Draining Life

by LagLemon

Summary

After a bad break up with Pepper, Tony packed his things and moved into Stark mansion. He refurbished the mansion so that it was more his style and less of his father's, readying himself for a new life as he tried to recover from the surgery that had removed his arc reactor. He didn't like being alone, but at least when he was in the mansion, he didn't have to see everyone pitying him. Besides, here he could work on Extremis without anyone staring over his shoulder.

It would be perfect soon.

Things would be better with Extremis.

After the move in, Tony starts having strange dreams - ones that start getting more and more disturbing as the nights go by.
He dreams that there is something buried outside in his yard, hiding beneath the patch of petunias, and it won't leave him alone.

*** Just to point out, the major character death tag is only here because Tony is turned into a vampire. ***

Notes

Warnings for creepy crawly things, emaciated vampires and gore. Heads up for lurking nightmares and Tony being changed into a vampire without his permission/consent. Let me know if I missed anything in the tags, and I'll put it up! I'll be updating the tags as I go - so no worries.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Stark Mansion hadn’t ever been a home-sweet-home sort of place, even though Tony had lived there for most of his childhood. Sure, his parents had been there when they weren’t off running around the world to attend some gala or working to get Stark International better press, but when it had really counted there had never really been anyone at home to make it feel like a *home*. Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Jarvis had been around, and he had always made Tony feel welcome when no one else had bothered to try, but somehow Jarvis’ *Jarvis-ness*, for lack of a better word, hadn’t quite sunk into the building the way Tony had hoped it might.

Of course coming back to the Mansion almost twenty years after his parent’s untimely demise probably hadn’t helped the whole melancholic gloom hovering around the place; Tony didn’t want to be here, and the mansion likely didn’t want to see his ugly mug again either but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now that the boxes were packed and delivered.

He could have found somewhere else to live after Pepper had left him. He had thought about it on the drive over with Dummy sitting on the floor of the flatbed truck behind him, musing on his misfortunes while sipping a bitter cup of Americano. He could have stayed in the tower. Hell, he could have bought himself some other place and built everything up from scratch again like he had with the Malibu house, but his heart hadn’t been in it. He was tired of watching the things he created turning to dust.

Instead, he had retreated to the last place something nice had happened to him – aside from all the places he had been with Pepper, Happy and Rhodey of course. Well, truth be told, the Avengers had made his life a lot easier too, so it wasn’t like the mansion was the *only* place left he had lived in that held good memories.

Maybe that had been part of the problem.

It had been too easy to throw away his work to run after his new teammates, too easy to spend nights building new equipment while listening to Steve prattle on about battle tactics and upcoming missions as they settled into their new Stark Tower accommodations. The others had so many interesting stories, and he had been starved for attention – or so Pepper had said to him as she was packing her life away into the bags she had brought with her the first time around. She had claimed that he hadn’t been happy with her; he hadn’t been so sure about that, because if he hadn’t been happy with her, why had it hurt so damned much when she had walked out of his life and into Happy’s arms?

Maybe he had stared at Steve a bit too much.

Maybe he hadn’t stared at Pepper enough.

He knew one thing for certain. She sure as hell hadn’t wanted to be an Avenger; he hadn’t meant to push it on her so hard, but he had. He had updated the version Extremis in her, but he had made a big, crucial mistake while doing it. He had tried to give her a controllable version of Extremis’ heat powers to help her feel like she could be one of the team. He had even made her a suit of her very own.

She hadn’t liked that part so much.

He had taken everything out once she screamed in his face about not wanting to be a monster – a weapon in human skin – but it hadn’t been enough. She had been furious with him for putting the
code in without permission, so angry she had been beyond words, glaring at him so fiercely he had worried for a few seconds that she was going to melt his face off somehow despite the fail-safes he had put into Extremis.

She hadn’t left his lab until he had put things right.

He hadn’t taken everything out, although looking back on it now it might have been just as big a mistake as putting them in her code in the first place. He had left her with shielding powers. It was for her protection, he had reasoned; hers and Happy’s, seeing as how when she had moved out of the tower, they had moved in together.

The armor he had built for her, tentatively nicknamed Rescue, now sat in one of Tony’s many armor vaults in Stark Tower, forgotten and locked away. He hadn’t been able to get rid of it – hadn’t been able to look at it either for that matter. Maybe Natasha could use it someday if she needed it; then it might not go to waste.

Pepper may have left him, but thankfully she hadn’t left her job as CEO. Tony was grateful for that. She had worked her way up from the secretarial pool, suffered through the insults and crude comments when people had seen her working with a drunken manwhore like him, and she deserved every second of praise she had received and then some; she deserved a life of her own, without him dragging her down. He had told her that too, and she had smiled softly at him the way she used to when they had first become friends.

