden inhalation from Tony.

Bucky turned to him expecting to see that he spilled food on his clothes but instead saw him clutching his chest with a pained expression.

Their eyes locked and both of them seemed to realize what was happening at the same time.

Bucky dropped his tray and Tony fell backwards.

“Oi, what are you –?” Monty began.

“GABE!” Bucky hissed, ignoring the Brit as he scrambled over Tony.

Tony was pulling at his shirt and Bucky could make out broken bits of smoke escaping from his struggles.

“Oh crap,” Bucky hissed.

He and Tony’s eyes met again, and Tony gasped, “H-Howard.”

Steve swooped in past Bucky without another word. He had Tony in his arms and was running toward Howard’s tent before the rest of the team could react.

Bucky was so shocked he just dumbly watched Steve’s retreating figure run away for a few seconds. He was freed from his reverie when Jim gasped, “What the fuck was that?”

Bucky spared one looked to his confused friend and then ran after Steve.

Gabe was right next to him and the rest of the Commandos were close behind them.

They reached Howard’s main tent just as his assistants were hurrying out.

“GET OUT NOW!” Howard exclaimed, pushing one more out. He pointed at the Commandos and said, “Not you, you guys get in here right now and make sure no one comes in!”

“Dum Dum watch the door,” Bucky commanded and went into the tent.

“What?! Wait –! Ugh!” Dum Dum stood at attention with a loud groan.

Tony was laying on Howard’s work table and Steve was hurriedly ripping off the bandages. Gabe stood on the other side of the table and put his hand on Tony’s neck to check his pulse. Bucky did the only thing he could think to do and grabbed Tony’s shoulder, hoping it’d be some sort of comfort. He did the same to Steve with his other hand. Both men were trembling.

“What happened?!” Howard demanded, returning to Tony’s side, beside Gabe.

“What is happening?!” Monty countered as the rest of the team surrounded Tony.

“What…is that?” Jim gasped and everyone’s attention was directed to the flickering blue glow that was being revealed.

“That is why we are here,” Howard said. A small trail of smoke was coming out of the reactor’s seam. Howard ordered, “Jacques get me a light. Steve, Bucky, get ready to hold him down in case this gets painful. The rest of you stay out of my way.”

Jim scoffed and Monty’s scowl deepened while Jacques ran to get Howard his light.
Tony reached out to Steve and he tightly grasped Tony’s hand. Bucky rounded Tony and stood next to Howard, ready to jump on Tony if needed.

Jacques held up a lantern and positioned it above Tony.

Howard took a deep, steadying breath and put the gentlest of touches on the arc reactor, he whispered, “If I end up killing my own son, I am going to be sorely pissed at all of you…”

“Just take it out before I pass out!” Tony snapped.

Howard bit down on his lip and then carefully turned the reactor until it clicked free. As he slowly pulled it out of Tony’s chest a tiny puff of smoke escaped drawing a curse from Jim. The smoke was coming from the reactor again Howard’s fingers shook slightly as he turned it over and released the Palladium core.

“Aw Fuck,” Tony cursed as Howard pulled it out, revealing a large crack on its side. Tony grasped his head and repeated, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…” He covered his eyes and gasped, “I’m dead.”

“I…I can try to fix it. I’ll – I’ll weld it!” Howard ran over to his tools.

Tony dropped his hand and grasped Steve’s arm, his eyes were only for the super soldier. The emotions in both of their gazes made Bucky feel like an intruder, more so as Tony wetly gasped, “Steve…I might only have minutes. My – My heart’s beating so fast and it’ll just make me go faster.”

Steve hunched over him and pressed his forehead to Tony’s. He whispered, “Hold on. Howard might be able to fix it.” He grasped the sides of Tony’s face and gasped, “Don’t leave me, Tony. I need you, please, stay. I can’t lose you yet! Please, hold on!”

Tony held onto Steve tightly and gasped, “You were the best thing that ever happened to me. I wish we had more time…”

“Just hold on,” Steve begged.

Frustration and a bitter despair spurned Bucky to turn away and rush over to Howard. The inventor had thrown on a welding mask that covered his entire face and thick gloves. In one hand he held the core and in the other a welding stick.

“What are you doing!?” Bucky demanded, “Fix it!!”

“I know! I just…I just have to be careful! I cannot mess this up or he’s dead! This thing is extremely fragile! It could shatter under too much heat but if I do not use enough heat then the I won’t be able to seal the crack!”

Bucky grasped his shoulder and made the man look away from the core. He stated, “You need to do this now, Howard, or Tony will die! Stop over thinking it. Just do it!”

Howard flicked the switch and the hot end of the welder turned on.

Howard put the core on the ground and began to curse under his breath as he lowered the welder to it.

Bucky glanced behind him and saw Steve was still hunched over Tony, their faces centimeters apart. Tears were in Steve’s eyes and he was whispering something to Tony, lightly petting his face as he did. Tony was still holding on to him and his knuckles were turning white from the tightness of his
grip.

Bucky clenched his fists but clenched down on his frustrated words too to keep Howard’s attention on the core. It felt like it took an eternity for Howard connect the welder and the core and even longer for him to begin fusing the metal.

Bucky stopped breathing as he did it. In fact, it seemed everyone did and the only noise to be heard was the hiss of the metal.

Howard snapped the welder back sharply when he was done. He breathed shallowly as carefully picked up the chip. It hadn’t shattered but would it still work?

Howard turned off the welder and ripped off his mask. His hands began to tremble again as he brought the chip and reactor together. It didn’t click in as easily as it had last time. From the corner of his eye, he saw Steve and Tony clutch each other closer.

When the chip went in, the reactor sealed but the glow did not return.

Howard looked at the device in his hand like it had just signed his own death warrant.

Steve broke the silence by gasping, “Oh God, no.”

Bucky snatched the reactor out of Howard’s hands. He did the only thing he knew worked with janky equipment...he hit it.

“BARNES!” Howard yelled aghast.

But Bucky hit it again and the blue light flickered for a second and Howard paused in reaching out to him. With his heart in his throat, Bucky hit it again and the light returned.

Bucky never before found an appreciation for that blue glow until that moment.

He turned to his friends and held it out, showing them the blessed blue light. Steve laughed wetly and Tony smiled thankfully at Bucky. He carefully crossed the room and handed the reactor to Tony. Tony just as carefully returned the reactor and hissed when it connected to his body. He closed his eyes and settled back onto the table to recuperate.

“Thank you, Buck,” Steve gasped, tightly grasping his arm. “You saved his life.”

Tony’s eyes opened with a haunted look.

“…Can someone tell us what the bloody hell is going on?” Monty demanded.

Bucky spared Tony a reassuring smile and then clapped Steve’s shoulder as he said, “I’ll explain it. You two probably need a moment…”

Steve smiled sadly at him and whispered, “Thanks again, Buck…”

“Anytime,” Bucky promised.

Bucky ushered the Commandos together and called Dum Dum inside so he’d only have to explain this once. As he began the near incredulous tale, he couldn’t help but note the couple awkwardly pull apart. Now that death was no longer threatening to take Tony, they had to separate again. They could be friendly but nothing more. Bucky had to look elsewhere because the heartache radiating off of both men was too painful to watch.
The reactor was working but the next morning Tony couldn’t get out of his sleeping bag because he was feeling too dizzy.

Gabe crawled into the tent with him and carefully checked him over. The entire team hovered nervously outside with Steve kneeling at the front of the tent looking inside. Bucky stood next to his friend with a supportive hand on his shoulder.

“More Palladium must be leaking out than usual,” Gabe stated to Tony, but it was loud enough for all of them to hear. “Your body can’t handle this much metal poisoning. It’s only going to get worse from here on…”

“I just can’t catch a break, can I?” Tony groaned.

“We’ll get you set up in the medical wing at the base and I’ll have access to more supplies. I might be able to find something more to help you,” Gabe said.

“Or Howard might be able to make a new core,” Steve added, clutching the tent cloth tightly.

“Maybe…” Tony sighed, it sounded more like an assurance to Steve than himself.

Bucky’s fingers dug into Steve’s flesh and he whispered, “First, we’ll get Zola. Then, we’ll get Schmidt and his tesseract…with that we will get Tony home.”

Steve nodded at Bucky’s statement but didn’t look away from Tony.

Bucky couldn’t stand this. He couldn’t wait till they were done marching and they could begin their search for Zola…only then would he finally be able to help them.

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Arriving at the Allies’ Switzerland base, meant they were one step closer to defeating Hydra.

But it also saw Tony, one step closer to his grave.

He developed a fever and didn’t seem able to break it. He lived in the infirmary now but, even with all the medical attention, he wasn’t getting any better.

He was beginning to fade in and out of lucidity. The first night of his delirium, he weirdly called out to “pepper” asking where it was. Bucky had brought him some pepper from the kitchens, thinking it might appease him, but it just made him more upset.

Steve calmed him down…he seemed the only one able to.

Bucky and Steve were of equal mind wanting to find Zola faster. They pushed for the mission to be bumped up and for the information collaborated immediately.

Their sources eventually came back as being viable. Zola was going to be on a train, trying to escape the country. This may be their only chance to catch him.

They had to move out immediately. The Commandos were quick to pack up their gear, but Steve and Bucky were already ready…they had been for a while.

Steve wordlessly went to Tony with the small amount of time remaining to him and Bucky just as silently followed.
Tony opened his hazy eyes and they focused on Bucky first. He asked, “Did I finally die?”

“Nah, man, you’re still kicking,” Bucky assured him.

“Are you sure? Didn’t we die?” He sounded a little fuzzy, like he wasn’t positive.

Steve stepped in and worked his magic. He gently ran his fingers through Tony’s hair and whispered, “No one has died and no one will die. We’ve got a location on Zola and we’re going to bring him in. He’ll tell us where Schmidt is and then we’ll get him and then get you home.”

Tony looked far from relieved by this news, in fact, he appeared downright upset. He closed his eyes and, with a pained whisper, stated with an eerie certainty, “No, he’s going to die…”

“…What?” Steve’s voice trembled on the last syllables and he gasped, “Tony? What do you mean?”

“Hm?”

Tony blinked open his eyes and Steve pressed, “What’d you mean by that? Is someone going to die? Someone on the Commandos?”

Tony blinked a few times and then, with wide eyes, he gasped, “…D-Did I say that out loud?”

“Yes,” Steve hissed the word like it was poison.

Tony looked from Steve and then to Bucky and then he pushed himself up. Steve scrambled to his feet and he gasped, “Don’t get up, Tony!”

He gently pushed Tony back down and Tony lay back into his bed. He turned his head to the side and stared at the wall to his left.

Steve repeated, “Is someone going to die?”

Tony closed his eyes and then slowly breathed in and out. With his eyes still pinched closed, he whispered...

“No.”

---

Bucky had heard stories about life or death situations where people had said their entire lives flashed before their eyes or everything seemed to move slower.

But that hadn’t been the case for Bucky...

The rail he was holding on to broke off and his body fell so fast that Bucky’s mind had only realized
what had happened seconds from the ground. His scream of disbelief was cut off by the violent impact of his body slamming into the ground.

He didn’t even have a chance to know he was going to die, nonetheless, realize that Tony had known he was going to die all along…

---

Steve was there for all of it however...and he did have that time to reflect.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter and new chapter count! The end is nigh!

That being said, for the next month, I will be backpacking southeast Asia! So I probably won't be posting until I'm back! XD

Thank you for reading! I promise to work on this during my travels!
Chapter Notes

I'mmmm baaacckkkk! And thank you once again for your patience! I use my tablet to write and log into Ao3 and did not bring it with me while I was backpacking, so I was unable to write or reply to anyone's comments in the meantime but I promise to do so right after I post this chapter!
So I've written y'all a super angsty chapter as an apology for being gone so long! ^_^
There's a happy ending, I promise! <3

Tony was where Bucky and Steve had left him hours prior in his private room. Steve stood outside it for several long moments, collecting his nerve.

The serum had gifted Steve with fantastic abilities. He was stronger, faster, and healthier. However, it didn’t just affect his physical abilities but his mental abilities as well. He found he was able compute things faster and remember nearly everything after the serum with amazing clarity.

Which was why he had perfectly remembered what Tony had said to them before Steve and Bucky left.

Tony knew what was going to happen.

He knew Bucky was going to die and...he did nothing.

He didn’t even warn them.

When he entered the room, he saw Howard was sitting at Tony’s bedside, gently wetting Tony’s forehead with a cool cloth. Tony’s eyes were closed and he didn’t hear Steve come in. Howard nodded to him in greeting and then silently stepped away from his future son. He went up to Steve by the open door and whispered in a low voice, “I can sit with him a little longer. You should let yourself grieve, Cap.”

He thought Steve was here as the next in rotation to sit with Tony to keep an eye on him in his sickness. Steve lightly shook his head and murmured, “I need to speak with Tony, privately, if you don’t mind.”

Howard’s eyes narrowed and he assessed Steve with an inquiring gaze. After a short pause, he said, “I haven’t said anything, but I’ve got eyes and ears. Let’s be frank, there’s something more than friendship or camaraderie going on between you and my son, isn’t there?”

Howard’s question stumped him. Steve didn’t know how to reply. Yes, Steve loved Tony but what did that love amount to if Tony had let Bucky die? Steve was too much of an emotional wreck at that moment to even begin to comprehend where they stood now.

It must have shown because Howard sighed heavily and grumbled, “You’re hurting right now and I am sorry for you. I too am grieving for Barnes but I know it’s nowhere near the extent you are...but, I’m right, aren’t I?”
Unsure how Howard would handle the information, Steve cautiously replied, “Yes…”

Howard sighed heavily again, and his eyes fell back onto Tony. Without raising his gaze, Howard stated, “Again…I’m sorry…”

With that he left them alone. Steve stared bitterly at the spot Howard had vacated and again wondered how he came to this moment.

Why did Bucky have to die?

He sat down on the cot next to Tony and picked up the damp cloth Howard had left on Tony’s forehead. He gently wiped away the excess water droplets that had dripped from the cloth and then wiped down the areas around Tony’s face and neck where Steve used to overheat when he was feverish.

Through the cloth he could feel the heat radiating off Tony. Gabe had been pumping him full of penicillin and other anti-inflammatories but Tony’s body was struggling with the infection. Even the light in his chest seemed dimmer…

“Da…?” Tony slurred heavily and struggled to open his eyelids like they were a little too heavy. Steve pulled back his hand and put the cloth back in the dish beside the bed. It seemed to take a moment for Tony’s eyes to focus on him and another moment for him to recognize Steve.

Tony’s hand gently nudged Steve’s thigh and, as if he was clarifying Steve was really there, he whispered in question, “Steve?”

Steve could feel his eyes heating as he stared down at this frail version of the man he so loved. What was worse though was he did not know where the upset was coming from. Was it because Tony was wasting away or that he had let Bucky die?...Or maybe it was both...

It was all too much, the combined knowledge and seeing Tony like this in person. With only a second’s warning, his eyes overfilled, and he inhaled sharply as his chest seemingly collapsed from the immense grief. He put his hand over his mouth as if to smoother any more sounds, but it’d do little good, Tony had seen it all.

“Steve?” Tony whispered, his voice harsh with concern and he clutched Steve’s leg with his weak grip.

“You knew he was going to die,” Steve gasped, his voice rough with emotion. It wasn't a question. He knew the answer but he had to hear Tony say it and then tell him why. He needed to know why.

Tony slowly let go of his leg and then closed his eyes. He licked his lips and then guessed, “Bucky fell.”

A harsh sob passed through Steve’s lips in response and the tears fell freely from his eyes.

The confirmation from Tony was a blow he hadn’t been ready for. He’d been expecting it but hearing it from Tony’s lips was so much worse. All his grief and sorrow grew tenfold and felt like he’d collapse under the pressure. He couldn’t even look at Tony anymore and turned away from him and buried his face in his hands.

He began to breathe faster and sharply as he tried to control the emotional storm that was brewing within him. He barely had it under control.

Tony knew how Bucky was going to die. He must have known all along. Bucky had been his friend
but he let him die.

_He actually did it._

Any feeble hopes that the time traveler wouldn’t betray them so were utterly decimated that the crater left behind was large enough to leave his very sanity barely intact.

Bucky had been his brother.

Tony had been his lover.

Just yesterday, they had been his entire life.

But now…

He managed to gasp, **“Why?”**

He kept his eyes buried in his grasp and remained turned away so he could not see Tony’s reaction, but he did hear the tremendous pain in his voice as he replied.

“…In my future, that Bucky died on that train just like yours did today,” Tony whispered. Steve’s breath hitched as he imagined the timeline. Was Bucky fated to die no matter what? The thought crushed Steve further. Tony struggled as he tried to continue, “…It – It…” Tony paused again and then quietly stated more slowly, “The same day I decided to save his life was the day that the future changed and, it may have been because of our relationship but…but I think it was mostly because of my resolute decision on _saving_ Bucky. He was in the hologram, Steve. He shouldn’t have been there. The future changed drastically because Bucky survived. I had to make a horrible decision so I could save you from Hydra and fix the future.”

Steve’s throat felt tight and he wanted to scream at Tony, to shake him until reasons that made sense became more apparent. Because a future where Bucky _lived_ and Steve turned into his enemy made no sense. Bucky would _never_ let that happen.

“So you let him die so I could live on as myself and not _Hydra’s puppet_? Did you even consider _my feelings_ in the matter!? OR _BUCKY’S_?!” He nearly screamed Bucky’s name as his anger grew with Tony’s detached reasons. He finally turned back to the time traveler in his rage and saw Tony in a similar state as he was. Tony was crying and wore an expression of total anguish. Steve crumpled a little at the expression and he gasped tightly, "How could you do this..."

His words gutted Tony. He crumpled in on himself and choked on the words as if they caused him pain, “It’s all I’ve been thinking about ever since arriving in this era. I…I had to consider everything, Steve. _Everything_. Not just us or Bucky. There is the fate of the _entire_ world to consider, a world where Hydra is still active. Does that mean World War II never ended? How many people die that didn’t have to?…How many do _you_ kill as the Winter Soldier?”

Steve flinched, his reasoning was utterly logical, but it did not change the fact that this was _Bucky_.

“Why didn’t you warn us? I’d already changed the future by involving your father,” Steve implored, his voice begging. “Even just a forewarning that something might happen…”

Tony shook his head and whispered, “I couldn’t chance it. When the events unfolded like they did in my timeline, I saw it as a sign that I could right the future and save you from the fate of the Winter Soldier and the rest of the world from Hydra…I just… I just wanted to make everything right, Steve. I can barely live with myself for what I’ve done…but, if this is the last thing I do, I need to save the future at least.”
“How am I supposed to live on knowing it was all brought about by sacrificing my best friend’s life?! No matter what happens now the future is bleak to me!”

Tony clutched his chest with a pained expression and with his other hand he grasped Steve’s hand tightly. Steve almost pulled away, but Tony’s face suddenly pinched with absolute despair and he sobbed, “You…God, Steve, you’re not going to have to live long with it…”

The implication behind Tony’s words washed over him like ice cold water. With it, all of his emotions flowed away and he was left with a hollow feeling.

Tony shakily pushed himself up and worriedly gasped, “Beloved? Steve, no, just – just forget I said that – I can’t think straight – Steve – I’m so sorry, please –! I didn't mean it! Please!”

“When?” Steve asked in a low voice, not meeting Tony’s hazy, anxious eyes.

Tony shook his head and pressed his fevered forehead against Steve’s arm as if hiding would solve the problem.

Steve drew him off of him and met his eyes, demanding, “When, Tony? Give me that much. It is more than you did for Bucky.”

The words were harsh and Tony withered under them. He lay limply in his hold and dropped his gaze, whispering, “Soon…a few days…when you finally face off against the Red Skull. You’ll both meet your end.”

Steve let go of Tony and felt his mind connecting the dots with amazing clarity. He whispered, “That’s how Hydra ends, with Schmidt. Something must have happened in the other timeline because of Bucky’s presence that prevented that…”

Tony nodded sadly, his lips trembling as he whispered, “He followed you and somehow his help made it so all of you lived, him, you, and the Red Skull…and you know what happens from there…”

Yes, Steve was captured and turned and Hydra lived on to the 21st century.

This fight between Steve and Schmidt was the very bedrock of the future. And to save that future...

“I have to die,” Steve stated, the words coming much easier to him than anything else he’d exchanged with Tony.

Tony fell forward and wound his arms around Steve’s torso tightly. Tony wept into his chest, “I originally wasn’t going to just save Bucky…”

Steve’s tears renewed with the words. He knew Tony had his secrets, but he couldn’t believe he carried such burdens for so long.

He pressed his face into Tony’s hair and held him close, feeling his warmth, proof that he was alive…that they were both alive…for now. Steve gasped, “Why did this happen to us?”

*Why* had they been allowed to meet, love, and be torn apart in such a horrific way? *Why* did Steve’s living equate to Hydra’s living? *Why* did Bucky have to die with him? And *why* did Tony have to suffer and die too?

Just like he expected when coming to see Tony, his heart crumbled, but for a reason he in no way expected. He was a dead man walking…because Tony was right. They had to stop Hydra. The
future was bigger than Steve, Bucky, or Tony…

But was this really what his life was going to amount to?

He was 27 years-old.

_He barely lived his life._

And all he had wanted from life was to see the future Tony had told him about…

---

Steve stayed with Tony that night. The emotional upheaval had exhausted Tony and he passed out in Steve’s embrace. Steve lay beside him in the cot but did not sleep.

He did not have much time left so sleeping seemed like a waste of time…but he couldn’t bring himself to leave Tony’s side.

The man had hurt Steve. He broke Steve’s heart and then ripped it from his chest, crushing it further in his grasp…but that heart still belonged to Tony.

He could have hated Tony. He could have never forgiven him for what he did…but Steve did not want to live the last days of his life such.

Tony was all that was left to Steve.

He was the rest of his life.

He stared at him mostly, categorizing his quirky features that he liked most about him, remembering his expressions when they’d made love or just laughed together, and worrying over the changes that had occurred and marked him as unwell. Since being bedridden, Tony hadn’t shaved and had his beard growing back in. He looked closer to the man he had originally met, stepping out of the Iron Man suit and into Steve’s life, forever changing it.

And he was going to lose him.

He always knew this, but it had always felt like a faraway future…and he always assumed he’d see him off…not die.

He was scared. He was so scared, and he wanted Bucky and his ma and his pops…and Tony. The others were all dead, but Tony was barely alive himself.

None of them could save him.

He was going to face death alone.

When Tony woke the next morning, Steve whispered, “Tell me how it happens.”

Tony’s eyes pinched in sorrow and he needed a moment to collect himself. Steve held him and patiently waited. Tony pressed himself closer into Steve’s embrace and buried his face into the crook of Steve’s neck. His fever burned hotly into Steve’s flesh and Steve drew the blanket off of both of them, hoping to cool him down.

Into his neck, Tony whispered, “I only know what Howard told me as a child…I don’t know if he embellished anything…”
“I’ll take it,” Steve whispered.

Tony sighed and then began recounting his childhood memories. Steve silently listened and felt detached from the situation even though Tony was mapping out his last moments.

“And then he said the radio’s transmission was cut,” Tony wrapped up. “My dad looked everywhere for the wreckage…he had people looking for you till the day he died, but all they found was the tesseract.”

Thinking of Tony's condition, Steve asked, “Will they find it quickly?”

Tony shrugged and Steve pulled Tony into a closer embrace and lightly kissed the top of his head. Tony began to tremble in his arms and Steve worriedly asked, “Are you in pain?”

“Yes – no, Steve…I’m sorry,” Tony gasped, with his face still buried in the juncture of Steve’s neck. “I’m so sorry – I should have said something sooner…”

Steve tightened his arms around him and kissed his forehead again. They all should have done things differently... He didn’t want to linger on the hurt. He just wanted to simply…be.