As it stood now, they were talking but they hadn’t seen each other face to face since the night she had left. He wasn’t sure if that was good or bad, although to be fair he wasn’t sure he would be able to handle seeing her without a few drinks in him first anyway.

The tower simply hadn’t felt the same after she had left. The Avengers had been nice about it, but Tony hadn’t been able to stay around them; as time had gone by, their smiles had become too much to handle, their jokes and stories dragging him down into the dark even when they had only ever meant to use those moments to cheer him up.

The nightmares had come back.

The panic attacks hadn’t ever really truly left.

His fake smiles hadn’t been enough to keep his melancholy safely hidden this time; the others had noticed and so he had left before they could corner him to try and rattle the broken words out of him. The last thing he wanted now was to talk about it – about any of it.

The mansion had remained the last place left in the city where he couldn’t see that god-awful chunk of sky where the wormhole had opened up. It was empty, massive and free of every last bit of Pepper he had managed to collect over the years. The only problem was that it was filled with memories he would have rather forgotten.

Tony hadn’t set foot in the mansion since the day he had left for his parent’s funeral. Jarvis had suffered a stroke a few days after they had been interred; Tony had sat by his bed day and night until he had passed, shelling out more than a few thousand dollars’ worth of bribes to have the privilege of keeping his old friend company one last time.

Jarvis had been driving them to the airport when it had happened. The bystanders Tony had talked to
while the fire department had been hosing down the road to wash away the blood had said that the Stark car hadn’t had a chance; the tractor trailer had come out of nowhere, the driver too sleep deprived to handle the icy turn. Tony had spent the days after living in hotel suits, drinking his sorrows away with cheap whiskey while sloppily scribbling out code that would later become the base for his first version of Jarvis-the-AI. He had sobered up for Jarvis’ funeral, but he hadn’t ever had the strength to step back into the mansion again knowing that Jarvis wasn’t going to be there to greet him. He had debated on selling the mansion, or giving it away to some foundation so that they could do with it what they liked, but he hadn’t been able to let it go for some reason.

Still, even if the place had its share of crappy memories, it wasn’t all bad. There were more than a few secret treasures buried away here, hidden away from prying eyes. Sure, there was a good three inches of dust on everything, but that wouldn’t be around for long.

Tony hired a cleaning crew and then vigilantly watched them through the security cameras as he put them up, keeping an eye on things while the cleaners worked. Steve would have called him paranoid, but Tony was used to sleeping with one eye open. The Tower always had something running, some small, inconspicuous camera lurking in the corners to keep the naughty things out; he supposed it was easy to forget that if you weren’t the one doing the maintenance.

A solid security system kept people from walking off with dangerous stuff – not that he thought there was anything dangerous in the mansion. He had had the place stripped of armaments and weaponry years before, and even if there was anything there now it was probably outdated and not of much value unless a specific collector somehow managed to wander through.

This wasn’t the only security system Tony was spying on. Jarvis had his digital eyes locked on everyone in the Tower too, not that Tony expected anything bad to happen to them. It just made him a little itchy if he didn’t know what was going on – that was all. Nothing to worry about.

Tony worked at re-wiring parts of Howard’s old laboratory, flipping through video feeds on his Stark Pad as he went about his work. He pulled the last bit of faulty wire out and leaned back on his heels, wiping the sweat from his brow on the back of his hand. It hadn’t taken as long as he had expected to get things up and running. Twenty some odd years of abandonment hadn’t done the old girl any real harm it seemed, although he had fought off more than his fair share of spiders to get the work done. Thank god for vacuum cleaners.

There was still a small pile of scraps lying in the corner of his workshop amidst the new crates of technology waiting to be installed. Tony had always suspected that Howard had been nesting down here in the basement, but he hadn’t realized just how close to true that had been; his mother had always laughed it off when they had talked about it. Usually the conversations ended with her trying instead to trick him into going to bed, or to just plain leave her alone because her ‘headache’ was back. She had been a real peach when she wasn’t busy planning galas, but she had apparently had quite the blind eye when it came to Howard’s compulsive scrap hoarding.

They had been lucky the place hadn’t been crawling with metal shavings and stripped wires back when he was younger, because Howard – genius that he was – had little to no organizational skills unless said organization was forced upon him.

The many boxes Tony had brought with him from the tower were now lining the walls of the workshop; there hadn’t been any space for them when he had hauled them in on a dolly, at least not until he had picked his way through the debris of Howard’s final experiment. Tony supposed that he
should have been more emotional about it. This was his father’s space – the litter in his hands the last remaining detritus of a man who had helped end World War II and founded a company known worldwide. And yet, when he had been throwing things out, he hadn’t felt a thing.

Tony sighed aloud. He took off his work gloves and set them down on his knee. “Hey, Jarvis?”

“Sir?” Jarvis’ voice was a little tinny and muffled as it came in through the speaker sitting half installed on the counter a few feet away, but it was still the most beautiful sound Tony had heard in a long time.

“How’s it going in the tower?” Tony asked, twisting together yet another chunk of seemingly unending copper wire. He was old hand at wiring things up, but damn did it take forever. He must have been getting old, because his knees were starting to lock up, and he hadn’t been down here all that long.

“Things are going well sir. Captain Rogers has informed me that you haven’t been in contact with him for over forty seven hours,” Jarvis said, sounding a little miffed.

Tony stretched out, trying not to let the stiffness in his back deter him from his work. “Forty seven hours?”

“Indeed, sir,” Jarvis said. “It has been three and a half hours since you started working this morning. The cleaning staff is leaving for lunch. May I advise that you do the same?”

Breakfast did sound like a good idea. Tony hefted his Stark Pad up, tucking it under his arm as he threw his gloves onto the nearest crate. It wasn’t like he was on a deadline or anything. He could take a break whenever he wanted.

He stretched again and winced as he inadvertently pulled his stitches; the hole in his sternum where his arc reactor had once been was filled in again and covered with a circular patch of skin they had taken from his inner thigh. He was still unbearably sore even weeks after the operation had taken place, although the doctors had said that it wasn’t anything to be concerned about considering the amount of physical labor he had been doing – outside their advisement, of course.

To make matters worse, the bone grafts the surgeons had put in weren’t doing as well as he had hoped. He could feel the disc of molded bone and steel shifting every time he touched it. It was an unpleasant sensation to say the least. Even with surgical tape keeping the bandages pressed flat, the damned thing still got all revolting looking even though he was careful about keeping it clean.

Some days he wished that he hadn’t taken the damned arc reactor out in the first place. Sure, it was nice to be shrapnel free, breathing easily for the first time in years (and oh god, getting real gulps of air was so orgasmic he wasn’t sure it should be legal) but he missed waking up with the light of the reactor painting the ceiling a soft blue; he had always found it calming and now it was gone.

The near constant nightmares weren’t making the healing process any easier. He woke up struggling to see if the reactor was still there nightly, panicking and clawing at his chest every time he couldn’t find it in the dark. If Jarvis wasn’t there to talk him through those muddled moments he might have torn the bandages clean off in his frenzied state; god knows what he would have done to the new skin if he had gotten at it.

Still, it wouldn’t be long now. Even if things weren’t healing the way they should, Extremis would push things along for him. He had been feverishly coding the last few weeks before the move,
getting everything in place for the perfect install; the only reason he hadn’t thought about putting it in before was because Pepper hadn’t been so keen on the idea. With Pepper gone, however, there was nothing stopping him from fiddling to his heart’s content. He had everything he needed ready to go – once he had it unpacked and set up.

He had the base code saved and backed up in the Tower’s private server room, ready for access. A few more days of nit-picking and debugging wasn’t going to hurt it any, although he was already itching to see what it could do. He had built in things he had once only dreamed of – internal access of computerized systems, the ability to access anything and everything technological he needed at will. He would be able to heal all those pesky injuries he got while out on missions without spending weeks in the hospital and better yet, he would be able to react faster, think faster – pilot the Iron Man with a *thought*. It would be the best thing to happen to him; he could feel it in his very bones.

His workshop was set up; the very thought made him want to cackle with glee like some crazed madman ready to revive the dead. Tony sat down with a grunt at the counter beside the butcher block, idly scanning news sites on his Stark Pad. He yawned, scratching at his greasy hair.

It had only taken four days to get the workshop and house set up the way he wanted it, even though he had been hampered by the cleaners every few hours; they hadn’t seemed to know how do anything without someone walking them through things step by step and Tony hadn’t been able to sit around watching them fumble over every little detail. Eventually Jarvis had ended up taking over so that he could work in peace, but by then Tony had managed to irritate the living shit out of everyone he had come into contact with at least three times over. He had tipped them all well to make up for it, but he was pretty sure none of them were going to willingly walk through his door again.

Jarvis’ system was running at peak efficiency; hell, Tony was pretty sure he had outdone himself this time, because Jarvis seemed to be spending a suspicious amount of time lurking in the Mansion’s databases now that everything was quiet again. Aside from Jarvis’ direct line though, there was very little connecting the Tower and the Mansion. It had seemed easier that way – less distractions and all that sweet brassy jazz. Not that he had stopped asking about Steve of course.