Mostly he wanted to be with Tony.

He whispered, “I’m sorry too…” For all the pain they caused each other, for being the one to first want a relationship that’d only end in heartbreak, for leaving him first in death…

Tony pushed himself enough out of the embrace to meet his eyes and he began to say, “Steve –.”

Steve simply pressed a gentle kiss to Tony’s lips before he could argue away Steve’s apology. Kissing Tony again felt like coming home. His heart soared as he remembered how much he loved this man. Tony returned the kiss and any anxiety Steve felt about his impending death melted away.

When their lips separated, they stared at each other a few moments and Tony whispered, “I missed that…I missed you…”

Steve gently ran the backs of his fingers over Tony’s cheek and whispered, “I missed you too, love.”

Tony cupped his cheek and drew him back in, kissing him so tenderly that Steve fell a little bit more in love.

---

Their loving reunion didn’t last long unfortunately. Tony’s fever didn’t let up and he relapsed back into the hazy world of delirium. Gabe gave him more medicine, the others volunteered to help sit with him, but Steve was the only one who could keep him calm.

“I’ll use my suit,” Tony explained hoarsely to Steve once they were alone. “I’ll get you out of the plane before it crashes and then we’ll grab the tesseract and go back to the future together.”

Steve smiled sadly at Tony and whispered, “Your suit isn’t here, sweetheart…”

“Jarvis will come. He’s always there when I need him,” Tony replied, his eyes began to fall and he repeated drowsily, “Always…”

It broke Steve’s heart to see Tony so sick. He adjusted the blankets around him and then gently lay a cold compress onto his forehead. He released a relieved breath when he didn’t wake and then
whispered to the slumbering man, “Hold on a little longer…”

He hated to leave him, especially with the clock ticking away what little time he had left. But he needed to make sure these events to come still occurred. Yes, Steve was going to bring about the end of Hydra in his martyrdom…but the most important thing was that he was going to be saving Tony’s life too and it was that factor that kept him going. He was going to make sure Tony got the tesseract and got home.

Dum Dum was sitting outside the room. He knew the Commandos had been sitting outside in shifts, waiting for Steve to step out so one of them could take over for him.

“I need to speak with Peggy. Can you keep an eye on him and, if he wakes, come get me?”

“Of course, Cap,” Dum Dum gently replied.

Steve thanked his friend and ran in the direction of the main offices where he knew Peggy would be either bent over reports or writing missives.

He found her sitting with Howard however.

She got to her feet, gasping in relief, “Steve!”

“I need to speak with you privately, Pegs,” Steve whispered.

“I’ll take that as my sign to go,” Howard said and pushed himself to his feet. “I’ll pop in to see junior.”

“He’s sleeping,” Steve cautioned.

“I won’t wake him,” Howard waved off his concern like it was nothing and Steve watched him leave with a frown.

“Howard won’t wake him,” Peggy assured him. Steve turned back to the woman and she continued, “You haven’t seen it, but he’s changed a lot since he found out Tony is his son. He knows he needs his rest and will not disturb him…”

Steve wasn’t entirely convinced but he needed to speak to Peggy. He murmured, “Peggy…You should sit down…”

She did, albeit slowly, and she asked, “What is it?”

Steve sighed heavily and sat down where Howard had been sitting a moment prior. With a hushed voice, he relayed everything Tony told him about the coming days. As his account progressed, Peggy’s face grew paler until he told her about the plane crash and she cupped her mouth with a pained gasp.

“Steve, you can’t –,” she began to plead.

“It’s already happened in Tony’s timeline, Peggy,” Steve tiredly said. “It may be our only chance to finally stop Hydra…and to save Tony.”

She grasped his hand and gasped, “But what about you?”

He smiled sadly at her and whispered, “I’ll be alright…I just need you to promise me to help Tony get home, no matter what. I need to know he will at least survive all of this…”
“Oh, Steve…” She sighed dejectedly.

“Promise?” Steve asked, smirking a little to try and defuse the situation.

She shook her head and, with a trembling voice, she whispered, “I promise.”

---

Steve returned to Tony’s side and glad to see he was still sleeping.

He sat on a chair beside the bed as to not disturb him and, once Dum Dum closed the door behind him, Steve let himself slump under the mass of his emotions. Telling Peggy about his death, Tony’s flagging health, and Bucky’s own demise all weighed heavily on him. He still couldn’t believe Bucky was gone. Sometimes he half expected him to barge into the room and demand Steve take care of himself.

But Bucky was dead and soon Steve would be too. All the plans they had made once they returned to New York, amounted to nothing.

The only solace he had was that he’d see his friend soon in heaven at least.

His emotions surged at the notion.

He didn’t want to die…

He didn’t want Bucky to have died…

He didn’t want any of this to happen.

He started to cry again, but really cry. Cry like he should have after he saw Bucky fall or found out his own grisly fate. It all had built up and was finally being released. Maybe it was because he no longer had to be strong for Peggy…

He tried to be silent, but he kept exhaling in sobs and it woke Tony. One look at Steve and Tony reached out to him.

Steve readily climbed into the bed with him and held on to Tony like he was the only thing keeping him on this Earth. Tony held him just as tightly as Steve muffled his sobs into Tony’s shoulder.

He didn’t want to leave him. It wasn’t enough time. He wanted more with Tony…and Bucky.

Why was fate so cruel?

---

“We’ve found the Red Skull,” Peggy stated solemnly. “The Colonel says we need to go now or we’ll lose him…our people report…” She took a sharp breath, getting ahold of her emotions, and then whispered, “They report Schmidt has a plane and plans to take off soon.”

Steve was sitting next to a slumbering Tony and holding his hand. A couple of days had passed since he last spoke with her, but no amount of time spent in Tony’s presence could stop the draw of destiny.

“It’s time,” he stated, feeling…numb? No, there was fear. He could sense it, but it was enough to just tighten his throat. He had time to acclimate to the knowledge.
She rushed forward and grabbed his free hand and then begged, “There has to be another way! Somebody else – or another time –!” She gasped the words with tears welling up in her eyes.

He shook his head and dislodged her fingers. He whispered, “I need to say g-goodbye to Tony.”

Saying it aloud made his heart clench.

“Steve,” she implored.

“Please, Peggy, give us a moment…” Steve whispered.

She bit down on her lip tightly and cupped his cheek. She whispered, “You, Steve Rogers, are the strongest, most brilliant man I have ever met…and you don’t deserve this.”

He dropped his head and whispered, “Thanks, Peggy.”

She pressed a lingering kiss on top of his head and then gently let go of him.

“The Colonel wants the team to be ready in an hour,” she stated, taking a step back.

He lifted his gaze and promised, “Then I will see all of you in an hour…”

She nodded and then spared a pitying glance over his shoulder before stepping out. He looked over his shoulder where her gaze had pointed and saw Tony had woken up. His hands had curled into the bedding and his grip was so tight that his knuckles turned white.

“Don’t go,” he whispered harshly.

Steve lightly grasped his hand and carded his fingers with Tony’s. Tony held his hand tightly as if he planned to never let go.

“You know as well as I do that I need to go,” Steve whispered.

“Fuck it. Fuck all of it,” Tony retorted harshly. “I’ll go in your place. You’re not going to die.”

Tony struggled to sit up and his entire body was shaking just by pushing himself up to his elbows. Steve got up and stopped him by grabbing his shoulders before he could hurt himself.

“Sweetheart, you’re barely able to function in bed. You won’t be able to get on that plane nonetheless fight Schmidt…”

“My suit –,” Tony began, grabbing both of Steve’s wrists.

“Is in France,” Steve reminded him. “It’s waiting by the time machine for you when you’re finally able to return home.”

Tony’s fingers dug into the flesh of Steve’s arms and, with eyes starting to tear, he sobbed, “You are my home, Steve…I can’t imagine a future without yo –.”

Steve smothered his mouth with a kiss before he could finish.

He’d come to accept what lay ahead but Tony’s words woke something inside of him, something he knew to be impossible.

Tony returned his sudden kiss and they spent the next few moments letting the kiss overrule everything. Tony dug his fingers into Steve’s scalp and pressed his mouth so tightly to Steve’s that it
felt like he was trying to steal his breath. Steve cherished every second and every shared breath.

He carefully positioned himself on the bed next to Tony and embraced him the best he could without breaking their mouths. Tony readily moved aside and wrapped one of his arms around Steve’s torso while keeping the other hand threaded in his hair. They put their all into it, pouring their very souls into every touch.

It reminded him of when he first kissed Tony under the stars in the shadow of the base. Steve’s heart at the time had swelled with emotion and every touch was magical. He had wished that moment had never ended because for the first time in his life he was kissing a man more for their hearts than anything else…

And now he was kissing the same man and he wished that moment would never end again because he’d never have it again. The magic would end.

“Steve,” Tony moaned with need. It wasn’t a moan of lust however…it was of an actual need, like he couldn’t go on without him. In response, Steve kissed him more deeply to physically show him how much he needed him too. This would be the last time he would kiss Tony, embrace his warmth, or feel his heartbeat. He tried to get as much of it as he could before he was forced to go.

He probably shouldn’t say it again, after Tony’s prior reaction, but he needed to utter the words one more time. He had to pull himself out of the kiss and gasp for air before he was able to cup Tony’s jaw and hiss, “I love you, Tony. I wish I coulda had more time with you…”

Tony’s expression crumbled and he embraced Steve tightly. He sarcastically wept, “It’s ironic that the time traveler can’t seem to find enough time?” Tony buried his head in the space between Steve’s neck and shoulder and then wetly whispered, “I would have gladly spent the rest of my life with you…”

Steve’s heart broke again. It must have been the dozenth time but, God, this felt worse than the rest. He pressed his face into Tony’s hair and silently cried into his scalp.

He would’ve gladly spent the rest of his life with Tony too…

“My suit will be here any moment,” Tony gasped hoarsely, his voice almost manic as he clutched at Steve. “You don’t have to die!”

Steve heart twisted within his chest, wishing what Tony’s fevered mind believed to be true. He knew Tony had told the suit to stay in France until it was May, a month away… As it was, he wouldn’t have been able to do it without risking the future.

“Then we’ll wait a little longer,” Steve whispered in an assuring tone. He had less than an hour and he wasn’t going anywhere in that time. He was going to spend as much of his final moments at Tony’s side.

Tony relaxed with his promise and nuzzled his head back into the juncture of Steve’s shoulder. He whispered, “We’ll find a way, Steve…”

Steve bit back another sob and held Tony tightly.

Tony’s body was overtaxed by the emotional bout and he fell back asleep in minutes. Steve spent the remaining time staring at him, trying to ingrain his façade into his mind’s eye so he could take the visage of Tony with him at least…

His internal clock ticked the time away and he had to physically force himself out of the bed even
though every fiber of his being told him not to. He turned back to Tony and gently tucked him.

“We’ll meet again,” Steve promised, gently kissing his cheek for the last time.

He was going to see Bucky again and his Ma and everyone else he’d loved and lost and...one day, he’ll see Tony again too. He was sure of it.

But first...

Steve turned away from Tony and did not look back as he left the room.

But first, Steve had to defeat the Red Skull, change the tide of the war, and thereby save Tony’s life.

---

Steve felt no worry in the battle. He knew the outcome. He went through the motions and eventually the Red Skull disappeared and only one thing was left to Steve...

He walked over to the plane controls, his heart growing heavier with every step. He tried, there was the slightest chance that he could gain control of the plane, but he had no response from most of the controls...only the flaps seemed to work meaning he could position the plane pointed up or down...

And he knew he was going to have to use that function or New York was going to be destroyed.

The moment had come.

Steve took a steadying breath and closed his eyes, he remembered his last moments with Tony and imagined him there with him, only centimeters away.

“Command this is Captain Rogers, do you read me?”

“Captain Rogers, this is Co--,” someone began.

“Steve! Is that you? Are you alright?” Peggy jumped in.

“Peggy, Schmidt’s dead,” Steve stated.

“What about the plane??” She demanded.

“...Peggy,” Steve sighed.

“Give me your coordinates, I’ll find you a safe landing site,” she retorted stubbornly.

“There’s not going to be a safe landing,” Steve replied, looking at the screen in front of him with all of the red warning indicators. “But I can force her down…”

“I’ll get Howard on the line. He’ll know what to do,” she insisted.

“You know as well as I do there’s not enough time,” Steve retorted ironically.

“Steve…” She whispered his name, her voice layered with pain.

“I got to put her in the water,” Steve stated what he knew all along.

“Please, don’t do this. We have time. We can work it out,” Peggy begged, still not accepting the reality.
“Right now, I’m in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer then a lot of people are going to die…Peggy, this is my choice.”

Peggy was silent in reply and, with a thudding heart, Steve pushed down on the controls, pointing the plane downward. The plane started to shudder from the speed and Steve’s fingers began to shake too.

He put on brave airs, but he was still scared. He still wasn’t ready for this. He still wanted to live. He wanted Tony. He wanted to be with Tony right now so badly.

“Peggy?” He whispered her name in a quiet whisper.

She heard him and whispered, “I’m here…”

“Tony doesn’t know I left. Can you go to him and let him know…and just be there with him. He’s in a fragile state right now and will need someone and his Aunt Peggy will probably be the best person for the job.”

“I’ll go to him,” Peggy gasped, sounding like she was fighting tears.

“You get him to the time machine and tell him I want him to do a few things for me. Firstly, I want him to live. He needs to fix his reactor and live to be a really old man. Secondly, he needs to be at city hall for the first gay marriage in New York for me and congratulate those fellas because I won’t be able to.”

“Of course, Steve,” Peggy whispered.

“And…tell him to not let my death drag him down. Tell him to live on and find another person to love. We could have had a future but it’s not going to happen.” His voice finally broke and he took a shuddering breath and tightly stated, “Tell him to find someone else to spend the rest of his life with and to be happy.”

“I will, Steve,” Peggy whispered, her voice breaking too.

The ground was rushing toward him. He closed his eyes and Tony’s visage came back to him. Peggy called out his name, but he did not reply. He concentrated wholly on his memory of Tony until his body was violently thrown forward and his consciousness was cut off as the plane broke apart around him.

Tony's face faded away and...

And then all Steve Rogers knew from that point on was nothing.

Chapter End Notes

<3
Roads? Where we’re Going You Don’t need Roads.

Chapter Notes

New chapter! ^o/
It turned out much bigger than I expected...like two chapters shoved into one. XD
This will mostly be Howard's POV and will take us from the day after Steve's death to his own death! And then we are back in the future...and, well, things are going to turn out a little differently...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was light knocking on the door and Howard quickly lay the fresh compress on Tony’s forehead before answering it.

Peggy stood on the other side with eyes red rimmed and her heart clearly broken.

Howard knew only one man that could put that look on her face and felt his heart fall into his stomach. He grasped the door handle as if to catch himself from falling and gasped, “No, not Cap too.”

“We…Colonel Phillips has declared him MIA but…” Her breath shuddered and she whispered, “Tony told Steve he wouldn’t survive this mission but he went anyways. That wonderfully, stupid brave man refused to let Hydra win.”

Howard hugged her, hoping to comfort her. The fact that Cap was dead was too shocking and he couldn’t truly believe it just yet. She let him pull her into his embrace for just a moment but then she pushed herself out of it. She stated, “Steve wanted me to relay a message to Tony…I thought I should tell him what happened to Steve and Steve’s final words all at once to lessen the blow…”

Howard clenched his fists, not wanting to upset his son further. But there was nothing he could do. The man Tony loved was dead and none of the power or wealth Howard had could change that.

He stepped aside and Peggy went to Tony’s bedside. She sat on the bed next to him and gently shook his shoulder to wake him. Tony woke but his consciousness was slow to surface. He struggled to focus on Peggy but, once he did, he slurred, “Aunt Peggy?”

Peggy ran her fingers through Tony’s hair and whispered, “Tony, dear, there’s something I need to tell you…”

Peggy’s voice dropped an octave lower and Howard wasn’t able to clearly discern her words but Tony’s paling face and growing horrified expression left no doubt.

Tears fell freely from Tony’s eyes by the time Peggy was done and he gasped, “How can I possibly move on after – after…” Tony choked on the words and turned onto his side to bury his face into his pillow. His shoulders began to shake and he sobbed into his pillow. Peggy tried to comfort him, but Tony hissed, “Leave me alone!”

Looking worse for wear, Peggy did as he asked and drew back. She went back to Howard’s side and whispered, “I’m going to be with the rest of the Commandos. We’re…We’re holding a
ceremony for Steve and Bucky to – to remember them by…”

“I’m going to stay here with Tony,” Howard murmured.

She nodded with understanding and hugged him one last time before slipping out of the room. Howard sighed heavily and returned to the chair beside Tony’s bed.

He didn’t draw attention to himself and, with a sad heart, he listened to Tony sob his heart out.

He felt horrible for intruding on such a private moment, but he needed to stay in case something happened with Tony’s arc reactor. This was the greatest stressor it would face with the heaving sobs Tony unleashed upon his chest.

The hardest part was staying quiet. He wanted to say something to distract Tony from his pain or comfort him.

But he knew he was the last person Tony would want to comfort him…

He pretended not to notice but Tony very pointedly called him Howard, not Dad, even after Howard discovered their relation. There was a history there that Howard had yet to experience but Tony had already lived. A history where Howard and his son were estranged…

With everything he’d seen, the time machine, the Iron Man suit, the arc reactor…the only thing he wanted to know about was what had happened between him and Tony to make his son barely tolerate his presence.

It was an absolute relief when Tony finally passed out.

Howard gently turned the man over so he was laying in a more comfortable position, and then mopped up the excess sweat and tears. Even in sleep, he looked distraught.

There was only one thing he could do now to help Tony and that was to get him back to the future.

Howard stuck his head out of the room and waved his assistant over. He gave her direction in order to get his people mobilized and start searching for Steve and thereby the tesseract.

There was nothing he could do for Steve now, but he could get the tesseract and save Tony’s life in the least.

Thankfully, he hired competent people so she was jogging in the direction of Command as soon as he was done speaking to her.

Howard lightly closed the door and returned to his son’s side.

He stared at Tony for a bit, but the man remained unchanging and Howard’s mind continued to churn uneasily. He picked his notebook off the ground and opened it up where he left off, writing formulas to create a new element for Tony’s reactor. He hadn’t found the right balance yet nor did he have any idea how he was going to make it but…he had to do something…

He was willing to work on this for the rest of his life if it meant saving Tony’s life.

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“Why are you still here?”

Howard woke suddenly at the hoarse voice but groaned when the muscles in his neck strained. He’d
fallen asleep in the chair next to Tony’s bed and it was his son’s voice that woke him.

His notebook slid from his lap with his waking and he squawked loudly as he caught it. He grinned sheepishly at Tony, but his son continued to frown at him…a look he’d grown used to seeing…

Over the last few weeks, the continuous frown had only encouraged Howard to smile more, but Howard’s smile slipped a little as he remembered last night.


Tony’s frown deepened and he pressed his face into the pillow and harshly whispered, “Don’t call me that…”

Howard wanted to know why but, for once in his life, he didn’t demand answers. He could see Tony was in a delicate space and he whispered, “…Alright.”

Howard unhappily looked down at the failed formulas he worked on the night before and he once again darkly wondered what the future held for Howard and, eventually, the family he’d have.

“What’s that?” Tony asked, his eyes also focused on the notebook in his hands.

“My notes,” Howard replied. “I’m still working on trying to find you a new element.”

“I remember that notebook,” Tony whispered. “I read about the base in it…and you described it containing a miraculous thing but…the remaining pages were missing…those pages.”

Howard felt like someone just switched the OFF switch in his brain. Tony didn’t seem as affected and his eyes were flickering and beginning to close.

Howard stated very slowly, “You read this in the future…I mentioned the base…?”

Could…Did…Was – Was Tony always meant to find the notebook and come to the past?

“What if…?” Howard began but Tony was already out. The implications of this new discovery changed everything. What if everything that had happened was meant to happen? What if it happened like that in Tony’s timeline too because he was always meant to be here?

Howard stared at his notebook like it was the Holy Grail.

This insignificant object was the start of all of this.

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Howard had no time to contemplate his notebook’s part in all of this because, before he knew it, the tesseract had been found. He personally went out with his team to retrieve it.

Howard hired a private car to move the tesseract and Peggy commandeered one of 107th’s jeeps to transport Tony. They both raced to location and racing time itself in order to fling Tony deep into its future before…before the unthinkable could happened.

Howard arrived first and wasn’t prepared for the entire team of the Howling Commandos jumping out of the Jeep, but he was more unprepared for the fragile looking version of his future son. He deteriorated much more in the days since he left. He barely recognized him. He didn’t even wake as Dum Dum helped Jim move the stretcher with him on it out of the back of the Jeep.

“How on Earth did he survive the move here?” Howard gasped.
“He did so just barely,” Gabe morbidly murmured as he took his place by Tony’s side.

Howard’s gaze was locked onto Tony’s face. These were probably the last moments he was going to be seeing him until he was born and it was a sorry sight. Was this Tony’s fate? Was this his end?

Howard’s hands tightened into fists and he promised himself he wouldn’t let this be it. His son would survive and Howard would make it so.

He was going to create the element needed to fix Tony’s reactor and save his life, even if it were the last thing he did.

But first they were going to send him back to the future.

With Jim, Dum Dum, and Gabe preoccupied with Tony, the remaining Commandos scouted out the area to make sure it was safe. Howard carried the tesseract while walking beside Tony. He left his people behind, wanting to limit the knowledge of the time machine to as few people as possible.

Once Tony was gone, the responsibility of the future would be in their hands…

Iron Man did not react when they entered the room. It stood against the opposite wall and was almost completely hidden behind the time machine when they first entered. Its eyes were not glowing and a fine layer of dust had settled on its shoulders.

Howard had no idea how to wake it, but everyone seemed to unconsciously look to him, expecting him to know what to do. Howard rounded the time machine and approached the robot warily.

All he knew was that the Iron Man suit would be waiting for them here. From the little Tony had told him, he knew it had been sent here to conserve power, but they never discussed how to turn it back on. He always assumed Tony would be awake to do it…

Standing in front of it, he cleared his throat, but the suit did not react. He tried knocking gently on its chest next. He didn’t expect a reaction, however, it suddenly seemed to grow a little taller as it lifted its head and its eyes flickered on. The glowing gaze bypassed Howard and locked onto Tony and then the robot was no longer in front of Howard but by Tony’s side.

“What has happened?” It demanded of them. "How did he grow so ill? Was he poisoned? Injured?"

Jim and Dum Dum lowered Tony to the floor as Howard jogged back over. The AI didn’t seem to remember what happened so Howard explained, “It’s palladium poisoning. The reactor is barely held together because the core has practically disintegrated and, unfortunately, that mean its waste went into Tony’s body.”

“And I see it has cultivated and brought Master Stark to death’s door,” the robot murmured ironically.

At the sound of its voice, Tony finally stirred. Everyone hovered around him worriedly and Howard felt a tinge of relief when Tony opened his eyes. Tony smiled for the first time since Steve’s death and wetly gasped, “J? Is that you, buddy?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Wait, let me look at you…” Tony’s eyes took in the robot’s form and he gasped, “You changed back. You – You’re back to normal. Mark 15 and all.”

“I do not know what you are referring to…” Iron Man retorted, “The files in my memory are spotted,
but the last thing I am able to access was leaving this very base in a convoy. I do not know how I came back to this location or how you progressed into this condition without my noticing.”

“It’s a long story but…I told you to come here so you wouldn’t use up your battery…” Tony whispered.

“Because of the damage to your reactor,” the AI guessed. “Then, because of your presence, I take it we have the means to return to the future?”

“Yes,” Howard answered for Tony.

Iron Man turned to Howard and stated, “Then let us proceed without any more delay.”

Howard nodded and started ordering the Commandos to various stations. He went up to the time machine and carefully removed the tesseract from its case and placed it into the one hole that seemed designed for it. Months prior, Tony had thrown Howard and his team out of the time machine in fear of him breaking it, luckily, his glimpse of its inner working gave him a vague idea of what connected to what but…operating the damn thing well…that was another story…

With Peggy and Gabe’s help, Iron Man gently maneuvered Tony back into its body.

The suit began to close around Tony, but he gasped, “Wait!” The moving pieces froze and a shallowly panting Tony looked at each one of them, even Howard, and then gasped, “Thank you…I won’t forget this.”

“Look us up in the future,” Jim said.

“Yeah, it’s going to be tough not talking to you about this until you grow up,” Dum Dum laughed.

Indeed, it will, Howard silently agreed.

Tony nodded, his eyes beginning to shine.

Surprisingly, Tony looked to him last and, for the first time, he said, “Dad…” The breath caught in Howard’s throat and Tony continued, “…Don’t…I – just…” He sighed heavily and then stated with finality, “Thank you.”

“Thank me when I invent that new element,” Howard retorted.

Tony smirked and replied, “Hopefully it’ll be ready and waiting for me when I get back.”

“It will be,” Howard swore.

Tony nodded and the suit closed around him. He turned to the machine and wobblingly walked up to it.

The Tesseract was in the machine and it was on and glowing. Howard had everyone sitting at stations that read levels of input and output and they’d notify him if anything looked wrong. Howard himself simply stood in front of the machine and watched his son climb up the ledge and onto the gaudy chair. He practically fell into it and then glanced around him. He turned the numbered dials on the dias in front of him to the proper year and then paused. He looked around him, probably looking for where to go from there. His bulky, gauntleted arm luckily bumped into the lever beside the chair and Tony was thrown back into the seat by an unseen force.

A high-pitched sound pierced his ears and was so painful he fell to his knees. On the ground, he was
then assaulted with a bright light that stole his vision and, once the spots disappeared, he was finally able to focus on the machine and saw that his son was gone.

He’d gone back to the future.

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When Tony first started at elementary school, Howard was approached by SHIELD again.

He had helped found the organization with Peggy after the War but left after Maria became pregnant with Tony. His focus had been too cut between SHIELD, Stark Industries, and the work on Tony’s new element.

His son coming into the world reminded him his time table was closing and SHIELD was the obvious choice to drop.

He’d been in his office at Stark Industries and had his old notebook open on his desk. He was looking at the old formulas and morbidly remembering when he wrote them a decade and a half ago beside his son’s deathbed.

He still hadn’t found an answer and it was beginning to infuriate him. He was becoming irritable with everyone, even Tony, the very one he was trying to save.

“What’s got your knickers in a twist?”

The familiar, teasing voice brought a smile to his face and he lifted his gaze to see Peggy leaning in his doorway.

“Peggy Carter!” Howard gasped. They’d called each other every once in a while, but he hadn’t seen her in years. Howard stood and exclaimed, “Look at you! You’ve barely aged! If I wasn’t married…”

“A flirt as always,” Peggy said, rolling her eyes as she came in and closed the door behind her.

Howard rounded his table and met her halfway. They hugged and then both kissed the other’s cheek. When they pulled back, she smiled warmly at him and whispered, “You’re not looking too good there yourself, Stark…”

He sighed heavily and murmured, “You’re sounding like my wife now…” He went back to his desk and sat down heavily. He rubbed his eyes and asked, “Is it really that obvious?”

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes and your shoulders are tense. What’s wrong?”

“The element,” Howard stated simply. “I just can’t figure it out and Tony keeps growing and before I know it…” He’ll be grown up and then… He shook his head and murmured, “Forget about me, how are you? How is SHIELD doing?”

She sighed and sat down across the desk from him. She said, “SHIELD is the reason I’m here
“Still have no interest in returning…” Howard stated dryly.

She shook her head gravely replied, “It’s not that either, Howard. Do you remember Dr. Erskine’s assistant? That quiet, tall man? He was found dead last week in his home. Apparently, he fell down his stairs and broke his neck.”

“How quaint.”

“It is SHIELD’s final stance on the matter, but I find it suspicious,” Peggy retorted. She paused and then whispered, “A few years ago, the man who built the crucible, the main part to the machine that made Steve Captain America…he died in a house fire.”

“…You think someone is slowly picking off anyone involved in Project Rebirth?” Howard stated, quirking his eyebrow.

“Not 100%, however, there were not many who were involved and the majority who were are dead now, Howard…” Peggy stated.

“And I’m one of those few still left alive,” Howard said ironically. “Did you come all the way out here to save me?”

“One death is a coincidence, but a second is suspicious,” Peggy stated.

“Years apart though, Peg? And why go after the Project Rebirth guys two decades later? We are nothing without Erskine. We can’t make another super solider without him.”

“…Can’t we?”

Howard’s shoulders twitched but kept his face passive. He worked side-by-side with Erskine. If he really wanted to…he could, but he swore to never create another again. He evenly replied to the agent, “No.”

“You’re the one who is most in danger with that kind of knowledge,” she stated, seeing the truth.

Howard shook his head and murmured, “It’s far fetched, even for you, Pegs. I have enough on my plate to worry about, nonetheless worrying over a phantom murder like you are implying.”

“Howard –,” she began earnestly.

“Peggy,” he countered, getting to his feet. “My son just won his first science fair award a few days ago. Before I’ll know it, he will start inventing, building the Iron Man suit, and then traveling through time. I need to make him an element for when he returns, an element that will save his life.”

“You won’t be able to help him if you’re dead,” she hissed.

“All of this will be nothing if he ends up dead,” he countered.

She clenched her fists, but Howard did not waver. He needed to make the new element, not help her investigate a probable murderer.

“Promise me you will be cautious, at least, Stark,” she whispered.

“Of course, Carter,” Howard replied. “I’ll hire more security if that will make you feel better.”
“It would, thank you,” she stated, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Now, unless you want to discuss Area 51, are we done talking conspiracy theories? Can we talk about our lives? I heard through the grapevine that our little Peggy might be engaged?”

“Who told you? Was it Dum Dum?” She chuckled.

“Yes, the big mouth,” Howard chuckled, leaning back into his chair. “When do I get to meet the lucky guy and make him ridiculously uncomfortable?”

Peggy threw back her head and laughed a full minute, making Howard smile. He hadn’t heard her laugh like that since before Steve and Bucky died. She’d grown too serious with her work in SHIELD.

Howard buzzed in his assistant and ordered them refreshments and they spent the rest of the afternoon reminiscing and talking about their present lives. It had been nice to speak with Peggy again. Not many women were comfortable with Howard’s brash ways and she was one of the few that could handle him.

She left him promising to visit more and then Howard was alone again with his notebook. Memories spurred him to turn back the pages and look at his old notes. He came across a drawing Tony had managed to draw next to his sketch of the Hydra base and smiled sadly at the image. It was a pencil drawing of Captain America's spangled shield. Howard still remembered walking into his office and nearly having a heart attack when he saw the young child treating such a precious object like a coloring book.

Had Steve survived he would have loved to see the drawing…but he and his shield were now lost forever…He still had people looking for him, but he knew by now it was a lost cause…Poor Tony would have no grave to return to…just the memorial in D.C.

Howard’s finger circled around the star-spangled drawing of Tony’s shield and remembered all the designs Howard had gone through before settling on the classic design that was now immortalized in history as being synonymous with Captain America. The Vibranium was a bitch to get so he had been so nervous etching the design on it…

Howard’s finger stilled and his eyes widened as he stared down at the crude drawing of the shield in shock as all the Vibranium components and formulas filtered through his mind and made sense.

It fit.

He could use it to make the new element for Tony’s reactor.

Howard jumped to his feet, clutching his notebook close to his face, staring at the answer that had been with him for years. Hell, Tony fricken’ drew it on the same page as one of his sketches of the base! It was like the universe was screaming at him to notice it!

He finally figured it out.

After all these years, he was finally able to save his son’s life.

Howard yipped and did a little victory dance. He then sat down and opened the notebook to one of the few remaining fresh pages and began writing out the cornerstone to the new element.

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Unfortunately, the technology of Howard’s era was not advanced enough to keep up with his formulas. He started to sketch out ideas for an arc reactor, but he knew his son would be the one to actually see it built. He did what he could for Tony. He wrote out all of the formulas, sketched out mock ideas on using the reactor to create the element but...in the end, he had to wait for his son to invent it. He removed the pages from the notebook and gave them to Peggy for safekeeping. She swore they’d be safe with her and she would store them in older personal vault at SHIELD until they were needed.

He knew it would take years for the technology to catch up so...now he had time again.

It was a relief but also strange. At first, he didn’t know how to spend that time so he started to devote more time to growing his empire...and then being with his family.

He began to work 9 to 5 like an everyday American. Maria was much happier with the arrangement, but Tony was shy. He’d grown up without Howard being there and he was clearly unsure how to act around his father.

He couldn’t help but remember the older Tony calling him “Howard” instead of “Dad” and Howard was resolved to change that.

After spending an entire day shopping with Maria and then a few hours with Tony in his workshop, he was utterly exhausted and fell asleep on the sofa in the library. He woke up with a soft blanket draped over him and Tony’s teddy bear tucked between him and the couch. Howard sat up with a small smile as he picked up the bear. Maybe he was making progress with his son after all...

He got up with a groan and rubbed his hungry belly and, with one glance at the clock on the wall, he saw he missed dinner and Tony’s bedtime. He walked down the hall and poked his head in Tony’s room. From the glow of his Captain America nightlight, he saw his son was fast asleep. Howard silently closed the door and made his way to the kitchen.

Jarvis most likely left him a plate in the refrigerator and Howard’s mouth was already watering for whatever it was.

He entered the kitchen expecting no one else to be in there so he jolted to a stop when he saw the figure hunched over the oven. The stranger straightened with a snap and Howard could barely make him out in the darkness of his kitchen, but he could tell the man had half of his face covered. He clearly wasn’t there with good intentions in mind.

Howard backed up and the man moved with him like a predator keeping its prey in its sight.

Howard didn’t know what to think. He’d never had someone break in before nonetheless dealt with a robber. He’d confronted Nazis in the War but confronting this man was the last thing he wanted because he was so very conscious of the fact how close his son was to this stranger in the safety of their home.

If there was a loud noise, Tony might come to investigate.

The intruder took another step toward him and Howard couldn’t move. He felt trapped. This man had no life in his eyes. What was he capable of? What did he want? What was he doing here??

The clink of a gun being cocked grabbed both of their attentions and Howard let out a huge sigh of relief when he saw his butler standing at the other end of the kitchen with his shotgun. Jarvis had the gun pointed straight at the intruder and, in a murderous voice, stated, “You have ten seconds to leave this property before the authorities get here but only five seconds to leave before I justly shoot you
The intruder needed no other incentive and spun right around and out the backdoor.

Howard clutched his chest and gasped, “Jesus!” He’d been holding his breath and was now inhaling it all back in, in large gasps.

Jarvis charged right after the man and Howard half expected him to chase him down. Instead, he slammed the door closed behind him and bolted it shut.

“I’m going to check on Master Tony and the Missus,” Jarvis stated, tucking the shotgun into a safer position in the crook of his arm. “Will you be alright alone a moment, sir?”

Howard sat down heavily at the island counter and gasped, “I think?”

Jarvis nodded curtly and hurried out the other end of the kitchen Howard had just entered through. Howard’s eyes trailed to where the man had been standing when he first entered. Why steal from the kitchen? All the good silver was on display in the dinning room and there were vastly more expensive objects in the other rooms! The only thing of value where the man had been standing was the oven, but it’d take four men to move that…

Was the oven door was open?

Howard got up and rounded the counter and confirmed it was indeed open. What –?

That was when the smell of gas hit him.

“Howard?” Maria’s worried voice came down the hall and Howard felt his heart freeze over.

He yelled, “Maria, get yourself and Tony out of the house!”

“What?”

Howard bent down and stuck his head in the oven. The machine was simple in its build and he saw no obvious tampering, but his perfectly well-built oven was spewing noxious fumes.

“Sir, the intruder could still be out there!” Jarvis countered in protest at Howards exclamation.

Howard removed his head from the oven, feeling a little dizzy from the gas, and gasped, “There’s gas leaking all over this place! We need to get out!”

Jarvis and Maria stood at the kitchen’s entrance with Tony tucked protectively between them. Howard surged forward and picked up his son and led them to the front door and fresh air. They sat on the front steps with Jarvis pacing in front of them with his shotgun until the authorities arrived. Howard held his son tightly as the house was searched and the fire department called. Maria wrapped her arms around both of them and was deathly silent. All the commotion excited Tony at first but, eventually, the small child fell asleep in his arms.

The gas was turned off and an expert was promised to come in, in the morning to fix the oven and, until then, the house was safe enough to return to but…but Howard did not feel safe. Maria must not have either because she put up no arguments when he suggested they all get a room in the city for the night.

Jarvis drove them in the Bentley so the entire family was able to pile in the back and Maria dozed off on his shoulder while Tony continued to sleep on his lap.
Howard didn’t think he was going to be going to sleep for a long while.

Someone just tried to kill him and his family.

And they tried to make it look like an accident.

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Howard called Peggy first thing in the morning.

She answered on the first ring and gasped, “Howard! Are you alright?”

“You heard?”

“SHIELD keeps an eye on all its people, even the ones who retired early,” she retorted. “SHIELD has already taken over the case, but we can’t find any trace of the intruder. What about your family? Your son?”

“We’re all okay…scared but fine,” Howard replied with a heavy sigh. He sat down and leaned into his head as he whispered, “You were right, Peggy. All those years ago I didn’t listen and it almost cost me and my family their lives!”

“I’m trying to cause a stir at SHIELD about this, but no one is taking the pregnant ex-agent too seriously. Most are saying it’s an extremist that didn’t agree with your company’s weapons deals. They don’t see the connections between you and the others!”

“So I am a man with a target on his head and my family are going to be collateral damage?” Howard hissed.

“If you ask SHIELD for protection, they will give it, no questions asked. You are one of their founding members and if you don’t feel safe then they will help you in that aspect at least. They can’t argue away your safety!”

“…But what about Tony?” Howard whispered. “What if, even with these protections, he still gets hurt?”

Howard would die if anything happened to his son.

“He survives to time travel,” Peggy pointed out.

“…But what if we changed the future,” Howard whispered fearfully.

Peggy was silent on the other line as she considered his words. Howard tightened his grip on the phone and then whispered, “Can you tell SHIELD I’ll take the protection…I need to be with my family right now…”

“Of course, Howard,” Peggy swore. “And let me know if there’s anything else I can do for all of you. I can be there within the hour.”

“Thanks, Pegs,” Howard whispered and hung up the phone.

He went back to the bedroom he was sharing with his family. He got a hotel suite with three rooms, but Howard and Maria didn’t think twice about letting Tony sleep in their bed and Jarvis had camped himself out in the living room with the shotgun still at his side.

He and Jarvis exchanged nods and Howard silently opened the door to the bedroom. Maria was
awake and still reading the newspaper he’d left her with. Tony was deeply asleep and curled into her side with one arm thrown over her thigh.

Howard wordlessly slipped into the bed and draped an arm over his son’s small form. Maria’s fingers found their way to Howard’s scalp and gently carded his hair. She whispered, “What did Peggy say?”

“SHIELD has taken over the investigation, but they think it has to do more with my company’s business than my work in Project Rebirth…”

Howard had told both Maria and Jarvis about Peggy’s suspicions last night. Neither still knew about Tony’s eventual time travel but they were now aware someone wanted all who helped create Captain America were being picked off in “accidental” deaths.

Meeting their future son during the War was the one secret he kept from his wife.

He didn’t want her to know of the horrible trials Tony would have to face.

“Dear, if Tony had –,” she worriedly began.

“I know…” Howard sighed, running his fingers through Tony’s hair. Tony hummed under his touch and pressed his face deeper into Maria’s side. Staring at their son, Howard stated, “We need to protect him.”

“How…?”

Sighing heavily, he whispered, “There is one way…but you’re not going to like it…”

She raised her eyebrows in silent question.

“Boarding school. I know you didn’t want him to go, but we both did, so it won’t be strange if we sent him. It’ll be the best excuse to keep him away from me and safe…”

Maria’s lip wobbled and she wrapped another arm around Tony.

Howard couldn’t meet her gaze as he added, “You should get your own apartment too. If you continue to live with me then you’ll be at risk too.”

“Howard-!” She sharply hissed his name but paused to collect herself. Whispering more evenly, she stated, “Don’t you dare ask me to give up both of the most important things in my life. When we married, ‘it was for better or for worse’ and I am not leaving you over a little assassin.”

Howard smiled at her and whispered, “This is why I married you…”

She smiled sadly at him and whispered, “We’ll send Tony to boarding school until you or SHIELD find out who is trying to kill everyone from Project Rebirth and stop them…Then we’ll bring him right back home.”

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Howard was late to Tony’s High School Graduation. He and Peggy had been investigating a new lead. They came across a strange lab that had clearly been abandoned for years but it looked like some kind of super soldier research had been done there.

“But why kill us?” Howard murmured to Peggy as they entered the building. “Wouldn’t they want to kidnap us instead for our knowledge?”
“Maybe they want to be the only ones with the knowledge?” Peggy countered and that was the final word on the matter as they hurried down the aisle and then found Maria and the others saving their seats for them.

“You missed his speech,” Maria whispered.

“Damn,” Howard hissed. He found his son on stage and saw he was already looking at him. Tony shot him a glare and looked away sharply. Oh, boy, he was upset.

Howard and Peggy had been looking into the Project Rebirth murders for the last ten years and Howard had barely interacted with his son in those years. Holidays and summers were their time…if he wasn’t at work.

Maybe once Tony started working with him, once he let him in on what Howard was doing, he would finally understand and not hate Howard as much. He prayed he could change this aspect of the future at least. He did all of this for Tony.

“We’ll have to watch a video of the speech later,” Howard whispered, grasping Maria’s hand. She leaned into his side and they both looked to his son as he stubbornly glared at a spot in the crowd that wasn’t them.

After applauding the graduates, everyone filled out of the amphitheater and headed toward the ballroom for the afterparty celebration. The voices of family and friends buzzed loudly in the halls and Peggy surprisingly stated, “He almost looks like the Tony we first met. It is so strange to see him again.”

Howard glanced at Maria, but she was hunched over Jarvis in his wheelchair as they carried on their own personal conversation.

“It is strange,” Howard stated. And frightening.

Did that mean Tony was going to get the reactor in his chest soon? He wished his son had revealed how that happened. He didn’t like not knowing…

And poor Maria…Tony was clearly going to be badly hurt when he first got the reactor and his wife was going to be devastated by every little scar and hurt Tony suffered.

When they entered the ballroom, people spread out in search of their graduates. Peggy’s keen eyes found him quickly and they all repeated their congratulations to the teenager. Maria showered Tony’s face with kisses and Tony begrudgingly took it with a fond smile. When Tony turned to Howard, however, that smile disappeared and he held out his hand to Howard like he was one of his subordinates and not his son.

Howard took it and shook his hand like Tony wanted and said, “Congratulations, son.”

“Thank you, Howard,” Tony replied, his voice chipped as he addressed Howard by his first name for the first time.

Howard’s hand twitched in Tony’s grip and he unhappily let go of his son’s hand.

This was the last thing he wanted.

He could already feel the rift forming between them.

Howard rolled with it, pretending he was unaffected, and asked Tony about his speech. Their
conversation was stilted and Howard was relieved when Peggy stole Tony to tease him on his growing goatee.

“Give him time, sir,” Jarvis stated from his side. Howard glanced down at his retired butler and the older man smiled up at him as he said, “One day, he’ll know all you’ve done and he’ll understand. Just give him time.”

Howard sighed and looked back to Tony and murmured ironically, “Time’s all my son has.”

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Howard, however, had no more time...

Gasping for breath, Howard shakily sat himself up. the first thing he saw was the smoke rising from the car’s vents, then he saw the broken windows, and then and only then when he sat up did he feel the pull in his chest and he knew he broke several ribs.

He heard Maria panting in shallow gasps beside him and he saw she was pinned, her legs trapped and her beautiful face pale, half covered in blood, and twisted in pain.

He reached out to her, gasping, “Maria!”

“What happened?” She gasped in confusion.

“I don’t know…” Howard whispered. One moment they had been driving to Howard’s new lab and the next they were on the side of the road. Did they blow a tire? Hit an animal?

“I – I am going to get help,” he gasped. He fell out of the car and he saw a figure approach them. He gasped, “Help my wife. Please. Help.”

He was suddenly struck in the head and his mind went reeling.

What?

He was struck again and then thrown against the car.

No, wait, he was the one they had been looking for! The murderer! He finally caught Howard unaware – he finally –!

He met his murderer’s eyes and recognized the man immediately despite his head being raddled.

“B-Barnes?” He gasped. How was he alive? Why was he –?

Bucky struck him again, breaking his nose. He was hit a few more times and he heard Maria screaming his name.

“Just me,” he hissed through swollen lips. “L-Let her go.”

Bucky threw him back into the car and he slumped forward over the steering wheel.

He couldn’t move and he couldn’t look away from his wife, even as Bucky’s fingers wrapped around her neck.

They were going to die.

Every precaution he made amounted to nothing.
Every hope he had for the future fizzled away like the life in Maria’s eyes.

And everything he wanted to tell Tony would never be told.

The last words they exchanged were harsh and that was how his son was going to remember him…

Tony passed out when the world tightened around him.

When he opened his eyes again, he realized he’d fallen on the ground. The suit had gone dark again, but he could tell by the flickering screens that it’d be connected in a few seconds. He was too weak to sit up nor open his mouth to talk to Jarvis so he waited...

“Alpha Jarvis reconnecting…” The statement nearly made Tony cry. He was back. He was in the future. He survived.

His screens flickered on and Jarvis stated, “Sir, you are grievously unwell. You require immediate hospitalization.”

Tony chuckled, “Whatever you say J. It’s good to be connected to the real you again.”

“And it is good to have you back, sir. You have been missing for over a week. A SHIELD company has been guarding the time machine, waiting for your return.”

“Yay, open me up so they can carry me out of here…” Tony tiredly said.

His suit opened and faces were suddenly hovering above him. He recognized no one, but he knew that would change soon. Jarvis probably notified his friends of his return as soon as he confirmed the connection.

Tony passed out again as they removed him from the suit.

When he woke again he was in the arguably most comfortable hospital bed on the planet…and he felt better. Much better. He sat up and a figure leapt to its feet beside him.

“Tony!”
He was engulfed in a hug and he only needed to see that red hair to know who held him. His arms snapped around her and he buried his face in her hair and he just cried. He missed her so much and he had needed her in his grief and now here she finally was. Pepper Potts in the flesh. God…he missed her. How many months had it been for him? And how much time had passed for her? A week?

Eventually, they pulled back and properly looked at each other. Pepper cupped his face and looked deeply into his eyes. She whispered, “You’ve been put through the ringer…”

Tony chuckle wetly and whispered, “You have no idea…”

“Jarvis clued me in on some of it. You time traveled, Tony,” she gasped, her voice slightly awed. “You met the Commandos…your dad…Captain America! It must had been amazing!”

Tony shook his head and whispered, “J…his systems got messed up. He doesn’t remember all of it…” The AI didn’t remember Tony and Steve falling in love, or the different realities of the future they experienced, nor how Tony got sick in the first place.

Speaking of which…

Tony glanced down at his chest and saw the raised veins were still there. He hadn’t dreamed it. He was still dying.

His spare reactor was in his chest now. Pepper must have brought it at Jarvis’s suggestion. It was probably helping but the poison was still in his system.

“What kind of drugs are they pumping in me?” Tony asked. He felt pretty good, better than he had in weeks.

“The kind that’ll get you back on your feet,” Fury stated, slithering out of the shadows.

Tony fell back into the bed and moaned, “Of course you are here…”

Pepper smiled warmly at him and sat beside him on the bed, gently grasping one of his hands. Tony wordlessly carded his fingers with hers and leveled an annoyed look at Fury. He was probably there when Tony teared up over seeing Pepper…Bastard.

“Believe it or not, I had to choose between meeting the Norse God of Thunder or talking to you. So, you should consider yourself lucky.”

Tony snorted but Fury merely raised a single eyebrow.

“Well, I am the Earth’s first-time traveler, so I guess that amounts to something,” Tony haughtily stated.

“Which is why I chose to be here,” Fury said and threw a packet of papers on Tony’s lap.

Tony picked up the sealed files and asked, “What is this? Do you expect me to do paperwork? Did you guys look at me at all? I’m dying. I’m not going to spend my last days signing the dotted line.”

“I have been carrying that with me ever since I became the director of SHIELD. The prior director made me swear that I’d never open it and, in addition, she made me swear to deliver this to Tony Stark but only after the year 2009. I thought it strange at first, but I didn’t ask any questions until you disappeared into what my people are calling a tridimensional, time continuum transporter in the year 2009. Then I figured, this might have something to do with that so you can probably get this a little
“…Aunt Peggy?” Tony guessed, not looking up from the folder in his hands.

“She knew I’d pass it along without too many questions,” Fury nodded.

With shaking hands, Tony unwrapped the sealed folder and looked inside. The missing pages of his father’s journal were there and a note in Peggy’s handwriting.

Tony –

Your father found the answer to your missing element in these pages. He would have wanted you to have it and not collect dust in SHIELD archives. He spent his life looking for it and looking out for you in all the ways he could. Live on, like he and Steve would have wanted.

Love, your Aunt Peggy

“Steve?” Pepper murmured in confusion as she read over his shoulder.

Tony hiccupped as he was overcome with emotion again. He was going to live, but he needed to tell Pep the story and he didn’t know if he was ready to talk about it.

To him, Steve had died just yesterday…

He closed his eyes and he could still picture his perfect super soldier in his mind’s eye.

He shakily whispered, “It’s a long story…”

She grasped his hand and whispered, “I’ve got time…”

Fury silently left them alone and, with his eyes still closed but his hand tightly grasping Pepper’s, he began to whisper his tale.

---

Tony stared down at the model his father had made of the first Stark Expo and saw the element he’d slaved over hidden its design.

Tony had used the notes his father had left him to create the element he’d been unable to and now he had a new arc reactor and a new chance at life. Those notes led him to the few clues his father had been able to leave him this model and an old reel of film.

Pepper and Rhodey silently bickered how to put the projector together as Tony stared down at the model. His feelings for his father were a confused mess as he regarded the model. His father had done this for Tony, half of his notebook was dedicated to Tony.

Tony grew up, thinking the man didn’t care about him but…but the man had.

Had it always been like that? Had the notebook always been filled with formulas to save Tony? Had his Aunt Peggy always torn out the last pages to give to Tony until he returned? Was his traveling into the past always fated?
The world seemed the same to Tony. Everything he remembered was still there…Even the old movies he had watched about the Commandos were the same. Steve and Peggy still shard their tragic romance and there wasn’t even the inkling that Steve once had a relationship with a man the last months of his life…

It was almost like it never happened.

He had nothing of Steve’s or any keepsakes of their time together, just their memories…

Even Jarvis didn’t remember and sometimes Tony wondered if it had only been a dream.

“We got it!” Rhodey excitedly exclaimed, raising his hands in victory.

Tony was drawn away from his memories and he sat down on the couch next to Pepper as Rhodey started the projector. His father’s image flickered on and he began to talk about his expo. It was clearly scripted and had several outtakes so Tony wasn’t expecting much from it.

A young Tony suddenly appeared on screen and Howard rounded on the boy, saying, “Tony? What are you doing back there? What is that? Put that back! Put that back where you got it from! Where’s your mother? Maria! Go! Go!”

“Oh, you’re so cute,” Pepper cooed at the little boy being carried off screen. The screen flickered again as a few shorter takes quickly filtered through his father stumbling through his lines.

Suddenly, though, the scene changed and Howard was leaning against his desk, holding the very notebook Tony had sitting on the coffee table in front of him. Tony’s version was obviously older and was complete again with the old pages reinserted, but Howard’s looked fresh and Tony wondered if there were pages still to be filled in there.

“Tony…you’re too young to understand this right now so I thought I would put it on film for you. I built this for you…and some day you’ll realize it represents a whole lot more than people’s inventions. It represents my life’s work. This is the key to the future…your future. I’m limited by the technology of my time, but one day, you’ll figure this out and when you do…you’ll have changed the world. If never get the chance to tell you this…I wanted you to know in my past, present, and future, what is and will always be, my greatest creation…is you.”

Tony threw is head back and stared at the ceiling, his heart constricting as it tried to understand the relationship he had, had with his father. He wished his father hadn’t waited until he was “old enough to understand.” Things may have turned out drastically differently.

“This is deep, man,” Rhodey said.

“I can drink to that,” Tony stated. “…Thanks for watching with me.”

“Thank you for including us,” Pepper whispered, gently grasping his hand.

Tony didn’t like being alone anymore. He’d grown used to the close company of people with his months in the Commandos. He had also been desperate to be with these two people all that time that he didn’t want to leave their sides just yet, even when he was dealing with this emotionally traumatic personal shit.

“So…my dad cared for me after all…” Tony stated, “But he still died.”

“Maybe you didn’t change the future at all,” Pepper reasoned.
Tony thought back to the projection of the older version of his father the alternative Jarvis had shown him. What would it had been like with Howard, knowing what he did now? Would they have worked together like they did in the alternative timeline? Would his father smile warmly at him like he was proud like he had in the projection? Would Tony call him “Dad”?

He had so many questions and no answers…he still hadn’t noted any changes to the future but…

His heart froze in his chest.

He sat up sharply, making both of his friends jump.

“Tony?” Rhodey questioned.

He’d been back in the future for weeks and he never thought to look. What if…What if the future had changed? What if Steve…

“Jarvis…” Tony whispered, his voiced edged with tension. His mind still back in the past and, with the projection of his father in his mind’s eye, Tony asked, “Is there any information out there on a Winter Soldier?”

Chapter End Notes

>:D
Damn! Where is that kid?!

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! Here's another gigantic chapter! :D

Tony stared long and hard at the information streaming in on the hologram in front of him and every new piece of information made him feel more numb and detached from his body.

Twenty minutes ago, he had been blissfully unaware of the true state of the world.

Jarvis could only find snit-bits of information of the Winter Soldier online. It was enough to convince Tony he was real, but he needed more. He needed to find the Winter Soldier and—maybe find Steve…

He had contacted Coulson for whatever information SHIELD had on the Winter Soldier. In the alternative timeline, the Winter Soldier had been an assassin hunted by the Avengers. In this timeline, he was probably hunted by SHIELD.

His suspicions were confirmed when Coulson wanted to know how Tony found out about the soldier in the first place and demanded that he tell him if Tony was targeted. After some teasing, Tony assured Coulson that he wasn’t next on the Winter Soldier’s hit list but was doing research on the differences between timelines.

Tony had only revealed the full extent of what had happened to him in the past to Pepper and Rhodey. SHIELD was very interested but Tony was never forthcoming. Coulson cooled down after that and offered his help, clearly curious, but Tony didn’t take him up on the offer and told the man all he needed were the files. The files he was given, however, were mostly a bloody ledger of the bodies the soldier had left behind.

There was little to no information on the man himself and he could tell key things were missing from the files he was given.

Tony took it upon himself to dig a little deeper and do some hacking in SHIELD’s database.

And now he was regretting it…

Because the information he and Jarvis were uncovering was just…wrong. So very wrong and dangerous and— and fuck.

They were uncovering the motherload of all coverups. The Winter Soldier was only a tiny, tiny piece of the pie.

Because it was fucking Hydra again.

Since the Winter Soldier had survived, he assumed that maybe a tiny portion of the organization survived. He was expecting maybe a few dozen people…

But there were hundreds and the list kept growing. Soon it’d be thousands.
They were in all three branches of government. They were in SHIELD.

“I…I don’t even know where to begin,” Tony finally gasped aloud.

Rhodey was pacing next to him like an agitated wild cat and was muttering under his breath about higher command.

Pepper was sitting down. She had to sit down. She stared at the same information Tony was with large eyes and a white knuckled grip on her phone. She saw him looking at her and gasped, “Do… Do you think Phil is…?”

Tony pulled up another screen and pulled up Coulson’s files. He compared it to the others he’d uncovered and then sighed in relief, “No…No, he’s one of the good guys.”

“Thank God,” she gasped, clutching her heart. “We – We have to tell him. SHIELD needs to know to fix this.”

Tony’s eyes returned to the screen. It was so deep… too deep. He whispered, “I don’t think this can be fixed…”

SHIELD was the one that was most infiltrated. When they rooted out Hydra, because there was no “if” in this scenario, when they fucking did it, SHIELD would probably not survive.

“Sir…I have located more information on the Winter Soldier you will want to see,” Jarvis stated, its voice serious.

“Show me,” Tony said, waving for another screen to open.

Nothing opened in front of him and Jarvis gravely suggested, “You may want to sit down with Miss Potts…”

Tony immediately assumed the worst.

Jarvis was going to confirm Steve was the Winter Soldier.

This was it. This was the moment he had been dreading ever since he started looking into it. He heavily sat down and Pepper immediately grabbed his hand. Rhodey stopped pacing and turned to watch the hologram that opened in front of Tony. He stood next to Tony, lending his presence as a form of support too.

Tony was already imagining the worst. He could already picture Steve being tortured in his mind’s eye. It made him feel sick and he tightened his hold on Pepper.

What opened before him was a hologram of an old, grainy black and white security footage of a road.

“I know that road,” Tony gasped in shock, not expecting to see the place his parents died.

A car suddenly flew into the screen and slammed into a tree, making all of them jump.

As his muscles untensed, Tony recognized the car too and now knew why Jarvis told him to sit down. This was footage of the night of his parents’ deaths. Tony grabbed onto Pepper tightly with his other hand and she unquestionably held onto him with both hands too.

A motorcyclist came onto the screen and Tony knew without a doubt this must have been the Winter Soldier.
His breath caught in his throat when the man beat his father and he stopped breathing all together as he watched him throw Howard back into the car and murder both of his parents. The soldier then walked up to the camera and shot it, making the screen go black…but not before Tony saw the man’s face.

“It wasn’t Captain Rogers,” Rhodey said, trying to assure him.

“No,” Tony agreed, his throat dry and his heart heavy. “It was Bucky…”

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Tony told the others he needed a moment to himself and went out into the balcony.

The sun was just starting to set and, as always, the sunrise looked beautiful against the Pacific Ocean. He only spared the view a moment’s glance before dropping his head into his hands and finally unleashed the anxiety attack he had been keeping at bay. He hyperventilated mostly and then cried…for Bucky and for Steve.

What little hope for a reunion with Steve died with the video and it broke his heart all over again as he finally accepted he was dead. A small, sick part of him had wanted Steve to be the Winter Soldier. Because then that would mean he’d have Steve back.

But he was dead. He was never going to get his super soldier back…

Never.

It felt like he lost him all over again.

And then he wept for Bucky…he cried for his friend because Hydra had broken him just as they had done to Steve in the alternative future. They erased the man he once was with years of torture…according to the files on the Winter Soldier, it took them twenty years – twenty years – to break him. Bucky had to be broken over and over again, each time being fragmented down until nothing was left…

And then he finally cried for his mom…and dad, whose deaths were so much worse than he imagined. At that point his eyes were raw and his throat hoarse so he moaned and whimpered more than wept.

All of it was so unfair and horrifying. Tony was tempted to escape it by grabbing a bottle of vodka and locking himself away from it all.

Instead, he let this all wash over him and then he wiped the tears off his face.

Steve was dead.

His parents were dead.

But Bucky…Bucky was alive.

He took a deep breath, and told himself, “I’m going to go Hercules on Hydra’s ass and make sure its not going to grow back anymore of those damn heads.”

He spun on his heels and stomped back into the building. His friends looked concerned, but Tony ignored it in favor and stating, “J, contact Coulson. Tell him I have to talk to him here, privately, and as soon as possible. Then you need to start gearing us up for war.”
“Yes, sir.”

Metal shutters started covering the windows all around the mansion, blocking out the last rays of sun. The interior lights automatically turned on to compensate.

Coulson messaged and called him several times, wanting to know what exactly Tony wanted to talk about, but Tony ignored them all in favor of going through SHIELD personnel files. He was too busy sorting out who exactly was SHIELD and who was Hydra and looking for Bucky to explain to the agent that his organization was a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Pepper pretty much did the same but scoured Stark Industries instead to make sure their company wasn’t infested with any Hydra agents. Rhodey did the same with the army. He started first with his own division and moved onto others.

That was how Coulson found them, surround by holograms with sour looks on their faces. Strike that…Coulson and a red headed woman in a tight, tight body suit found them like this.

“Who died?” Coulson asked upon seeing their stark expressions.

“What does ‘privately’ mean to you exactly?” Tony countered, eyeing the new agent suspiciously.

“I’m Agent Romanoff,” she said, nodding to Tony in a way of greeting. “You can call me Natasha.”

Tony was already looking her up on the data base as soon as she said Romanoff. She came out clear.

“Fury assigned her to be your new handler and I thought this ‘private’ moment would a good time as any to introduce you,” Coulson explained.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Tony retorted.

Coulson sighed heavily and then redirected the question as he asked, “What did you want to talk about? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? SHIELD. SHIELD is wrong,” Tony said and pushed the hologram of his growing list to Coulson.

Coulson looked over the names with a pinched brow and then demanded, “How did you get these names?? These are government agents whose names are –.”

“They’re Hydra,” Tony stated, interrupting him before he got into a speech about secret intelligence.

Coulson’s mouth dropped and he stared at Tony with an openly shocked face. Natasha was able to keep her expression blank, but her eyes did grow large as she looked at the list too.

“Are you sure about this?” She asked.

“Positive,” Tony replied. “What do we do…?”

Natasha and Coulson exchanged glances and then Coulson said, “We’re going to need to use your building, Stark. It seems HQ has been infested.”

(Of course,” Pepper answered for him before he started to whine about agents touching his stuff.

Coulson nodded curtly and got on his phone. He continued to scroll through the list of names Tony gave him with a grim expression.
Natasha asked to help going through the files and Tony gave her access and she started to read. She learned how to work it quickly and was adding to their lists at a fast rate.

Before Tony knew it, his home was crawling in agents and equipment was being set up to make this SHIELD’s new HQ. He only noted them when they bumped into something like when one damn near knocked over a priceless Han Dynasty vase and Pepper almost had a heart attack because of it.

He mostly focused on the holograms. He helped in finding more Hydra people but…mostly he was searching for Bucky. There was a scattered paper trail. From what he could see, Bucky was considered more of a tool than a person, making their records less substantial. They didn’t put much value on his life in general. When they weren’t using him for missions, they put him in a cryostasis chamber in some warehouses where they stored out-of-date weapons.

It pissed him off. It disgusted him. This was Bucky. This was his friend, a man who supported him and Steve when the rest of the world was against them. He had been one of the most caring, funny, and loyal men he’d ever met…and Hydra turned him into a monster and then treated him like trash when they had no use for him.

Tony’s heart was ripped apart from this: he was angry for his parents’ horrible murders, sad for Bucky’s unwelcomed fate, and – and, insanely…his heart was broken for Steve not being the Winter Soldier...

Tony had stupidly grown hopeful as soon as he found out there was a Winter Soldier in this timeline but now he was crushed and was reminded of how he missed Steve so much…

He’d grown so used to Steve’s constant presence that its sudden absence hurt as much as a lost limb. It had been love. He could say that now. He had loved Steve and he struggled with understanding it so he never told Steve he loved him and he was going to regret it for the rest of his life.

But Steve and his parents were dead.

He could only save Bucky.

He had struggled with Bucky’s fall from the train before and after traveling back to the future. He couldn’t save Bucky in the past because of the threat to the future…but he could save him now.

Tony felt partially responsible for what happened to Buck and the guilt was starting to fester. He needed to find him and free him from Hydra yesterday.

Tony closed all the personnel files around him and focused solely on the ones in front of him on the storage records of the Winter Soldier.

Fury and Coulson could handle Hydra.

Tony would handle getting Bucky.

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Bucky was being stored in a warehouse right off the Hudson in New York.

He’d been there for years…

Hydra had been waiting to use him for a total SHIELD takeover, but Fury was already leading scorched earth campaign to clear out all the Hydra agents. The entire country was embroiled in the scandal and no one really noticed when Tony slipped away for a cross-country flight.
He took out his newest suit, the Mark 17. He called the suit “Heartbreaker”, because of its oversized chest RT, that fired more powerful blasts than his older models could handle. It could fire narrow or wide beams and could also generate a Repulsor Shield for protection. It was all he would need to deal with any rogue Hydra agents that happened to be guarding the Winter Soldier.

The suit, however, was overkill. No one was there. Bucky’s cryostasis chamber had been randomly stuffed between a lot of boxes. Tony was shocked by the empty warehouse. Had Fury’s campaign already thrown Hydra into disarray? Or was Bucky forgotten in the years he’d been stored there?

The cryostasis chamber was a little bigger than a coffin and there was a small window to look within. The window was scratched up and heavily iced so it was hard to see through, yet, Tony could discern Bucky’s sleeping face. He had some kind of breathing mask covering half of his face and his hair was longer, but he looked just like the man he had befriended in the early 20th century.

Tony wasn’t sure how to remove Bucky nor exactly how’d he react to being removed from his frozen sleepaway. So, he moved the entire thing. The Mark 17 was larger and stronger than the other units so, once he got the container away from all the boxes leaning on it, he had no problem moving the bulky machine.

Taking it back to Malibu, however, was a different story entirely. SHIELD and everyone else was on high alert so he was pinged left and right and even had a LAPD helicopter fly alongside him for a little. He took the cryostasis chamber straight to his workshop but unfortunately had to knock over a few pieces of equipment to squeeze it in and finally settle it down.

DUM-E squealed excitedly and drove around the new piece to the lab in excited circles. Tony grinned at the robot and did not discourage its actions.

“Sir, Colonel Fury demands an immediate audience with you. He wishes to know what you just brought into the house,” Jarvis stated. “…As does Miss Potts.”

“Tell Pepper, I brought Bucky home and tell Fury I did some early Christmas shopping,” Tony retorted, stepping out of his suit.

“Miss Potts is coming down to the lab and the Colonel says it is a matter of national security that you tell him what you just did,” Jarvis relayed.

He could see Pepper hurrying down beyond the glass so he quickly said, “Tell Fury I’ll get back to him and opaque the glass before he has his agents come peek in at me.”

The glass walls and door darkened just as Pepper walked through them. With a scared expression, she looked to the container then to Tony and then back to the container again. She finally gasped, “That’s Sergeant Barnes.”

“Yup,” Tony said, stepping next to her as she stared into the container.

“Tony, you brought a Howling Commando into the house. One who everyone thought died 70 years ago until you found him in the middle of a coverup made by Hydra, an evil society everyone also thought dead! And he’s frozen in this thing in the middle of your lab! How – How are you going to get him out of there? Is he okay?”

“I got this, Pep,” Tony assured her. “I’m going to hook this thing up to my systems and figure out how to get him out of there safely. That’ll be the easy part…” He crossed his arms and, without looking at Pep, he stated truthfully, “The hard part will be what to do once he’s awake. He’s not the man he once was…he’s Hydra’s now.”
Pepper grabbed his arm and gasped, “What if he hurts you?”

“I’ll be ready for him, Pep…” He put his hand on the glass and repeated in a whisper, “I’ll be ready…”

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Luckily, Fury was too busy with Hydra to worry about what Tony had dragged into his home. So Tony was left alone to tinker on the chamber.

Well...not completely alone Pepper was there and Rhodey would’ve been there too if he wasn’t kicking Hydra butt at the moment and Tony wasn’t going to dissuade him from that particular mission.

Tony hooked up the container and connected it to his systems. Pepper helped him with the monitoring and nervously chewed on her lip as she watched him begin the shut down process.

“Tony…” She apprehensively murmured.

“Everything will be alright, Pep,” Tony assured her. He and Pepper gave the container a wide berth and he had five of his suits standing between them and Bucky. Steam rose out of the vents as Bucky was rapidly warmed and then the doors opened with a loud hiss.

In addition to the breathing mask, Bucky was strapped into the machine by metal bars and had several wires attached to him to monitor his health. He was slumped over and began to breath in loud, shallow gasps as if he’d run a marathon nonstop. Eventually, he caught his breath and he raised his gaze. His dark blue eyes focused on Tony through the messy fall of his hair and Tony saw no sign of his old friend in the gaze.

“Ready to comply.”

The rough voice made Tony’s spine tingle. Nope, that definitely was not Bucky.

Bucky waited for him to reply. Tony had assumed Bucky would try to fight his way out but…he was just standing there “ready to comply” with Tony. Tony stumbled over his words as he asked, “Ready to comply? Are you – Are you waiting on orders?”

Bucky nodded and Tony was starting to feel unnerved by his gaze. He hadn’t blinked since they locked eyes.

Shit. Bucky must think he was his new handler.

“Well, alright, let’s get right down to it then. You are no longer going to kill for Hydra. You are going to be your own person now. You’re going to be Bucky Barnes again,” Tony commanded.

Bucky’s brows pinched together and he slowly repeated, “Bucky…?”

Tony had read the files so he knew what to expect but it still made his heart hurt to hear the confusion in the other man’s voice. He didn’t even remember his name. They completely erased him.

“That’s…That’s your name,” Tony whispered.

Tony walked forward and Pepper wildly grabbed him, hissing, “Tony!”

“It’s alright,” he said as he waved her off. He stepped past the suits and asked Bucky, “You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”
“Only if you command it,” Bucky stated.

“Then I do not command it,” Tony smartly countered, shooting Pepper a grin over his shoulder. He looked back to Bucky and said, “In fact, let’s make this a thing. You will not hurt me or Pepper, that beautiful red head over there. You can kick the ass of anyone from Hydra, I’m sure they deserve it, so you have the freedom to do that.”

“Understood,” Bucky nodded. “I will provide protection.”

“No, that’s not what I meant! I –!” Tony sighed heavily and then murmured, “You can do that for now, but I want…” Tony paused and then said, “I want you to – to gather information!”

“The subject?” Bucky asked.

“You, James Buchanan Barnes…” Tony said, already feeling giddy at the idea. “I want you to learn everything you can about him.”

And maybe he will start to remember.

With a serious expression, Bucky nodded.

“Okay, I’m going to let you out and who do we not hurt?”

“You and the female,” Bucky tersely stated.

Tony removed the face mask first and said, “You will call her Pepper and me, Tony. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t want to hear “sir” from you either, Bucky,” Tony commanded, moving on to removing the wires and unlatching the bars keeping him upright.

Bucky’s eyes pinched when he said his name again and he asked, “Why do you keep calling me that?”

“It’s your name, remember?” Tony reminded him.

Bucky actually looked like he wanted to argue that for a second, but he must have taken it as a command because he remained silent.

Tony thought the metallic covering on his arm was another weird latch, but it did not come off and then Bucky moved it and Tony realized it was his arm. He cursed colorfully under his breath and grabbed it to inspect it closer.

“Tonyyyyy,” Pepper groaned, still worried about Bucky but Tony knew he could trust him. The man seemed to think Tony was his new handler and, once he began to remember, he wouldn’t hurt him because they were friends.

With every move of joint or muscle, the metal plates of his arm shifted to accommodate the change like a rippling of water.

“Amazing…” Tony gasped, “I didn’t see this in the notes about you…then again, I was looking for your location and not the metal arms attached to you…Is this Hydra’s version of my armor? How thin is this armor?”

Bucky didn’t reply and Tony took that as another memory lost to him so he said, “When we get the
chance, let’s scan this thing and see how it ticks.”

Bucky nodded to the supposed commands he was clearly eager to work with. He wobbly stepped out of the chamber and then fell forward. Tony went to catch him but, Jarvis must have taken the movement as a threat, and all the suits surged forward and pulled Tony away from Bucky.

Bucky was caught by two suits instead and hung limply in their arms. A bristling Tony, meanwhile, pushed himself out of the suits’ grasps and angrily hissed, “He wasn’t going to hurt me!”

“Sir –,” Jarvis began.

“Oh, don’t you ‘sir’ me too!” Tony pushed his way through the bots and continued, “From now on, you’re only going to help me when I ask for it! Understood?”

“Crystal,” Jarvis stated, albeit somewhat miffed.

Tony pulled Bucky from his suits’ grasps and murmured, “Good.”

He supported Bucky to the nearest workbench and he beared most of the Commando’s weight as he transported him.

Bucky sat down with a dizzied expression and Tony asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Operational,” Bucky replied, sitting up a little straighter.

With a frown, Tony scolded, “I don’t care if you’re able to fight. I want to know if you feel sick or are hurting because then I’ll find a way to make it go away!”

Bucky seemed confused by his exclamation but still slowly murmured, “…I am a little nauseated, my head aches, and my muscles are fatigued, but that is normal when leaving the cryostasis chamber. It will go away in a few hours.”

“Some water will probably help and food to settle your stomach…Pepper?” Tony turned to her, hoping she’d know what to get him.

“I’ll make some toast,” Pepper whispered. “Will... Will you be alright alone?”

“We’ll be fine, right, Buck?” Tony said more to Bucky than Pepper. Bucky looked at him strangely but nodded all the same.

“Great! Toast it is! In the meantime...” Tony opened up new holograms for Bucky and said, “Let’s check out some old photos and spark some memories, shall we?”

He opened the files he made himself not too long ago. He had nothing to remember his time in the past but there were old photos of Steve and Bucky and the rest of the team archived. He had saved some of his favorites to his personal files. Most of were of Steve but there were quite a few of the others as well. Steve and Bucky took most of their photos together.

They slowly went through them. Bucky never said a word, but Tony provided commentary as the photos reminded him of happier times.

He was talking about the bomber jacket Steve was always wearing when Bucky finally pointed to the picture of himself and clarified, “That is me?”

“Yeah, before Hydra got you,” Tony replied. Bucky stiffened and averted his eyes from the picture. He started to shake and Tony worried his lip with his teeth before asking, “Do you want me to take
“...What I want does not matter,” Bucky whispered, still adverting his eyes.

Tony closed the holograms and retorted, “It does to me, Bucky…”

Bucky’s hand clenched and he whispered, “Then...please, stop calling me that.”

Tony’s heart compressed painfully, and he wondered if he was going too fast or if it was all too much for the Winter Soldier. Bucky looked like Tony had just gutted him.

“Oh, I will. What can I call you in the meantime?”

“Asset,” Bucky whispered. “I am the asset, nothing more.”

“Nope,” Tony announced. “Not going to happen. Let’s call you something that does not dehumanize you, eh? How about…” Tony searched his mind for the past he shared with Bucky and then grinned to himself. “We’ll call you ‘Jerk.’”

That elicited an emotional response from the Winter Soldier. The man rose a single brow and dryly repeated, “Jerk?”

“That’s right, jerk,” Tony happily replied and bittersweet memories of Bucky and Steve’s playful bickering came to mind. He got to his feet and said, “If we’re not going to walk down memory lane then let’s look over your arm and get it off of you before you start to prune. Pepper will bring us some grubs and then we can all discuss your living arrangements for the foreseeable future, alright?”

Bucky wordlessly nodded and Tony was happy to see his gaze no longer looked so dead. He was obviously very confused.

“...I...I am not going into the machine?” Bucky murmured quietly.

“Machine? You mean the cryostasis chamber?” Tony asked.

Bucky clenched his jaw and dropped his eyes. With a tight voice, he stated, “It is required I go to the machine right after I leave the cryostasis chamber. It clears my mind and makes it so I have no distractions for my mission.”

Tony clenched his fists, wanting to kill whoever did that to Bucky. They did it enough times to make him remember and dread it.

“You are never going into that machine or cryostasis chamber ever again.” Tony smiled reassuringly at his long-lost friend and whispered, “I got you. You’re safe and, soon, this will all hopefully make more sense…”

Bucky nodded again and Tony could see a wary trust beginning to form behind those stoic eyes.

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He lasted five minutes into seeing the insides of Bucky’s arm and he ready to hurt someone again.

They fucking cut off his arm.

This was no gauntlet like he had assumed.

THEY FUCKING CUT OFF HIS ARM!
He got madder as he saw the faulty work done within. They connected his arm to his nerves and Bucky must had been in constant pain.

“I’m going to remove your arm for a little while,” Tony stated, his voice shaking a little in his fury. “It’ll be a few days until I can get you a new one.”

Bucky nodded and didn’t even flinch when Tony disconnected it from his shoulder. Tony pulled on his enhancing goggles and did what he could to fix the attaching joint that was fused onto Bucky’s shoulder. He removed all the pieces that were digging into his flesh or did not need to be there and then very carefully shut down the connections to the nerves. Bucky flinched a few times but voiced nothing.

“I’m sorry, man. Almost done…” Tony whispered either way.

Bucky put up no word of complaint, but Tony didn’t expect him to…

Pepper returned in the meantime with a plateful of toast, some bananas, and a few water bottles. She sat everything down next to them and then sat on the other side of the table. She didn’t take her eyes off of Bucky and watched him like he was about to go crazy on them at any moment.

Bucky made no move to touch the food so Tony sighed and paused in his work to say, “Dig in, jerk. We got this specifically for you.”

Bucky slowly reached for the food with his free hand and then selected one slice of toast. He nibbled on it as Tony finished up on his shoulder.

When Tony was done, he sat up and groaned when his lower back muscles protested the move. He then grabbed a banana and asked Pepper, “Do we still have SHIELD people upstairs?”

“Yes, but, at this point, I think they’ll go if we asked,” she replied. “Most of their equipment has been moved to the more secure facility of Fort MacArthur.”

“I, start asking people to pack up and go,” Tony said.

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis retorted.

Tony turned back to Bucky and said, “My home is your home. You’re going to live here from now on. I’m going to make you a new arm and then you are going to live your life how you want to.”

Bucky swallowed his toast thickly and murmured, “How?”

“We’ll take it a day at a time…” Tony whispered and then gently patted Bucky’s thigh.

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After all the agents were booted out, Tony gave Bucky a tour of the place. The ex-Commando checked all the exits and tested the locks. Tony let him move a potted fern in front of one particular window he did not like and even let him move one of the couches five inches to the right for whatever reason. He seemed to approve of the metal shutters and Tony said he’d keep them down until Bucky said so. Bucky nodded, giving him the impression he wasn’t going to waking up to views of the water anytime soon.

After seeing the territory and adjusting it to his needs, Bucky seemed more comfortable in the house. Even with just one arm, the man moved around with the fluid ease akin to the big cats Tony had seen locked up at the zoo. Bucky was clearly still dangerous but, luckily in his eyes, Pepper and Tony
were his cubs not his prey.

Tony sat Bucky in front of the TV and turned on the news to keep him from pacing through the house. The SHIELD versus Hydra debacle was the main story and Bucky was instantly fixated.

He was so quiet. Tony felt unnerved by a quiet Bucky…but, then again, with everything he had been through, he was lucky Bucky was even able to function.

“Where are you going to put him tonight?” Pepper whispered.

“One of the guest rooms obviously,” Tony retorted. He opened the fridge and frowned at the contents. He asked, “Should we get pizza?”

“Should we perhaps consider the fact that the Winter Soldier is sitting on your couch watching the evening news?” Pepper hissed, “We read the same reports, Tony. He is no longer the man you once knew. He is a killer. He murdered your parents!”

Tony closed the door to the fridge and stared at his hands as he tightly squeezed the handles and his knuckles turned white from the pressure. He breathed evenly to try and calm himself and then whispered, “I know what he did. I know exactly what he did, Pepper. Every word I read and every image I saw will be etched into my mind forever and you want to know why?” He let go of the handles and finally met her eyes as he stated, “In 1945, I let him fall. I let him fall right into those bastards’ hands and he is like this because of me. They tortured him, cut off his goddamn arm, they broke him, and he doesn’t even remember his damn name Because. Of! ME!”

Upon his exclamation, Bucky sharply got to his feet and looked to where they stood in the kitchen with calculating eyes. When he saw no danger, he slowly lowered himself back down to the couch and even more slowly turned back to the TV.

Not looking away from the stiff figure in the other room, Tony whispered, “…So, yes, I am going to let him sleep in one of the guest rooms. And, yes, I am going to let him live with me. I have to help him, Pep. I have to…”

“Okay…” She whispered, lightly touching his shoulder. He leaned into her touch and she continued, “I’ll order some pizza and then we can put him up in one of the guest rooms.”

“Thanks, Pep…” Tony said and then made he stepped back, moving to leave the kitchen.

“Tony…” He turned to her and she cupped his face as she whispered, “Everything we do in our lives have consequences. And those consequences affect other people in our lives for better or for worse. We have no control of that just as you didn’t have control in the past.”

“I did, Pep –,” Tony gasped, his voice breaking with his guilt. “I – I coulda saved him…”

“But then Steve would be the one sitting here instead of Bucky, right?” Pepper whispered, reminding him of the paradox he dealt with. “There probably would have always been a Winter Soldier, Tony. Hydra was going to make the soldier no matter what. You wouldn’t be able to control it. You. Are. Not. At. Fault.”

She pulled him into an embrace and he latched onto her. He loved Pepper but he didn’t find complete comfort in her hold. It was not what he wanted. He wanted the old, familiar feel of Steve’s larger form enveloping him, cocooning him in warmth and love. He wanted Steve so badly right now. He would know what to do. He would know how to help Bucky heal…

Tony took a deep breath and then left Pepper’s arms. He whispered, “I’m going to sit with Bucky…”
She nodded, her eyes a little shiny from unshed tears and whispered, “I’ll call for pizza.”

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The doorbell rang and Bucky jumped to his feet and grabbed a vase off the side table beside him. He slammed it against the same table and had a weapon ready in seconds.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Chillax, Robocop! It’s just pizza!” Tony gasped, getting to his feet. When Bucky didn’t move he reiterated, “Stand down, soldier!”

Bucky reacted to that. He lowered his hand with the broken vase in hand, but he still stood stiffly like he was ready to spring into action again at any moment.

Tony held out his hand and commanded, “Give me the vase.”

Bucky handed it over and Tony gingerly stepped away. Pepper had been in the kitchen and she stared at Tony with wide eyes as he walked past her to throw out the vase.

“That was the Han Dynasty vase,” Pepper whispered, her voice tight from shock.

“It was…” Tony whispered, tossing out the once priceless pottery. He asked her, “Can you get the pizza? I don’t want to leave him alone…He might break the vase from the Qin Dynasty next if the bell rings again…”

Pepper murmured evilly under her breath as she stepped past him. She was the one who cultivated Tony’s art collection and thought of it as her baby so she was probably pissed now, which, Tony felt was much better than being scared of Bucky. Tony smiled after her retreating form and then turned back to the assassin in his living room.

“So…When you’re in this house, you are safe, okay? We are all safe. You don’t have to fight here,” Tony stated.

“…What…What is my mission then?”

“Oh…Buc–Buddy, you haven’t latched onto anything I’ve said today, have you?” Tony sighed. He ran his hand through his hair and said, “I know this all must be so very confusing to you but…No more missions. We’re just going to work on you healing and remembering.”

Bucky’s brow was pinched tightly in confusion, but he nodded all the same and sat back down. Pepper brought in the pizza and tossed the two boxes on the coffee table in front of them. She then went to the side table and swiped the remaining vase away from Bucky. She darkly murmured, “I’m going to assassin-proof the house. Do not break anything else in the meantime! And clean up this mess!”

She waved to the broken shards on the floor and Bucky automatically obediently knelt and started to pick it up with his bare hand.

“No! No! What are you doing!? Stop!” Pepper wildly gasped and pulled him upright. She continued, “We have a broom and dustpan. You could hurt yourself! Let me see your hand!”

Bucky let her turn over his hand as she inspected it for cuts. He watched her with unabashed confusion.

Happy with the state of his fingers, Pepper let him go and then said, “All the cleaning products are kept over here.” Bucky wordlessly followed her and Tony covered the growing smile on his face.
upon seeing Bucky’s perplexed expression.

Bucky cleaned up the mess with the broom and dust pan and then returned to the couch with his perplexed expression still in place. Pepper gathered all the fragile art pieces she could and stored them in her room for safekeeping before returning to the couch and grabbing a slice of pizza.

To Bucky, she pointedly said, “You are not allowed in my room.”

Bucky nodded with a serious expression and Tony chuckled.

Tony put on *The Princess Bride*, the only movie he could think of at the time that wasn’t a war movie or too violent. Bucky was quiet throughout the movie, but he didn’t look away from the screen either, so Tony interpreted it as the man enjoying it.

Pepper went to bed after that and Tony showed Bucky to the room that would be his from now on. Bucky had already seen the room on the tour but, when Tony told him it was his, Bucky walked around the room, taking it all in again. All of the bedrooms were on the second floor, overlooking the infinity pool and the ocean but the shutters were still down so the room seemed very locked in to Tony. He assured Bucky, “Once you feel comfortable enough, we’ll raise the shutters and you’ll have a great view…”

Bucky didn’t say anything. He just kept looking around so Tony continued to talk, “The attached bathroom is yours too. There’s already soap and shampoo in the shower and there should be some toothpaste and an unopened toothbrush in one of the drawers under the sink. Pepper has someone come by once a month to keep me stocked up! Oh…but you’ll need clothes and you have more muscles mass than me and Pepper combined so you’re definitely not fitting into anything of mine… Jarvis, order some clothes for our friend here.”

“They’ll be delivered in the morning,” Jarvis assured him.

“Good. Very good…Do you need anything else?”

Bucky turned his inquisitive eyes to Tony and then replied, “Access to research for my mission.”

“What now?” Tony retorted, his mind racing to come up with a mission.

“When you first woke me, you told me my primary mission was to research James Buchanan Barnes.”

“Oh yeah…I did say that, didn’t I?” Tony stated, “Well, here, this is the hand command to open a hologram.” Tony demonstrated the movement. His thumb, pointer, and middle finger were extended with even space between each finger while the other two were parallel and touching. Jarvis’s cameras caught the movement and automatically opened a hologram for him. Bucky tried the movement and one opened in front of him too. “To close the holo, just pull the screen down with the same hand command and, voila, you can do your own research!”

Tony closed his in the demonstration and Bucky did the same. Tony asked, “Anything else?”

Bucky shook his head and Tony said, “Okay, well, I’m going to go downstairs to my workshop then. If you need me, I’ll probably be there for the next couple of hours! Come to me for anything, okay?”

Bucky nodded and Tony was reluctant to leave him alone but he knew the Winter Soldier wasn’t going to leave the property. In his mind, Tony was still his handler and Jarvis was keeping an eye on his anyways. The AI would let him know if anything was wrong.
“Goodnight, jerk,” Tony said as he backed out of the room.

He wasn’t sure, but he may had seen a flash of amusement in Bucky’s eyes for half a second.

Tony was true to his word and returned to his workshop. He went straight to work on Bucky’s new arm, wanting to give him back full mobility as soon as possible. He started straight from scratch, grabbing materials that originally would have been used in the Mark 19. He tried to keep it close to the original design however to make it easier for Bucky to move and to be less distracting to him. He must have been used to the arm by now and any major changes would be disconcerting. Tony wanted to make everything perfect for Bucky so he put his entire concentration into his work.

His playlist was playing so he didn’t really notice Bucky until he happened to glance up.

Tony jolted and grabbed his chest as he gasped, “Shit! Buck! Don’t sneak up on me like that! I’ve got a heart condition!”

“I will announce my presence next time,” Bucky stated, nodding his chin.

“Okay, good…everything alright? Did you need something?” Tony asked, his heart was still racing under his hand.

“It would be safer for you if I am in the same vicinity as you to better watch over you,” Bucky stated.

Tony sighed, “We’re safe here. You don’t have to worry about anyone coming after me. You saw the news, everyone is too distracted by Hydra and SHIELD to wonder what I’m up to.”

“It is still safer,” Bucky argued and then opened up a few holograms around him. Tony saw he already figured out how to save files and was already compiling his research. One of the files contained an image of Bucky and Steve and Tony looked away sharply as his heart burned sharply.

Tony didn’t put up anymore of a fight with Bucky and went back to work, not feeling as enthused as he did before seeing that image.

Time was so particular when it came to Steve’s death. It technically happened decades ago even though it was still only a couple of weeks to Tony. How long was he going to grieve him? He felt like Bucky must be feeling without his arm. He was missing a piece of himself. He’d never felt this way about anyone before and he darkly wondered if he was going to be grieving Steve’s loss for the rest of his life…

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Tony fell asleep in the workshop. He had a cot there and clonked out on it but not before reminding Bucky he should sleep in his room when he grew tired. Yet, when Tony woke the next day, Bucky was still in the workshop and researching on the holograms.

Tony groaned and sat up on the cot. He asked the Winter Soldier, “Did you get any sleep?”

“I can go three days without any sleep and can probably go longer if I continue not to do any strenuous labor,” Bucky stated without looking away from the screen.

Tony fell back onto the cot and groaned, “Great, you’re worse than me. Pepper is going to have an emotional crisis…who will she mother the most?” He sat up and teased, “With your baggage, I think you’re going to move into her number one spot.”

Bucky’s brows pinched and he gave him that confused look again.
Tony was probably going to see a lot of that in the coming days…

Pepper had left him a message on his phone about going into the office early that morning, so it was just Tony and Bucky alone all day.

They spent most of their time in the workshop: Bucky reading and Tony working on the new arm.

Tony kept slyly glancing at the Winter Soldier as he did his research. Bucky was engrossed in the information. Last night he may have started only looking into it for the “mission,” but now there was a fire in his eyes, a need to know.

When Tony returned to Bucky’s side, to retrofit His arm socket, Bucky was quiet at first. But after a few moments had passed, Bucky stated, “Steve was my friend…”

Tony froze and then his eyes snapped to Bucky’s. The Winter Soldier hadn’t been spouting an obvious fact he’d learned in his research. His voice was sad and it was the first time Tony heard emotion in his voice.

Tony stopped what he was doing and sincerely replied, “Yes, he was.”

Bucky ducked his head a little and fell silent, his eyes contemplative.

Tony, meanwhile, was freaking out a little.

Was he already remembering??

“Did—ah—did you want to talk about him?” Tony asked.

Bucky considered his question and then replied, “No, I want to got back…to my research.”

Tony nodded and then cautiously went back to fixing the socket. Bucky stared off into space, his expression was blank, but his eyes were dark with the depth of his hidden feelings.

The silence between them felt more noticeable to Tony after that. He went back to work on the arm but continuously looked up to Bucky, wondering what he was thinking about. Was he reflecting on memories of Steve? Or maybe he had no memories…just a feeling?

He was overflowing with curiosity and he had to force himself to not blurt out any unwanted questions. Bucky didn’t want to talk about that and Tony was going to respect his wishes…even though he was practically dying of curiosity because of it!

Tony forced himself to concentrate on his work and had a prototype by the late afternoon. He constructed a new joint on Bucky’s shoulder and then had Bucky try on the new arm so he could see what adjustments he’d need to make.

The former Commando couldn’t hide his surprise when the arm clicked in easily and he could move it within seconds.

“There’s…” Bucky began, sounding unsure. He whispered, “There’s no pain?”

Tony smiled at his old friend and swore, “Your arm will never hurt you again.”

Bucky flexed the arm and then moved each individual finger. He commented, “It moves just like my old arm.”

“Try not to sound too impressed there, buddy,” Tony sarcastically said. “I’m not done with it. I need
to strengthen it and add on a paint job…Do you want the red star again? Or would you like to try a
different symbol? Or maybe nothing at all?’”

Bucky glanced down at his shoulder, now bare of the red star. He put his hand over it and looked at
Tony with a conflicted gaze. Finally, he whispered, “Can I think on it?”

“Of course,” Tony replied. “Take your time. We can customize it however you want. Just let me
know, okay?”

Bucky nodded and Tony murmured, “I need to take the arm off to finish it.” Bucky nodded again
and held his arm out to Tony to remove.

Tony placed the arm on his counter and, as his back was to him, Bucky breathlessly asked him, “Is
all of this real?”

Tony turned back to Bucky and found him staring at him with a broken expression and a white-
knuckled grip on his knee.

“It is real, jerk,” Tony replied cheerfully. Bucky flinched and Tony sobered up and assured, “You’re
free from the nightmare. You’re safe…”

Bucky dropped his head, his hair obscuring his face, and he nodded again.

Tony hesitated and then walked back to Bucky’s side. He didn’t think the man was ready for the
amount of physical contact that came with a hug. So he merely placed a comforting hand on Bucky’s
shoulder and, to his surprise, Bucky leaned into the touch.

In a tiny voice, so quiet Tony could barely hear it, Bucky whispered, “Thank you…”

Tony’s eyes trailed over the scars imbedded into Bucky’s body and then his gaze rested on the worst
of them where his shoulder turned into metal. With guilt churning in his gut, Tony whispered, “You
don’t need to thank me…”

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Tony was finishing up the arm around the same time Pepper returned. She came down into the
workshop wearing an expression of bafflement and carrying a large box. As soon as they were
within earshot, she gasped, “Have you two been down here all day?”

“Mostly,” Tony shrugged and then carefully inserted another tiny shield panel to the arm’s
exoskeleton. Nodding to the box, he asked, “What’s that?”

“Jarvis said you ordered it last night. Apparently, there are new clothes in here for Bucky, which, by
the way, is clearly not enough for a proper wardrobe if it can all fit in this box!”

Bucky slowly got up as Pepper opened the box. The first item she pulled out was a plain t-shirt and
she held it up to Bucky’s chest to make sure it’d fit. She mumbled, “It’ll do…Jarvis, send me his
measurements and I’ll go shopping tomorrow after work.”

“She’s a mommier you,” Tony laughed and picked up another scale with his tweezers.

Pepper ignored Tony and placed the shirt back into the box and then put the box into Bucky’s one
available arm. She commanded, “Take a shower and then change into these. After that, we can go
out before the sun goes down to get you two outside.”
“Outside??” Tony squawked, nearly dropping his piece.

“We’ll go down to the private beach,” Pepper said to Tony and then, turning to Bucky, she explained, “You’ll like it. It’s in a cove so it’ll just be us.”

Bucky seemed a little stunned by Pepper. Receiving clothes and the news of a beach trip was a lot to pile on him all at once.

Pepper physically turned him and commanded, “Shower. Now."

Bucky stumbled forward and looked a little dazed as he went upstairs to follow her orders.

“The Winter Soldier has finally met his match,” Tony teasingly stated as soon as Bucky disappeared.

“He’s not the bloodthirsty assassin all those missives made him out to be,” Pepper countered.

Tony thought of the forlorn and lost Bucky he sat with today and sadly agreed, “No…he is not…”

Bucky took a quick shower and then they all went into the elevator that took them down to the cove beneath his house. They strolled out onto the warm sands and a cool, salty breeze ruffled their clothes as they walked toward the waves. Bucky led the way and seemed to forget they were there as he went straight to the water.

The new pants he was wearing were instantly soaked as the surf crashed against his shins. He took several steps into the water so that, even with the tide, he’d always be in the water. Tony and Pepper wordlessly watched him from the shore, close enough so that only the strongest of tides could brush foamy water against their toes.

Bucky stood in the water for a while as unmoving as a statue.

When he finally turned back to them, he wore a lost expression and said, “The ocean in Italy was not as cold…”

The statement was directed at Tony and his spine prickled.

He vividly remembered their journey to Switzerland, before he had fallen sick. They traveled along the French coast and spent one day on Italian soil before moving northward. The Commandos took that time to jump in the water one last time because they knew they were not going to see the ocean for a long time. Tony hadn’t gone in the water for obvious reasons, but Bucky had.

“I…I didn’t go in the water, r-remember?” Tony replied.

Bucky dropped his gaze as he thought back and then he whispered, “That’s right…you stayed behind with…Steve…”

Bucky turned back to the ocean again. He was clearly searching for something, but it was more internal than external.

He must have come to some sort of conclusion because he dropped his head and turned back around. His expression was closed off and he went straight back to the elevator, leaving Tony dying of curiosity again.

Steve was a no-no topic with Bucky but once again Bucky was making connections with Steve.

“He’s already remembering,” Pepper breathlessly gasped.
Tony worked late into the night again and was able to finish the arm by early afternoon the next day. He found Bucky sitting on a balcony overlooking the water and he was staring out at the ocean with an empty expression.

“Hey, jerk,” Tony called out as he walked over. “Your arm’s ready to go.”

A little life returned to Bucky’s face. He was clearly eager for the arm. Bucky got to his feet, but Tony waved for him to sit down and said, “It’ll be easier for me to put this on you if you’re not towering over me.”

Bucky sat back down and Tony went to his side and popped the arm in. He designed it to disconnect and reconnect easily. It’d make it easier for Tony to update or repair. It locked in automatically and Tony watched the process with a proud smile. Bucky was able to move the arm in seconds. He tested the joints and fingers by moving them around in front of him.

“What you’re seeing is the base metal, so if you want a different color or a symbol on your shoulder then you let me know, okay? I can make those kind of changes in a matter of minutes so you won’t be armless as long.”

Bucky silently nodded and Tony sat down next to him.

They shared a silent moment, both staring out to the ocean.

“It feel alright?” Tony eventually asked him.

Bucky nodded again and flexed his new fingers. He murmured, “It…It almost reminds me of…my old arm…from before.”

Tony’s heart picked up and he cautiously asked, “You – um – you’re remembering then?”

“Bits and pieces,” Bucky replied non-committedly. He closed his fist and hoarsely whispered, “Every day, I remember more though…”

“That’s great!” Tony said with a smile.

“Is it?” Bucky whispered and the smile fell from Tony’s face. That was right…Bucky was going to remember more than just his past as a Commando…he was going to also remember his time as the Winter Soldier.

“…Everything is different now,” Tony assured him. “You are different. You can’t change what happened, but you now have control of your future. Hydra doesn’t have you. You’re safe now.”

Bucky shook his head and got to his feet. He wordlessly walked away and Tony let him go even though everything inside him was telling him to chase after his friend and make him believe it’d all be okay…but, he didn’t know that. He didn’t know how this was all going to turn out in the end for Bucky. The man went through countless horrors and some people wouldn’t be able to handle that knowledge. Only time would tell if Bucky could…

Tony gave Bucky his space for the rest of the day. He caught up on his lost sleep and then cleaned up his workshop. Jarvis kept him updated on Bucky. Mostly, the man was researching his past. He
just did it in various areas of the house like he couldn’t get settled.

Tony sat down to do some research of his own on what was going on with SHIELD and Hydra, when Bucky suddenly rushed into the room.

“Everything okay?” Tony asked, concerned by the wild look in Bucky’s eyes.

“I – I killed your parents,” Bucky gasped.

Tony’s chest deflated and he closed the hologram he just opened. He should have expected this moment. Sighing heavily, he ran his hand through his hair and whispered, “…Yeah, you did…”

Bucky slowly lowered himself to the floor as if standing and this revelation was too much for Bucky to handle at the same time. Sitting on the ground, he looked at Tony like he was the oddest thing he had ever seen. He gasped, “You knew?? How – Why…Why did you take me in? Build my arm? How can you even look at me? Or – Or call me friend?”

“Because you are my friend,” Tony simply stated.

Bucky shook his head and dropped it into his hands. Tony’s concern was building but, suddenly, Bucky laughed. It was clearly a pained one, but it was a laugh all the same and it shocked Tony.

Still shaking his head, Bucky gasped, “This – This can’t be real…I’m dreaming again.”

Tony slowly got to his feet and walked over to Bucky’s trembling form. He kneeled next to him and gently placed a hand on his back. Bucky flinched like he was struck but Tony did not pull away, in fact, he decided he wasn’t going to hold back and fully enveloped him into an embrace. Bucky seemed to stop breathing altogether and Tony hissed, “I forgive you for what you did because you had no choice in the matter. They brainwashed you. They took your mind. It wasn’t you who did it.

No matter what happened in that time, you will always be my friend…if you’ll still want me…” Tony added the last bit, thinking of his own faults.

Bucky’s hands suddenly grabbed Tony, his fingers digging deep into his flesh. He gasped, “I’d be crazy not to…”

Conscious of the arms around him, Tony whispered, “Bucky…you probably don’t remember. You fell and then were captured by Hydra…” Tony gulped and then whispered, “I – I knew you were going to fall and – and did n-nothing.” Tony pressed his forehead onto Bucky’s shoulder and repeated, “I did nothing…”

Bucky’s arms snapped away from him and Tony carefully let him go. Bucky sharply got to his feet and, breathing shallowly, he stared down at Tony like he had just stabbed him.

“Bucky,” Tony whispered pleadingly.

“Do not –!” Bucky clutched his head and then hissed, “Do not call me that!” He held up his hands between them as if to ward off Tony and painfully gasped, “Do not.”

Bucky sprinted from the room and Tony made no move to follow him.

Tony didn’t move and, a few minutes later, Jarvis informed him, “Sir, Master Barnes has left the property.”

Tony dropped his head into his hands and muttered, “I fucked up…I royally fucked up…”
“Shall I contact –?” Jarvis began.

“No!” Tony gasped. “Let him go!” Tony got to his feet and said, “Let me handle it! Let me…let me fuck up again…” Tony groaned and said, “Ugh, I need to call Pepper…”

Tony paced, not knowing how to tell Pepper the ex-assassin ran away because Tony admitted fault in the event that totally destroyed his life. She was going to be pissed and worried and she might finally have that heart attack she always threatened to have when Tony did something stupid.

And then there was Bucky. Where did he go? What if Hydra recaptured him? What if he got hurt or accidently hurt someone else?

He spent hours mulling over it.

And then he heard Pepper walking through the doors, talking to someone on the phone and he knew he couldn’t stay this any longer.

Tony cautiously went out to the foyer and stopped in his tracks when he saw Bucky standing behind Pepper with a box.

She hadn’t been on the phone but had been talking to Bucky and she continued, not noticing Tony at first, “–better yet, it’s a really tough material, like military grade tough. So you’ll have to work hard to rip it.” She spotted Tony gaping at them and said, “Good news! I got Bucky more clothes!”

“V-Very good,” Tony stumbled over the words.

She kicked off her heels and said, “There’s another box in the car if you’d like to grab it.”

“I – uh – okay?”

Bucky wordlessly went upstairs with his box and Tony watched him go with a dumbfound expression.

“Okay,” she chuckled. “Did you pull another all-nighter? Bucky’s arm looks great, but you need to take care of yourself too, Tony. Help him move the clothes. I’ve got Chinese coming. It’ll be here in another twenty minutes and then you, mister, are going to bed.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” she said and pushed him toward the door.

Tony did as she asked and grabbed the box. He went to the bedroom as if in a trance and Bucky was waiting up there for him. They both stared at each other and Tony was still too shocked by his appearance to really process the fact that he was actually standing there.

“I…I remembered it. As soon as you said it I remembered it and knowing what you did…it was all too much and I needed to be alone for a little. But I understand. It was me or Steve and…I’m glad Stevie didn’t have to go through what I did. He’d never be able to forgive himself. He would have never been able to come back… like I am…”

“I can never apologize enough,” Tony whispered.

“You don’t have to,” Bucky stated. “You said it yourself, we can’t change what happened, but we can move forward and I want to do that. I want to move forward.”

“Okay,” Tony said, nodding encouragingly.
“But…first, I want to go to Steve’s memorial.”

“That’s in D.C…” Tony said uneasily. “There was a lot of Hydra activity over there. Are you sure…”?

“Yes, I’m positive,” Bucky stated. "It...It's the closest thing Steve has for a final resting place and I want to go there to say goodbye. No, I need to go there, Tony. I need to be with him one last time, even if it's just his spirit..."

Tony sighed, “Alright, but you can be the one to break that news to Pepper over dinner.”

Bucky’s lips twitched into a small smile and he whispered, “I remember you once telling me I fretted over Steve worse than Pepper fretted over you and I thought you were talking about a condiment.”

Tony snorted, making Bucky’s small smile twitch into a slightly bigger one. It was heartwarming to see…Tony murmured, “I knew the two of you would get along, jerk.”

Bucky grumbled, "Stop calling me jerk all the time. Just call me Bucky. It's my name, ain't it?"

Tony laughed and Bucky's smile grew into one very close to the genuine one he remembered back in the 40s.

"Whatever you want, Buck. Whatever you want..."

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Things are awkward at first. There was no escaping it. Tony and Bucky may have forgiven each other but the history was there between them and they had to figure out how to operate around each other again with this new baggage. But…they did it.

Bucky started to come out of his shell too. He talked more, expressed his opinion, and let that old Brooklyn accent slip through a few times. His smiles were still too far in between but Tony was working on that.

They eventually took the trip to D.C. a week after Bucky asked. Pepper requested the time, hoping SHIELD would have a better hold of itself in the time. SHIELD did use the time wisely. Hydra was pretty much devastated by the time they left California and the only remaining agents were on the run and being hunted down.

They took Tony’s private jet to a private airport and they took a private car straight from the hanger. For once in this century, he was trying to be inconspicuous. He didn’t want to draw the media, SHIELD, or Hydra’s attention. He wanted the day to go smoothly for Bucky and give the man the chance to remember and maybe even grieve for his long-lost friend.

This was also the first time Tony would be going to the memorial since returning to the present and he wasn’t sure how he was going to react either…

It was just him and Bucky. Pepper thought it best they go alone as they were the ones who truly knew Steve. Plus her presence at Stark Industries would make it a normal work day so no one would think anything strange was going on.

They went on a Wednesday and in the early afternoon when most were in school or at work. Steve’s memorial had been built near the World War II Memorial and overlooked the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. It was a quiet day with very few visitors milling around. They stood off to the side
until Steve’s memorial was empty. Bucky led the way and stood in front of it, staring at the sculpted image of Steve’s face.

The statue stood fifteen feet high and was of Steve in full Cap regalia. He had one hand rested on his infamous shield, which was imbedded in the ground in front of him, and his other hand was pointed toward the distant Atlantic, his final resting place. The statue’s gaze was serious, and its jaws clenched as if he saw something dangerous on the distant horizon.

“They managed to capture Stevie and not capture him all at the same time,” Bucky sighed, lightly touching the larger version of the shield.

“Yeah,” Tony whispered, his eyes unable to look away from the face. His heart was aching again as he remembered Steve’s easy smiles and how his eyes warmed as soon as they met Tony’s. Out of all the photos he’d pulled out of the archives…none of them could capture the way Steve used to look at him.

“He’d be so embarrassed by this,” Bucky chuckled. “Hell, that plaque over there could be considered a novel and it mostly says what a good soldier he is…he was…” Bucky paused, all good nature leaving his expression, and then he hissed, “He was so much more than a good soldier.”

Tony nodded in agreement, not trusting himself to speak.

“He was the best man I knew,” Bucky gasped, dropping his head. He caught his breath and then looked up to the statue’s face and told it, “You saved my life in more ways than you could imagine, Stevie. So, thank you. I love you, punk. You were the best family a guy could ask for. I hope I can be half the man you were…I’m – I’m going to miss you…” He paused but his voice still broke as he gasped out, “A-A lot…” Bucky wiped the tears from his eyes and Tony gave him a half hug. Sniffling, Bucky murmured, “You say your goodbyes now. Stevie’s listening.”

“I – I don’t know what to say!” Tony gasped. Tony planned to support Bucky but…he didn’t think he was ready for this. He didn’t think he would ever be able to. He didn’t want to say goodbye because…because he wasn’t ready. Steve was still in his heart. He didn’t want to let him go yet…

“Just tell him everything he needs to hear,” Bucky stated.

Tony looked back up to the far away face and thickly gulped. There were so many things he wanted to say to his super soldier…He didn’t even know where to begin…

“Before you get to that…I need to hear how in the hell you and the Winter Soldier became so buddy-buddy,” Fury stated, coming out of the very trees Bucky and Tony had been hiding behind earlier. Agents spilled out of the World War II Memorial, behind trees, or cars, and just about anything that one could hide behind. They were surrounded in seconds.

Tony instantly grabbed Bucky’s arm, staying any form of the attack the man might fight back with. Bucky’s muscles were tense beneath Tony’s grip and he was trembling in suppressing himself.

“Fury,” Tony said evenly. “This is a private party to which you and your goonies were not invited.”

“He’s on our list, Stark,” Fury countered. “You’re on federal land. Hell, you’re within walking distance of the goddamn Capital Building! This place is crawling with cameras and agents! *I’m not invited?* You’re throwing a party in my backyard. You were not welcome as soon as you came in with a man with one of the bloodiest kill counts in history!”

“Bucky-!” Tony hissed in warning as the Winter Soldier took a step forward to put himself between Tony and Fury.
The agents surrounding them reacted immediately, all pointing their guns in Bucky’s direction.

“We’re cool!” Tony assured them. To Fury, he continued, “Bucky did not do that. Hydra did. He was their puppet. You probably read the same files that I did. He was brainwashed but he’s getting better! Guns to the face, however, are a very, very bad treatment. Very bad. Please stop…like now.”

A few agents lowered their guns a little and looked uncertainly to their commander. Looking like he just took a bite out of a lemon, Fury glared at him and his one eye was pinched into a tiny slit.

“What Tony is saying is true,” Bucky stated gruffly. “I had been given a version of the super soldier serum that healed me, including my mind…if my mind wasn’t erased regularly, I’d remember and fight back…”

“That does not change the fact that you are still dangerous,” Fury countered.

“Listen, he’s been in my care for the last two weeks and is as dangerous as a kitten,” Tony haughtily stated. “His claws only come out when threatened. But I’d like to think anyone would bite back when yourself or someone you love is in danger…Give him a chance.”

“Romanoff!” Fury barked, and the pretty redhead Coulson had introduced to him stepped forward. Fury stated, “Agent Romanoff is debriefed on your situation. I won’t take in Barnes on the condition she stays with you two for the near future. I trust her word over yours on whether or not he is ready for society. In the meantime, as always, I will be the one to clean up this mess.” Fury lifted his hand and twitched it in a way that made everyone lower their weapons and disappear to wherever they crawled out of. Pointing to Tony, Fury grumbled, “I’ll be the one giving YOU the chance, Stark, and I’m only doing this because you warned us about Hydra. Consider you and SHIELD even now, alright?”

“So you’re going to let Bucky stay with be as long as we bunk up with a cover model? Sold. Bucky you good?” One of Bucky’s eyebrows rose, and he looked at Tony like he was crazy. Tony grinned and said, “That means yes!”

Fury nodded and threatened, “Be careful, Stark, I’ve got my eye on you…”

He tried to slip away all cool, but Tony called after him, “Which eye? Seriously? Is the eyepatch a prop or do you have a super computer attached to it??”

Unsurprisingly, Fury ignored him and was gone in seconds. Leaving Tony, Bucky, and Agent Romanoff alone, like the entire area hadn’t been swarming with SHIELD agents a moment ago.

“Please, call me Natasha,” the SHIELD agent said, holding her hand out to Bucky as he was the closest to her.

Bucky looked at her hand and then her face, and now looked at her as if she were the insane one and not Tony. Oh, Tony was going to have a great time with these two.

Natasha perked an eyebrow and murmured in Russian, “Do you not remember how to shake hands?”

Tony snorted and Bucky glared at both of them before finally grabbing Natasha’s hand and shaking it.

“From our files, I read you’ve been with the Russians for a while. Did they train you in Sambo?” She asked Bucky as she let go of his hand.
“…Yes?”

She smirked and said, “I’ll quiz you on it to see if it is the style you remember. I haven’t had the chance to train in Sambo in a long while. It’ll be nice to practice with someone competent enough in the style.”

She started to walk away, and Bucky was right behind her, stating, “I am more than competent.”

“We’ll see, sniper, we’ll see,” Natasha teased, making Bucky smirk a little.

Holy shit, Natasha was going to be babysitting them fulltime, right? She must be some kind of witch because she made Bucky smile less than a minute into meeting him. What the hell?!

Tony started to follow the two in a sort of a daze, but Bucky turned around and stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. He walked him backward a few steps, making Tony stumble a little over his feet.

“Am I already a third-wheel?” Tony sarcastically asked.

Bucky actually flushed and stepped away from Natasha to whisper in Tony’s ear, “When a fella has a pretty dame like that wanting some physical contact, he’s got to be gay or crazy to say no.”

“Oh, my god,” Tony gasped. He had been just teasing but Bucky was serious…and he seriously just sounded like his old self just now.

She got him to smile and now to flirt. Who was this woman?!

“Me and Agent Romanoff are going to discuss the finer points of Sambo over by the reflecting pool. In the meantime, you still need to talk to Stevie.”

Bucky nodded to the memorial, his expression growing more somber as his eyes beheld the statue. Tony half turned back to the statue and his eyes automatically went back to its face and his heart twisted a little in his chest.

“…Yeah, I’ll – I’ll do that…”

Bucky nodded and then clapped Tony’s shoulder, leaving him alone with Steve’s memorial as he rejoined Natasha and they began to walk across the lawn to the reflecting pool.

Tony walked up to the statue and put his hand on the shield with a heavy sigh. He never spoke to a dead person before…not even at his parents’ graves. Where did one start?

“Hey, Steve,” Tony began. Done, easy. He was a pro so far. He stared at that stoic marble face and felt his resolve crumble a little.

He gasped, “I wish I could be talking to you right now and not a hunk of stone that looks like you…”

He ran his fingers over the smooth stone. It was cold, nothing like Steve's warmth. Tony whispered, "There were a lot of things we both wished for between us but we didn’t get any of it so I guess that’s just the curse of our relationship…”

Tony paused for a long time as he thought about their time together and then finally whispered, “I don’t know if you are here right now or if you’re watching from somewhere up high or if I’m just wasting air but…I love you. I still love you, even right now, knowing you’re – you’re dead…I miss
you so much and it breaks my heart every time I have to remind it you are gone…” Tony couldn’t
look at the statue’s face anymore and he whispered, “You were my great love, Steve. I doubt I will
ever find someone as amazing as you were and even though we had such a short time, I’m glad we
had it…I’m glad I had you…” Tony wiped a tear out of his eye and said, “Bucky is doing good,
his’d be doing great if you were here but I think I’m doing a good enough job. The future is also
looking brighter. Hydra is finally being destroyed. Your mission is almost done…and that bill for
same sex marriage is going to be passed in a year or two so…so I’m going to uphold my promise to
you. I know you won’t be the first in line to get married anymore but…but I’m going to be there all
the same and I think I might come out and tell people about this amazing man I would’ve married…
because I would have…I would have married you. I would have spent the rest of my life with
you…”

Tony closed his eyes and pressed his face against the shield and suppressed the urge to cry. Fury was
still in the area and he’d be damned if he’d let him see him cry again.

Into the stone, Tony whispered, “I love you, Steve. If you could hear anything of this, just know that
I love you…”

He didn’t move for a few minutes. His emotions were all over the place and he wasn’t ready to leave
just yet. This was the closest he would ever be to Steve again and maybe his spirit was there like
Bucky believed and Tony didn’t want to go if he was still there. Even if Tony couldn’t see him, he
wanted to be there with him.

Tony wanted to hold him and hear his voice but, instead, he closed his eyes and remembered the
warmth of his arms and the tender tone of his voice. He thought back to all the cherished memories
he shared with Steve and they were able to calm him down.

He finally raised his gaze and looked back to the marble face. He whispered, “Goodbye, Steve.”

He smiled warmly one last time at that marble face and then walked to where Natasha and Bucky
were standing by the water.

He felt cleansed getting it all out and he hoped Steve heard it all or…at least, the important part of it.

They returned to the house and Bucky elected to give Natasha the tour. Tony watched them
disappear upstairs with a smirk. He was glad to see Bucky so enamored.

He went down to his workshop and, because he was feeling nostalgic still, he opened up his personal
files and opened all the images he had of Steve. He wasn’t feeling as sad as he used to when he had
first compiled the photos. He wasn’t feeling as sad as he used to when he had
first compiled the photos. He looked at the images with a fond smile and, his chest may have been a
little tight with sadness, but it bubbled with the warmth of his love for Steve.

One image was a colored advertisement of Captain America that he had saved just because he knew
Steve would have been embarrassed by it. Tony grinned upon coming across it and he considered
making it into a full-blown poster but had decided against it. The colors were off in the image and it
would bother him too much having it on the wall. In real life, Steve’s uniform was darker and his
skin was tanner and his eyes –.

Tony stared as the drawing as his mind drew a blank, but his heart began to sink as it realized
quicker than his brain what had happened.

He knew Steve had blue eyes. He’d stared into those blue eyes countless times but…for the life of
him, he couldn’t remember the shade of blue. Were they lighter or darker than the poster?
He quickly flipped through the black and white photos, hoping one of them would spark his memory but none of them did.

“Jarvis, pull up all color photos of Steve,” Tony commanded.

There were only two and each had been taken with large groups so Steve’s figure was small and his eyes were hidden behind his cowl so they looked like two black pinpricks.

Tony closed all of the holograms with an angry swing and then knocked over the tools on the table beside him and then stomped over to the closest suit and knocked it over too. He fell down with a sharp curse and then collapsed against his worktable as tears began to flow from his eyes. He looked up and wetly gasped, “Why?”

He was just accepting Steve’s death. Why did he have to start forgetting what he looked like too?

"Why??” He gasped again, the word burning his very throat.

He buried his face into his hands and wept, missing Steve’s comforting embrace more than ever.

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Unknown to him, on the other side of the country, those sky-blue eyes opened for the first time in over seventy years.

Chapter End Notes

THE END IS NIGH! THEIR REUNION IS UPON US! THE FEELS WILL DROWN US ALL!
Steve’s mind was a little foggy as he woke. At first, he didn’t really remember the events before he fell unconscious. He only really registered that he was in a bed. It was as comfortable as the one in the Hydra base so Steve just assumed he was there which made him turn over and reach for Tony.

His hand met only open air and his eyes snapped open from the shock of it. He didn’t recognize the room and he immediately could tell something was off. Everything was too artificial and that radio broadcast…he sharply sat up and continued to listen. Yes, that was a game he had attended. They were playing a recording, trying to trick him into thinking he was safe.

With his heart rate slowly starting to rise, Steve was finally able to fully wake and remember. He was supposed to die in the plane crash and he seemed to be in some kind of recovery room but…none of his friends were there. The Commandos would’ve done like they had with Tony’s illness and stayed beside him in shifts to be there for him when he woke.

None of them being there confirmed the worst to Steve.

He wasn’t in the Allies’ hands, but the enemy’s.

A woman stepped into the room wearing an army uniform. He would have fallen for the disguise if he weren’t already suspicious and looking for discrepancies in her demeanor. She clearly was tense and had something hidden in her hand, a weapon maybe?

“Good morning,” she said as she closed the door behind her. She smiled as she glanced at her watch and said, “Or should I say afternoon?”

Steve remained seated, his eyes still studying the room.

Was this it?

After everything they sacrificed, did Hydra still get him in the end? Was this the beginning of his life as the Winter Soldier?

But why this act? Didn’t they originally torture him into submission?

“Where am I?” He finally asked.

“You’re in a recovery room in New York City,” she replied with a reassuring tone.

Steve glanced out one of the windows.

Everything outside looked too bright with pastels and white light. It was too clean the buildings, the air, even the sounds…especially the sound of the radio. He couldn’t believe it was real.

“Where am I, really?” He countered, seriously doubting he was home.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” the woman replied, her fake smile cracking a little.

“The game,” Steve stated, nodding to the radio and the most obvious clue of them all. “It’s from May 1941 – I know, ’cause I was there.”
The smile vanished completely from her face and Steve knew he caught her in the lie. This wasn’t a recovery room and she was not with the army. He got to his feet and walked over to her, threateningly stating, “I’m going to ask you again. Where am I??”

“Captain Rogers –,” she began uneasily.

“Who are you?”

Before she could reply to either question, the answer was indirectly supplied when the door burst open and men in tactical gear surrounded him.

Steve looked from the end of the gun barrels and then to the men who pointed them at him and then glared at them.

He was able to down them all in a few seconds and threw the last one through one of the walls. A sort of warehouse was beyond that and he jumped through without a second thought. Alarms started to go off and Steve’s heart was beginning to race from adrenaline.

He knew the future was already written but he was not going to meekly walk into Hydra’s arms. He was going to fight for his freedom and maybe, just maybe, he could change his fate.

Steve ran. He ran like he never did before. People lunged at him as he ran through the building, but he dodged them and focused on finding an exit over what lies they yelled.

The entrance to the building was mostly glass so he found it easily enough and was outside a couple of minutes after breaking free. He kept running down the street, not slowing in the slightest until, well, until he started to recognize the street signs and then realized he was truly in New York. He stumbled a little over his own feet but regained his pace, taking in the sight because…because this was not the New York he remembered.

Everything looked different and more advanced and…

Steve came to a complete halt.

It all looked almost futuristic.

Breathing more shallowly, Steve stepped into the nearest building, a corner grocer, and asked the man behind the counter, “Wha-What year is it?”

“2009 last I checked,” the man grumbled, sounding annoyed by Steve supposedly inane question.

“2009?” Steve gasped. That was the year Tony traveled from.

The employee nodded to a small rack of newspapers and said, “Yeah, 2009, see? Now you gonna buy anything?”

Steve stepped forward and grabbed the New York Times off the first rack.

The headlines read: More Senators Found With Hydra Connections!

Steve dropped the paper and didn’t hear the employee curse him out as he sprinted out of the store.

Hydra.

It was Hydra that had him.
This future was different than Tony’s.

Hydra was here! Which made no sense because Bucky died!!

He needed to get out of the area now before he fell into their hands and became their weapon.

And Tony.

Just thinking of him made Steve’s heart flip in his chest.

He didn’t know what month Tony left for the past in 2009. Was the pre-time travel Tony here?
Healthy and completely unaware of Steve’s existence?

Or was he already gone? What if Tony wasn’t in the era because he was still in the past?

Or had he returned to the future? Was he healing? Or did he…die?

Steve clutched his chest, not wanting to even consider it as a possibility.

He had no idea how he ended up in the future, but, he was there, and in the same era as Tony like he had desperately craved. He needed to somehow get to his lover and find out if he time traveled yet.
But he had no idea how to find Tony or who he could trust to ask.

All he knew was that Tony had a home in Malibu, California overlooking the ocean. If need be, Steve would run to the west and search all of the coastal homes until he found him.

But first he needed to drop his tail.

People and large, black cars were following him. The city had changed in the decades since he last seen it, but the grid of streets was still the same. Steve ran at top speed and took all the routes he used as a kid to escape pickpockets or bullies.

After he crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and was in his old neighborhood, he knew he was going to make it. He spotted a tunnel open to the sewers and went in without any hesitation. As a kid, he explored these tunnels all the time with Bucky. It was partially his childhood home. None of the bullies dared go too deep but the more reckless Steve and Bucky dared.

The smell was much worse than he remembered and no one had clearly been down there in a while. Rats and roaches scurried away from his hurried steps. He was splashing up all kinds of muck that loudly echoed down the tunnels, but they were directionless. Anyone following him would have no idea where he was going.

He could hear people follow him into the tunnel but, as Steve took more turns, their voices became more distant until he lost them altogether. After a few minutes of just hearing his own heavy breathing and the splash of his feet, he finally slowed to an unhurried walk and gasped for air as he clutched at his heart.

He did it. He got away.

In the back of his mind, he could hear Tony cheering, ‘One point to Team Cap!’

Steve chuckled and walked in direction of an exit that would deposit him somewhere in Flatbush. He needed to get out of New York, that was for sure. And he was going to California, there was no question about that either.

From there, he wasn’t so sure what he was going to do. He was obviously going to look for Tony
but finding him was another story…

He hoped Tony had returned from the past and got the help he needed. Steve’s heart shrivered as he considered Tony not surviving. Steve didn’t think he would be able to live in the future knowing that the man he loved in this era was dead…

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After ignoring several calls from Fury all day, Tony finally gave in and answered with a grumble, “We don’t want any.”

Bucky did not like Fury and Tony didn’t want his friend to have to deal with him anymore than he had to, so he had taken the call in the workshop. The walls were soundproof and it wasn’t abnormal for Tony to be in there at any hour of the day so Bucky wouldn’t poke his head in to check on him anytime soon.

“Stark,” Fury retorted, making his name sound like an offense. “So nice of you to pick up. I need to speak to you about serious business.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow at the hologram of Fury and then crossed his arms over his chest before he countered, “More serious than me helping my friend heal?”

They had been leaving the house more and even Natasha was starting to join them. They were small excursions, walking down the road to the fruit vendor selling fresh strawberries off the back of his truck or getting a cup of coffee from the local hipster joint. Bucky liked getting the coffee the most and had gotten into the habit of pulling his hair back into a messy bun. Tony sometimes teased that he was turning into a hipster and Bucky usually scoffed or rolled his eyes at the idea.

“Stark…Is this a secure line? Are you alone?” Fury demanded and looked behind Tony, looking to see if he was indeed alone or not.

“Secure line? Are you serious?” Tony retorted, slightly offended.

“Can Barnes hear us?!” Fury demanded.

“It’s just us, Eyepatch, unless you want to include Bucky but, last I checked, he’s not really into threesomes,” Tony replied, picking up the container of blueberries he brought with him and sat down on his couch as he began to munch.

“Good, because I don’t want him running across the country unsupervised, when I tell you that we found Captain Rogers,” Fury grumbled.

Tony dropped his blueberries from the sudden surge of emotions that flared from Fury’s statement and then his eyes heated up from joy and upset.

They’d finally found Steve’s body. He was finally going to be put to rest and–.

“–and he was alive.”

Tony entire body convulsed as he sat up sharply.

STEVE.

ALIVE.

ALIVE!!!?!
But Fury said “was.”

Tony turned away from the hologram and cupped his mouth to muffle the small cry of anguish that broke free.

When did Steve die? How long had they been living in the same era without knowing it? How much time did he miss out on with him?

Tony was pretty sure SHIELD was still clueless about his relationship with Steve. So he collected his emotions and turned back and carefully asked, “What happened?”

“We found him in the plane, he’d been frozen in the ice, and, when we started to defrost him, his vitals returned with the warmth. We tried to wake him in a controlled environment but broke out, calling my men ‘Hydra’ and has disappeared into Brooklyn’s underbelly. Do you understand now why I didn’t want Barnes in the room?”

Tony demanded, “But he’s alive?!”

“Last we saw, yes, but we have no idea where’d he go. Just in case he turns up on the next news cycle, I need you to be prepared to keep Barnes locked down on your property until Rogers is secured, alright?...Stark, where are you go-?....Stark, are you there?....Goddammit.”

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Jarvis directed Tony to Bucky’s location, which was where Tony usually found him most days, on the private balcony outside Bucky’s room. The metal shutters were up all over the house and had been for a long time, attesting to Bucky’s feeling of safety in Tony’s home. Tony saw him through the windows, lounging on his chair reading his latest history book by the faint light of the setting sun.

Bucky’s head swiveled in his direction as soon as he burst into his bedroom and was already on his feet with a Glock in hand as soon as Tony reached the balcony.

“Are we under attack?” Bucky demanded, always assuming the worst.

“Steve’s alive!” Tony gasped, slightly out of breath from his sprint.

Bucky dropped his gun and with a tiny, scared but hopeful voice whispered, “What?”

“He survived the crash, was frozen, and Fury just called me to tell me he kicked SHIELD’s ass thinking they were Hydra and is now running around New York!” Tony laughed, his eyes beginning to brim with tears.

“Steve’s alive?” Bucky repeated, sounding shell-shocked.

Tony laughed and embraced his friend, asserting, “Steve’s alive.”

Bucky hugged him back, his entire form shaking, probably with the same happy tears streaming from Tony’s eyes.

When they broke their embrace, Tony wiped at his eyes and said, “Listen, Fury seems to think Steve doesn’t have a destination in mind, but I think he’ll come here. I told him about my home in Malibu. This is the only place in the future that he knows about!”

“But if he’s in New York then we need to go there now before the punk does something reckless like he always does!” Bucky hissed, practically vibrating with the need to go chasing after Steve.
“I agree but one of us needs to stay behind here just in case he does manage to transverse the entire country. He needs a familiar face and I’m not on house arrest so it is going to have to be you, Buck,” Tony stated apologetically. “I’ll look for him in New York while you hold the fort here.”

“I know where he’d hide in Brooklyn,” Bucky countered stubbornly.

Tony shook his head and murmured, “Brooklyn has changed a lot since you last saw it and if Fury knew you left Malibu, he’d direct his resources to finding you. I’m sorry, Bucky, it has to be me, but I’ll find him and bring him home.”

Bucky nodded stiffly but Tony could see tears gathering in those frustrated eyes.

Tony clapped Bucky’s arm and stated, “I expect you to have a long lecture prepared for him about how bad it is to take such a long nap because seriously, seventy years? What was he thinking?”

Bucky snorted and clapped Tony’s arm in return and assured him, “We’ll have to sit him down because I am going to make a goddamn speech out of it.”

Tony grinned and went to go but Bucky grabbed his arm and whispered, “Bring him home soon, Tony…”

Tony nodded and sprinted to his workshop. Bucky didn’t move but watched him go with a forlorn expression.

Tony wasted no time getting to his workshop but paused as he regarded his latest suits up and ready to go. Mark 18, 19, and 20 were all lined up along the wall but…

“J, get me Mark 15,” Tony commanded.

“Yes, Sir.”

Tony walked over to the suit storage as it opened up in floor in the middle of his workshop. He looked down into the dark depths as a suit detached itself from its container and flew up to meet him.

Tony had installed a reactor into the suit as soon as he was healthy enough to do so but, he hadn’t touched it since. Too many painful memories accompanied the suit.

Sneaky opened up for him and, for a second, he could have sworn he smelt the old stone of the Hydra base underlined with the evergreen pine from the nearby forest. Tony stepped into the suit and it closed around him for what could have been the five hundredth time.

Tony closed his eyes for a second, quelling his turbulent emotions, and then his eyes snapped open.

Tony turned on his repulsors and said, “Let’s find my wayward boyfriend, J.”

---

Steve did exactly what he would’ve done in the past when he needed to get some where far and fast with no cash.

He jumped a train.

The future still had them, thank God. He did not see any commuter trains, all the ones he passed on that particular railroad all carried freight. This particular rail had been around in his era and it seemed to still be going the same way, west to California.
The train was going faster than the ones in his era, probably to deter any train hoppers, but Steve was able to jump on with no problem. He’d aimed for the open spot between cars and sat down on the joint connecting them. The ride was relatively smooth compared to the rides he was used to hopping in his era.

He leaned back and enjoyed the view of his new country pass by.

The train rarely stopped and, the few times it did, the trains were inspected. Steve, however, easily avoided the inspectors at each stop.

He felt safe enough to fall asleep after the last inspection.

He nestled himself in a divot in the gear, folded his arms over his chest, and fell into a doze. He was conscious of the rocking train, but his mind wandered into its memories. He returned to a hazy memory of lying beside a healthy Tony. They had just made love and Tony was pressed into his side and just smiling at him in a way that made Steve never want to leave.

The dream ended when the train stopped for another inspection a few hours later. Steve was reluctant to open his eyes, but he needed to move before the inspector found him.

Sighing heavily, he slipped off the train and decided to walk around whatever town he was in before jumping another train.

A heavy fog lay over the town and the chill in the air made goosebumps rise up along his arms. He’d run away with no shoes, cargo pants, and a thin shirt. He was filthy after running through the sewers and riding out in the open on the train. Tony was going to make fun of him for stinking so much.

Steve smiled warmly as he imagined Tony’s pinched expression of disgust and slinked out of the train yard without anyone noticing him.

It was a small town and early enough in the morning that not many people were out. The town was old and Steve was finally able not to feel too out of place. He spotted the familiar steeple of a church, rising out of the trees, and, like a moth to a flame, Steve was drawn to it.

He tried the church doors and was not surprised to find them unlocked. He cautiously entered the building and then dapped his finger tips into the holy water font at the entrance and made the sign of the cross before entering the rest of the way. The church was old and ornate like all the other churches he’d been to. The church itself was something untouchable to time, maybe he could get some support here like he used to in his past.

A man who must have been the priest was dusting the banisters and Steve cleared his throat to announce his presence. When the man turned around, Steve said, “Father…I need help.”

The priest looked to Steve’s bare feet and then trailed up his stained and worn clothing and he agreed, “Yes, my son, you certainly do.” He stepped down and hid the feather duster behind the alter as he continued, “Let’s go to my office and get you some food.”

Steve’s stomach grumbled loudly at that.

Flushing, Steve thanked him and followed the priest through a door leading them away from the main part of the church.

Father Michael lived in the back of the church and he had Steve take a shower in his bathroom while he got him some clean clothes out of the donation box. The hot water felt great against Steve’s skin and for the first few minutes of his shower he just simply stood in the water absorbing the heat.
He was in the process of lathering his hair when the father dropped off some clothes for him by the
door and then Steve sped through the rest of his washing.

Father Michael managed to find him a plaid shirt, jeans, and thick socks all of which Steve donned to
reclaim the heat he was quickly losing from the cooler air of the bathroom. When he exited the
bathroom, Father Michael was just placing some warm toast on the table and, in the small attached
kitchen, Steve could see a pot of coffee brewing. He hadn’t eaten since before the plane crash and
hadn’t had real coffee since the Hydra base…he felt like he was entering Heaven.

Father Michael grabbed the pot and poured them each a cup and then sat down at the table with
Steve. He gave Steve the mug and then pressed, “Eat.”

Steve didn’t need any more permission and dug in. He ate one slice of plain toast first, nearly
swallowing it whole and then more reverently took a sip of the coffee. It felt so good to finally get
something in his stomach.

“So, what’s your story?” The father asked, leaning back into his chair with his coffee.

Steve cleared his throat and chuckled, “It’s a long – long – story.”

“I have all day and a full pot of coffee,” the priest retorted.

Steve glanced at the glass container and then back to the priest and murmured, “We’re probably
going to need more than one pot…”

---

Two pots later, Steve was sipping on what he decided would be his final mug as the father tapped his
chin and stared at Steve with assessing eyes.

“If you told me this story last year I would have thought you were pulling my leg but with Hydra,
that thing in New Mexico, and, well, I just looked up a picture of you on my phone and there’s no
denying it…You’re Captain America.” The priest said it with a revered tone.

“Call me, Steve,” Steve said with a flush.

“Steve,” Father Michael repeated with a chuckle. “What more can I do to help you, Steve?”

“Tony Stark,” Steve said. He told the father about the time traveling but didn’t bring up their
relationship. He knew Tony said it was acceptable in this era, but Steve still wasn’t used to sharing
the information, especially with strangers. He asked, “When I mentioned him, you knew exactly who
I was talking about. Is he famous in this era?”

“He’s probably one of the most famous people of this century,” Father Michael chuckled. He asked,
“Are you looking for him?”

Steve wildly nodded and Father Michael thoughtfully said, “Now that you mention it…Before the
Hydra scandal, I remember reading something about him being in the hospital and Iron Man hasn’t
been involved in any of the Hydra stuff so he may still be there…Let me google it – oh – ah – that
means to look up the information on my phone, which connects me to the internet and, well, I don’t
really understand the internet myself so I’m not sure how to describe it…”

Steve stopped breathing at the word “hospital.” Was Tony still there? Did they not find him a cure??

Father Michael fiddled with his phone and eventually declared, “I can’t find anything solid. It’s all
mostly conjecture…No one knows what’s happened to him…but that’s normal with celebrities. They’re usually quiet about their private lives…”
Steve nodded his thoughts dark despite the priest’s assurances.

“He’ll be fine, Steve,” Father Michael promised him. “A lot has changed since your era. The news media are more concerned about ratings over events and currently the Hydra scandal is the hot ticket. Tony Stark feeling better and going home would be the last thing in their cycle…”

“Do you have any idea how I can find out where he lives?” Steve asked him with a tight whisper. His heart hurt. He wanted to be with Tony and to comfort him however he could.

What if he was still sick? What if he wasn’t going to get better? What if he was worse than when he had last saw him?

What if he was dying?
He wanted to be at Tony’s side at that exact second or at least hear his voice.

He so badly wanted to hear Tony’s voice…

“Finding Stark should be easy enough,” the priest murmured, making Steve’s head snap up.

“Wha-What?”

“He’s a celebrity,” he replied with a shrug. “When I went to Hollywood for business, they were selling maps of stars’ homes nearly on every other corner, his home was probably one of them. I bet we can find the same information online.”

Steve gripped his mug tighter, overcome with emotion, and whispered, “I can never thank you enough, Father…You’ve done so much for me and barely know me…”

Father Michael smiled warmly at Steve and murmured, “I know you by your deeds. You have helped many more than I have and did it without ever meeting most. What I’m doing pales in comparison,” Father Michael said, getting to his feet. “I’ll handle everything. You get some proper sleep and then we’ll get you to your friend.”

He showed Steve to a small guest room and Steve fell unconscious as soon as he hit the mattress. The train was terribly uncomfortable and he was on alert for Hydra so he didn’t get much sleep.

But, for the first time since waking, he felt safe enough to sleep deeply…

Which was his first mistake.

He was a tactician. He knew when people were looking for you, it was never wise to stay in one place for too long, but he had assumed he’d be alright with just one day in one remote location.

But when he felt the searing pain in his neck, he immediately knew they found him and he was in trouble.

They injected him with something that made him feel weak and dizzy, but it didn’t totally incapacitate him. He swung out at the person hovering over him and sent the dark figure flying through the opposite wall.

He staggered to his feet and saw the same dark clothed agents in the room as last time.

Steve ripped a syringe out of his neck and then raised his fists, taking a boxing stance. He grumbled,
“You guys don’t learn, do you?”

“Steve!”

The father called from outside and Steve’s heart sank. Hydra must’ve had him!

Steve picked up the bed and threw it at the largest cluster of men and then jumped out of the window.

Father Michael was being pushed against a van with his hands being held behind his back. Steve ran straight at them and rocked the people off the priest and then grabbed the father and threw him into the empty van. They went speeding off and the father fell back into his seat, cursing under his breath.

Whatever they gave him was making him feel sick. Nonetheless, he spun the car tightly around a curve and sped down the highway. No one was tailing them yet, but he knew they’d be on him any minute. He needed to get as much distance as he could between them if they had any chance of escape.

Father Michael grabbed his arm and pointed to the oncoming exit, gasping, “Get off here!”

Steve turned in the direction of the priest’s point and they went flying down the road. Father Michael provided more directions and led Steve to another church. As soon as the car rolled to a stop, the priest jumped out and Steve quickly followed.

“Louis!” The father yelled, running into the back entrance of the church. Another priest appeared and the father gasped, “I need to borrow your van!”

“Of course, but –,” the other replied but got no chance to reply as Father Michael snatched the keys off the wall and threw their stolen keys at the other.

Father Michael commanded, “Take that to the super market down the block! I’ll meet you back here and explain everything!”

“Michael –?!”

They were running to the church van before the man could get out another word and this time Father Michael jumped into the driver’s seat. The van’s engine roared loudly and continued to hum with it’s age as they drove out of there.

The other priest was just getting into the stolen car when they lost sight of him.

“Where are we going?” Steve asked, finally letting his eyes close, hoping it would help with the sick feeling growing within him.

“When you were sleeping, I purchased you a bus ticket,” Father Michael stated. That made Steve open his eyes and look to the man in shock. The priest was grinning and said, “I even paid for it in cash and under the alias, ‘Michael Stark.’ I did it as a joke but seems were in the middle of an action movie right now so good thing I had fun with it!”

The father reached into his pocket and held the tickets to Steve. Steve took the tickets from him and saw Los Angeles written as the final destination.

“I don’t know what to say…” Steve whispered, overcome with gratitude.

“Thank you usually is the go to,” the priest teased.
“Thank you…for everything. You saved my life in so many ways,” Steve said, thinking of his fate as the Winter Soldier. Had he escaped it or was he still running from the inevitable?

They pulled up to the bus station and then Father Michael proceeded to take money out of his pocket and hand it to Steve.

“Father, I can’t, you’ve done so much for me already!” Steve gasped.

“You need to eat, son,” the man countered and pressed the money into Steve’s hand before letting go. “Now go! I’m going to keep driving to throw them off your tail.”

“Thank you,” Steve earnestly gasped.

“In 16 hours and 23 minutes, you’ll be one step closer to your friend and away from Hydra,” Father Michael stated with conviction.

Steve paused and then dropped his head and whispered, “He’s more than just a friend…We were…lovers.”

His heart raced faster than it had when Hydra almost got him again and he almost collapsed from the resulting vertigo. He had held it back from the father in his retelling of the story, but the white lie festered within him and it felt wrong denying the man this last bit of critical information, especially with all he was sacrificing in order to get Steve to Tony.

The father reached across the divide and tightly grasped Steve’s arm. Steve fearfully looked up to the Father Michael’s gaze, but he saw no disgust or contempt in his gaze…only a weary sadness.

“Are you confessing to be a homosexual?” The priest clarified.

Steve gulped and nodded, afraid to speak.

“Steve…You were born this way and God made it so. There is nothing wrong about being gay. I am so sorry that you grew up in an era that vi –.”

The priest didn’t get a chance to finish what he was saying as Steve pulled him into a hug. He never before felt so blessed until he heard a priest from his very religion say that he was normal despite knowing his once most heinous secret.

—that the love he felt toward Tony was normal.

The father returned the hug and he whispered, “May God lead you true to your love. I will pray for both of you tonight. I hope he is healed and you reach him without any more delay.”

“Thank you, again, Father,” Steve tightly whispered.

The priest nodded and whispered, “You’re welcome, my son. Now go! Before Hydra sneaks up on us again!”

Steve wildly nodded and then ran to the bus with the matching number on his ticket.

They let him go on even though the departure wasn’t for another two hours.

Steve nervously watched the entrance to the bus depot but none of those dark cars drove into the parking lot bearing Hydra agents.

A dozen people got on to the bus in the meantime and then they left. It was a little after three, so they
were given a boxed lunch. Steve pocketed the money Father Michael had given him to save for later and ate every little crumb provided.

He was then given a blanket and headphones. After watching the passenger in front of him, he realized the headphones plugged into the glowing box in front of him and, with absolute fascination, Steve scrolled through the easy to navigate screen. He found a movie about Captain America. The cover was of a blond man in his uniform, clutching what must have been the woman playing Peggy close to his chest.

He watched the first ten minutes and found it too ridiculous to continue.

How did that get five stars??

Steve glanced out the window. The bus was driving on a highway going a nice cruising speed. The cars that passed them contained the usual commuters.

Feeling secure, he continued to scroll through the movies until he came to a stop at a familiar title.

Back to the Future.

Steve smiled sadly at the movie, remembering Tony tell him about it and quote it all throughout his time in the past. He glanced out the window one last time and then, with a bittersweet smile, touched the play button.

He settled back into the chair and watched the movie. It was not an emotional movie, but Steve’s eyes teared up as he remembered and he was able to imagine Tony’s voice whisper in his ear the same lines the actors said.

Please be alright, Tony.

---

Tony flew to Colorado as soon as he heard of the failed attempt to get Steve.

He’d traveled far since his initial escape in New York and was clearly going west.

Tony was still concerned for him but still felt a little happier by the fact that Steve was clearly heading straight to him. He also found it hilarious that his stubbornness in getting to Tony was foiling SHIELD at every turn.

But he didn’t find the fact that SHIELD tried to drug him funny at all.

He called Fury and yelled, “What is this about a tranquilizer?? He’s not a fugitive! Just use me! He knows me! He trusts me! I’m your best bet!!”

“Hello, Stark. Nice to hear from you. How am I you ask? Having a pretty shitty day,” Fury sarcastically replied in just a loud of a voice. “Why you ask? Well, a defrosted super solider just escaped one of the most secure facilities in the world and we have no idea where he’s going or the state of his mental condition. Is this worrisome? Maybe. Why? Probably because I keep having flashbacks of two months ago when Bruce Banner, another super powered human, Hulked out practically destroyed Harlem. Should I be worried about what a man who is emotionally compromised by the situation thinks? I think the fuck not.”

“Somebody woke up on the wrong side of their spy-themed bed,” Tony grumbled.
“I have not seen a bed since you fucking disappeared into a WWII Hydra fucking time machine, Stark,” Fury growled. “I am done with this shit. I know you are a resource, but I didn’t use you in Colorado because you were not there. If you want to be of use, stay in the fucking area and I will call you with his next sighting.”

The connection was cut and Tony grumbled, “Someone needs a nap…”

Tony flew for another hour, reviewing all the information SHIELD was posting about the situation. Apparently, Steve had gotten help from a local clergyman of the area and he was taken in for questioning but was invoking his right as a priest to keep what was said between him and Steve private.

Tony changed his course to talk to the man himself.

He might not want to talk to SHIELD but maybe he’d make an exception for Tony.

SHIELD had a headquarters in Denver and they’d taken the priest there for questioning. After a few threats about calling Fury and noting how grumpy he was due to the lack of sleep he was getting, the agents relented to let Tony speak to the man.

He’d already been taken to a detention cell to sleep for the night. Though it looked more like a small hotel room than a cell. The priest’s eyes widened with recognition when he saw Tony.

Surprisingly, the first thing the man asked, “What are you doing here??”

“Looking for Steve Rogers. I hear you’re the man to speak to about that,” Tony replied.

The priest looked nervously at the SHIELD agents not to far away and then murmured under his breath, “He told me everything about the time traveling and he’s just trying to be with you again.”

“He’s going to Malibu?” Tony whispered, his breath catching in his throat as he said it.

“I got him a bus ticket to Los Angeles myself. The bus left twelve hours ago. If you leave now, you might just be able to meet him there.”

Tony nodded wildly but, when he turned to go, the agents stopped him and asked, “What did he say?”

“He reminded me I left my oven on, now, if you’ll excuse me…” Tony turned on Sneaky’s stealth capabilities and seemingly vanished in front of the agents. He was about to step away, but he turned back to the agents and said, “By the way, if the priest isn’t being placed under arrest you should let him go. It’d be even more bad publicity for SHIELD if the public found out you were mistreating one of the clergy like that…Especially if it isn’t done within the hour. Goodnight!”

With that, he left and set a course for Los Angeles.

---

They stopped a few more times to pick up more passengers and Steve tensed every time they came on, but no one bothered him. Night fell and he was given a boxed dinner. He watched a documentary about animals of North America and fell aslepp to it.

He woke when the bus jolted to a stop and he sat up sharply, expecting another attack.

Instead, he saw the rest of the passengers packing up their items and getting up to leave. Steve
looked to the front of the bus and saw the door was open. The ride was over.

They were in Los Angeles.

He had no valuables on him...not even any shoes on his feet, just the thick socks Father Michael had given to him to warm up his feet after his shower. Those socks were filthy now and probably beyond saving. After he stepped out of the bus, he took them off and threw them out into the nearest trash can he found.

He then went to the information booth and asked, “Where can I find a map of stars’ homes?”

The bored looking woman pointed behind Steve and sighed, “In the gift shop…”

Grinning, Steve said his thanks and ran over to the gift shop. It was overfilled with every souvenir imaginable. He found some cheap black flip-flops stamped with Hollywood that were his size. It took Steve a few minutes to look through it all, but he found the map he needed. It was in a large, glossy booklet and, thank God, Tony’s house was listed on there.

He technically was not in Los Angeles but on the outskirts in Malibu, right on the coast. The booklet itself was a little too expensive for him if he wanted to get the shoes too. He solved the problem by saving it all to memory and then returned it to the stand. He went to the counter to pay for the shoes but paused by the clothing and grabbed a cheap shirt to replace the plaid one he was wearing. It was much warmer outside in LA than in had been in Colorado and Hydra was looking for a man fitting his description in this shirt.

He was left with a dollar after the transaction. He asked the man bagging his items, “What’s the fastest way to get to Malibu from here on foot?”

“Oh foot?” The cashier reiterated like he was crazy. “You don’t have anyone picking you up or like an Uber or...anything?”

Steve shook his head and, still looking at him like he was insane, the man said, “By car it takes like two hours...dude, you’re going to be walking a while.”

“I think I can handle it,” Steve replied with a smirk, thinking of all the miles he trekked in Europe.

“Allright,” he sighed heavily and then pointed out the window and said, “You’ll want to go down Decatur Street and then turn right onto 7th from there I’d tell people to follow signs for the I-10 West, but you don’t have a car, man…”

“I figure I’ll just go northwest from there,” Steve said with a grin. Tony’s home was on the coast and north of Los Angeles. He’d just run to the coast and then run along the main coastal road until he came across his house. The booklet had a photo of Tony’s home and it would be hard to miss.

Steve slipped on his new shoes and thanked the man for the direction.

Outside, he stepped into an alley to more discreetly change into his new shirt and then he gently placed the older shirt on top of a box someone was sleeping in. That person would put better use to the shirt than Steve would.

And then Steve began to run...In cheap Hollywood flip-flops that loudly smacked the cement with every footfall. While wearing a neon blue muscle shirt that said, “I Love LA!”

He looked absolutely ridiculous and did not imagine looking like this when he saw Tony again but... when he crashed his plane, he didn’t think he was going to be seeing anyone ever again.
He was grateful for the shirt and the flip-flops because they were tools in getting him closer to Tony. He picked up his tread as he ran. Tony was closer than he had ever been and Steve had no idea his condition and every moment wasted was another moment wasted without Tony.

“I’m coming, Tony,” Steve swore and raced down the sidewalk in the direction of the hazy ocean in the distant horizon.

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Steve was amazed by the number of cars in the city.

He thought New York City had bad traffic but…at one point he slowed to a walk and he was going faster than the freeway traffic.

Wow. If it would take two hours to get to Malibu by car then running was probably only going to take an hour. He blazed on ahead, energized by the notion and only stopped when he reached the ocean. He took a deep breath of the salty air and then released all the smog and car exhaust he’d been breathing in, in one big exhale.

His entire body was shaking with energy.

He was so close to Tony, so close to starting the rest of their lives. He prayed Tony was better. He wished it with all of his soul.

With the ocean to his left, Steve began to run north and, in what seemed like no time, passed the sign for entering the Malibu city limits.

He was running down the same streets Tony traveled.

Whenever he came across someone, he’d ask if he was going in the right direction. Most didn’t know where Tony lived but then he came across an older man, with a dark aviator glasses and a baseball cap with the word Excelsior! on it, watering his flowers, and he was able to point Steve in the right direction. Steve rounded a corner and stumbled to a halt when he saw the structure in the distance. It was nestled between cliffs and practically right on the ocean. No one was around the house as it was on a piece of land with high cliffs and no coastal access but that was it, it was Tony’s home.

After all his running, literally in Los Angeles and from the Hydra agents who were after him, he finally made it. Tony was right there.

Steve let out an emotional laugh and hugged himself.

He did it.

He was home.

Steve couldn’t stop his eyes from tearing as he got closer to the property. He couldn’t even run anymore and jogged weirdly as he randomly laughed and cried like a crazy person.

Just a few days ago, he crashed his plane and thought his life was over but now…now it was just beginning.

The road up to the house was completely uphill and had no sidewalk but he ran on the bike lane instead. No one paid particular attention to him so running there must had been okay.
Gilded gates were sealed between him and the property but there was an intercom there. He pressed the button and cautiously said, “Hello?”

He was gearing up his emotions to hear Tony’s voice but instead heard the familiar voice of his AI, “Hello, Captain Rogers, we’ve all been looking for you…”

The gates began to open and Steve wetly chuckled, “It’s good to hear you, Jarvis, is Tony – is Tony, okay?”

“His body was in severe disrepair when he returned to this era but, he is fine now,” Jarvis replied and Steve let out a breath of relief.

Any fears he had were quickly replaced with the utter most joy.

Tony was going to survive.

And he was going to survive with Steve at his side.

With a happy laugh, he ran through the open gates and to the main door to the house. He went to open it, but the doorknob was ripped from his grip before he got the chance and Steve’s gaze suddenly locked with a familiar dark blue gaze he thought he’d never see again.

Steve stared dumbly at Bucky and Bucky stared back with wide eyes.

How was Buck –? Was…Was Steve dead? Were they all dead? Was this heaven?

Bucky finally gasped, “St-Stevie?” His gaze dropped and he wetly laughed, “What – What the hell are you wearing??”

Steve glanced down at the “I Love LA” tank and then back to his once dead best friend.

“Bucky?” Steve finally gasped, his throat thick with emotion.

“It’s really me, Stevie,” Bucky whispered, his voice also tight.

“You – You goddamn, jerk,” Steve cried. He wasn’t sure which of them moved first but one moment they were both staring at each other and the next there were crushing each other in a tight embrace.

“You had us so worried, you stupid, stupid punk,” Bucky hissed into his neck.

Steve pressed his face into Bucky’s warm shoulder and felt his very alive heart beating madly against Steve’s chest. He gasped, “How is this possible? How are you alive and here?? You died, Bucky! I saw you die!”

Bucky broke their embrace and grumbled, “Fucking Hydra happened…They – They made me the Winter Soldier…”

Steve’s hands tightened on both of Bucky’s arms. One arm was normal, the flesh strong but soft under his clutch but the other arm…

Steve drew back and looked down at the metal appendage in horror. He gasped, “What happened to you?”

“That’s a long story…” Bucky sighed, there was movement behind Bucky and Steve’s heart shot into his throat as he looked over his shoulder.
It had to be Tony!

It – It wasn’t…

It was a redheaded woman with a measured step. Bucky slipped out of their embrace and introduced
her by saying, “This is Natasha. She’s been helping me out and works for SHIELD.”

“You have a lot of SHIELD agents running around like a chicken with its head cut off,” she
observed with a smirk.

Steve didn’t care about whoever SHIELD was. He looked past Natasha and into the seemingly
empty house and asked, “Where is Tony?”

“Looking for you, punk,” Bucky retorted, knocking him over the head.

“Master Stark will return soon and wishes to relay his joy to your return but says he wants to greet
you personally,” Jarvis stated. “In the meantime, perhaps we can provide first aide. There is a kit in
the kitchen.”

Everyone looked Steve down and their eyes landed on his feet. The cheap plastic rubber of the flip-
flops had rubbed his skin raw and, now that he was standing still, his feet were really beginning to
throb. Steve kicked off the shoes and Bucky immediately started to fuss over him just like he used to
in the past.

Steve leaned into Bucky as he led him into the kitchen. Bucky was berating him, but Steve couldn’t
stop smiling. He thought he was never going to have this again…to have Bucky again – to have him
lecturing again. Bucky sat him on a stool and started to clean off his feet and stared down at the top
of his head. This was really Bucky. Steve’s breath hitched and a few tears slipped past his eyes.

“Steve?” Bucky asked in concern.


Bucky’s lips wobbled and, with a shuddering breath, he whispered, “So are you.”

Natasha took the towel from Bucky’s hand and said, “Let me take this. You two have bigger things
to worry about…”

As soon as Natasha took over in Steve’s first aide, Bucky leapt up and hugged Steve again. This
time they both unabashedly wept into each other’s shoulder.

Bucky was alive.

Steve’s mind could barely fathom it.

Was this really his life from now on? To have Tony and Bucky??

When he crashed the plane, he thought he was the unluckiest person on the planet to have lost so
much but now…now he felt like the luckiest.

They held each other for a long time. Steve never wanted to leave Bucky’s arms. A small part of him
was irrationally afraid that he would lose him again if he let go.

In the time they held each other, Natasha finished applying first aide to his feet and left them to have
some private time together. For the longest time, they said nothing to each other as their embrace said
enough.
Steve had lost a brother and regained him in less than a week. On top of his own, escape from death and the impending reunion with Tony, well…Steve could barely put into words the emotions he was feeling.

Steve grasped Bucky’s metal arm again and whispered, “What happened?”

Bucky shook his head and whispered, “We’ll talk about that another day. Tony is gonna be here soon and I don’t want you to feel bad for me when you see him…He’s been missing you, Stevie. He’s tried to hide it from me and be strong but he’s a broken man without you and when he sees you…the last thing the two of you will want to talk about would be my past. It happened. We can’t change it. It’s over. We’re here now and we’re alive.” Bucky squeezed his arms, smiling widely at him as he said it. “You’re alive and you took your sweet ass time waking up.”

Steve cupped his neck and whispered, “We WILL talk about this.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky mumbled, knocking Steve’s hand off his neck. He teased, “Aren’t I supposed to be the one who does the nagging?”

“Shut up, jerk,” Steve groaned, finally pulling away from his friend and turned to take in Tony’s home for the first time. It was beautiful and the views were stunning. He could easily picture Tony walking from the kitchen with a fresh cup of coffee and taking in the same view as Steve was…

“Want a tour?” Bucky murmured.

“…Do – Do you live here too?”

“Tony was the one who saved me from Hydra and he took me in,” Bucky replied with a shrug.

Steve didn’t think it was possible, but he fell in love with Tony a little more.

Bucky took him to his room first and, after showing him the room and balcony, he made Steve change into his spare clothes so he could burn the cheesy shirt Steve was wearing. Steve was happy to oblige and changed into more neutral clothing.

They walked all around the house. It was much larger than he thought it was and Bucky explained how it was built into the rock below and even showed him an elevator that could take them down to the beach at the bottom of the cliffs.

It was down that hall Steve first heard him.

“Steve?!”

Steve froze, and Bucky smiled warmly at him.

“Guys? You there?!”

Bucky nodded toward Tony’s voice and urged, “Go to him. I’ll go down to the beach for a bit to give yous two your time.”

Steve smiled gratefully to his friend and sprinted down the hall.

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“Sir, Captain Rogers has made it home.”

The breath caught in his throat upon Jarvis’s announcement.
Steve was home.

He changed the direction of his flight in a millisecond and put all of his repulsors on full thrust, going faster than he ever had before. He’d been flying over the greater Los Angeles area, looking for any signs of Steve to no avail until that moment.

Steve was alive and in his home! Steve had gone right to him when he woke! Steve was waiting for him, probably wearing that same big smile that Tony had been missing since he returned.

Tony’s heart felt like it was being crushed in its anticipation of seeing the sole reason for its existence.

Steve.

The LAPD complained about his flying again, but he gave them zero fucks and kept up his high rate of speed right up to his front door.

Jarvis opened the door for him, so he landed in the living room, scratching the floor a bit with the rougher landing. Pepper would be thrilled but Tony didn’t even notice as he leapt from his suit and called out, “Steve!?”

The house was seemingly empty and there was no reply. Doubt instantly began to grow.

No, Steve was here. Jarvis wouldn’t lie to him.

He had to be with Bucky. Maybe they were hanging on his balcony. Tony walked up to the base of the stairs and yelled up, “Guys? You there?!?” He put one foot on the stair to go up and began to yell, “Can –?”

There was a small pinch on the back of his arm and his entire body jolted to a stop.

He’d felt that pinch so many times in the past when Steve had wanted to hold his hand in public. Tony had grown to love the feeling and had almost forgotten it. He turned around and there he was – Steve, smiling at Tony like he was the miracle even though Steve was the one who just came back from the dead.

With a shaking voice, Tony said, “You’re in the future, Cap…” He met Steve’s eyes and was momentarily stunned by the emotion within before he continued, “You can stop pinching me and start kissing me you jerk.”

Steve’s smile widened and he pulled on the same arm he just pinched in order to pull Tony into his embrace.

“Come here, love,” Steve whispered and then cupped his jaw and kissed him.

Tony’s legs turned to jelly at the soft sound of his voice.

This was him. It really was him! He was alive!

Tony snapped his arms up sharply and wound his arms tightly behind Steve’s neck, deepening their kiss. Steve’s response was to wrap his arms tightly around Tony so they were meshed as closely as they could possibly be.

It brought more proof that he was alive to Tony as he felt Steve’s warmth sink into his skin and his heart hammer against Tony’s chest. Tony let go of Steve’s neck to explore the rest of him and
remember his body but also make sure he was whole.

Every piece of him was how he remembered: his hard muscles, soft lips, the tiny happy sighs he made when they kissed, the way his fingers latched onto Tony…and those blue eyes. How could he forget their shade? They were the color of pure blue tropical waters and Tony wanted to sink into their warm depths and never leave.

It really was Steve. He was alive and was back with Tony…Better yet, they no longer had to worry about the future…

They could just be a couple now…their future was limitless.

Steve broke their kiss with a chuckle as Tony’s roaming fingers tickled his sides. He ran his fingers through Tony’s hair and murmured, “What are you doing?”

“Just making sure you didn’t lose anything in the plane crash. Oh, by the way, how did you survive that?? And how come you look exactly like I remember you??”

“I have no idea,” Steve replied. “I woke up in this room with Hydra agents and I’ve been running to you ever since…”

Tony knew Steve had mistaken SHIELD for Hydra but hearing those words come out of his mouth still made him tighten his hold on his super soldier.

He still couldn’t believe that he was here and touching him.

“Are you okay?” Steve whispered, gently placing his hand over the glow of Tony’s reactor.

Tony put his hand over Steve’s and assured him, “I’m fine. My dad was able to figure out the element I needed in the decades between my travel.”

Relief and joy splayed across Steve’s features as he cupped Tony’s face and, in a broken voice, repeated, “You’re fine?”

“God, Steve…I am more than fine. You – You’re here!” Tony embraced him again and then repeated more hoarsely, “You’re alive.”

Tony’s broken heart was reforming and beating once more. The pain of Steve’s loss was receding and, in its place, was joy and fulfillment. He felt complete again.

Steve returned the hug, pressing his face into the side of Tony’s neck and whispered, “And we’re together.”

Suddenly remembering his final moments at Steve’s memorial, Tony broke their embrace to meet Steve’s gaze again. He cupped his jaw and whispered sincerely, “Steve, I hadn’t been able to say it in the past…and it haunted me ever since I returned to the future, but you need to know…I love you.” Steve inhaled sharply and he grasped both of Tony’s sides tightly. He look surprised by Tony’s sudden declaration and Tony continued, “I really didn’t understand it until you were gone. I felt like my insides had been torn to shreds and I could no longer function. You were my everything…You are my everything. And I love you so much that I feel like my heart is going to burst from it if I don’t keep telling you. I love you. I love you, Steve. I lo –.”

Tears started to fall from Steve’s eyes and the words failed Tony at seeing him cry. Steve gently ran his thumb over Tony’s cheek, catching the tear Tony hadn’t felt escape from his own eyes. Steve then pressed his forehead to Tony’s and, in a hushed whisper, said, “I love you too, Tony. You are
my everything and more.”

Tony had heard him say it before but now it was different. Now they could have a future.

He could have Steve.

His brows pinched together tightly as he held back more tears and Tony gasped, “I love you so much.”

They embraced in a sudden hug that connected their mouths in a deep kiss that only broke when Steve gasped into his mouth, “God, I love you so much.”

He pushed Tony into the nearest wall and kissed him deeper. Tony dug his fingers tightly into Steve’s flesh and held on for dear life as his body gave into its passions and his mind was awhirl with all the new and happy possibilities for the future.

They could grow old together.

Steve could be openly gay without any fear of repercussions.

Tony could marry him when it became legalized in New York.

The future was theirs.

Tony broke from their kiss and murmured, “Great Scott…”

Steve snorted and whispered, “I’m going to be hearing Back to the Future quotes for the rest of my life, aren’t I?”

“I’ll include it in our vows,” Tony promised, carding his fingers into Steve’s.

Steve’s entire face pinched as he smiled and held back his tears all at once and he gasped, “Our… Our vows?”

“If you don’t think I’m not going to marry you after everything we’ve been through then you –,” Tony began but Steve cut him off, seemingly unable to hold back the exuberant kiss he needed to give Tony.

“Sir…I have tried to delay as long as possible, but Fury is threatening to storm the property. The agents he assigned to watch for a possible Hydra attack on the mansion saw Captain Rogers enter and SHIELD is now demanding answers…” Jarvis stated, breaking their kiss a little earlier than Tony would’ve liked…

“SHIELD?” Steve asked.

“Government assholes,” Tony replied. “And, unfortunately, they’ll never leave us alone until we talk to them…Ugh, this will take forever…”

Steve smiled sweetly at him and whispered, “We have the rest of our lives…that will be our forever. This will be just an annoying little blimp in our reunion.”

Tony smiled back at Steve and whispered, “So does that mean I can call you my fiancé?”

Steve flushed and then stuttered, “Did-Did you just propose to me?”

“Uh…I guess so?” Tony laughed.
Steve rolled his eyes and slipped away from Tony, overdramatically sighing, “And here I thought you’d swept me off my feet again.”

Tony stumbled after him, gasping, “You want me to woo you again, don’t you? Admit it, you romantic dork!”

“Well, I’d like to at least remember saying yes!” Steve countered.

“You were more than happy about me talking about our vows I just assumed –,” Tony began, leading Steve toward the front door.

“Well, I was happy,” Steve countered. “You were talking about getting married, but you actually didn’t pop the question!”

Tony shook his head with a smile but got to one knee right at the front door and grasped one of Steve’s hands and asked, “Will you marry me, Steven Grant Rogers, mon capitaine of my heart?”

Steve smiled that dazzling smile of his and whispered, “Yes, Tony, I will marry you, my ridiculous time traveler.”

Tony got back to his feet with a grin and he and Steve shared a kiss again, each pouring every ounce of love they could into it.

Tony opened the door and Fury was standing there with a frown and his arms crossed over his chest. Still smiling, Tony wrapped an arm around Steve’s torso and said, “Hey Eyepatch, have you met my fiancé, Steve?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all who have read this fic, from the person who just discovered it today to the ones who have been here since the beginning! I experienced many highs and lows in real life while writing this fic and all your kudos and comments made life a little bit better, so thank you! Until next time! :)

5/2 EDIT: Inspiration struck as I was writing the last paragraphs and have been thinking over it all day and, after reading your comments, have decided to go with my inspiration and write that part 2! However, I still haven't outlined it yet so I have no definitive date as to when I will start posting.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!