“I was thinking about heading down to the workshop,” Tony said, skimming through an article on particle accelerators and their links with terrorism. Everyone seemed to be blowing smoke out of their asses these days. Half of the article had probably been written in colourful crayon by the looks of it. He was debating on giving the editor of Viastone Corporation a piece of his mind when he scrolled upon a picture of Pepper and Happy standing hand in hand.

He nearly dropped the tablet when he read the headline up above the image.

*Stark is a confirmed bachelor again - What did he do wrong this time?*

Tony stared at the screen, barely seeing the words. The picture of Pepper was good; he could give them that much. They had captured the sweetness in her and there was no doubt about her being in charge either. Happy looked like he was going to swoon, and if Pepper had been looking at him like that, he probably would have too.

Tony pushed the tablet away. He put his hand over his eyes letting out a shaky not-sob, trying to keep himself together. Damn it Stark, he cursed himself, you were *over* this – you were doing so good!
“Sir? Your breakfast bagel is burning,” Jarvis said.

Tony wiped his eyes and gave the tablet a tap, turning it off without looking at it. He could still see Pepper’s smiling face even though the picture had faded from sight; he grimaced, clearing his throat. “I guess I was lucky this time, huh? Took them a month to catch on.”

“Ms. Potts tried to call and warn you sir,” Jarvis said, “but you were busy with reconstructing your Extremis Apparatus. I did inform you of her message.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony flapped a hand, slinking towards the toaster oven to pull out his now extra-crispy bagel. “No one’s fault but my own.” He slathered the bagel with cream cheese to make up for the black bits lurking around the edges and choked it down with a cup of overly sweet coffee. “I’ve got work to do.”

“Sir, Captain Rogers is calling again,” Jarvis said as Tony made his way down the stairs.

“Let him leave a message,” Tony grunted, shoving the door out of his way. “I don’t need Captain Perfect checking up on me. Jesus, he’s not lurking out on the porch, is he?”

“No sir, Captain Rogers is currently working out in the gym –”

“Good. Keep him out. You know what? Keep everyone out. I don’t want to talk to them – I don’t need them breathing down my neck,” Tony snapped, storming down the stairs. He kicked the crate nearest him and swore, his eyes watering as his big toe started throbbing. “Fucking hell!”

“Sir? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine! Just let me work!”

Tony crawled into his bedroom, barely able to keep his eyes open. He wasn’t sure how long he had been working, but it felt like it had been forever since he had seen a bed. The bedding was still done up perfectly, as if the cleaners had only just left; he collapsed onto the duvet, rubbing his face against it as he tried to get his legs up onto the bed with the rest of him.

This had been his parent’s bedroom once – not that they had spent much time in it. It had been their bedroom in name only; Maria had reigned here, and while all the furniture she had used was now gone, condemned to a storage facility somewhere in New York awaiting transfer to the Howard Stark Museum, he could still feel her presence. Apparently they hadn’t managed to scrape that off the walls even though he had asked them to sand everything down.

He managed to toe off his grubby socks, grumbling to himself as he wormed his way under the covers. He was close to finishing Extremis now – close to perfecting the one good thing waiting for him. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Tony woke from a nightmare, thrashing against the covers. He sat bolt upright, panting as if he had been running and clawed at the bandages on his chest, desperate to see the arc reactor. Minutes passed; he heard Jarvis’ voice murmuring softly to him and allowed himself to drop back down onto the mattress, resting his head on his sweat soaked pillow. It was fine. He was fine. He was in his own bed, not out in the garden. It was fine.
When he woke up again it felt a little like night hadn’t really left. Tony stared out the window, surprised to see that there was fog outside. It was the thick soupy kind, the kind he liked the least. He sighed to himself and checked the clock, finding that it was already three in the afternoon. He debated on dragging himself out of bed to grab something to eat, but his stomach didn’t feel all that concerned and the bed seemed far too comfortable to leave. He closed his eyes, rolling over.

“Sir?” Jarvis asked, sounding concerned.

“What?” Tony grumbled through his pillow. His mouth tasted a little like he had eaten cotton, but he didn’t really mind. He had tasted far worse things in the past few years.

“Sir, Captain Rogers has called five times today. I have informed him that you were sleeping and he seems to have accepted that, but I would suggest that you call him back at some point. He threatened to break down the door if you don’t call him back,” Jarvis said.

“He threatened you?” Tony chuckled, forcing himself to sit up. “That’s a first. Wait till the press finds out.” He winced at his own words, giving his head a shake to try and drive away the memories of Pepper and Happy and that goddamned picture. “Tell him that I’m fine. He doesn’t need to break down the door. I’m going to go work.”

“May I suggest eating first, sir?”

“Why not,” Tony grumbled, forcing himself to get out of bed. He gave himself a cursory sniff, figuring that his bandages could wait a few more hours and stalked out the room. He needed to work. He had things to do. Important things.

He collapsed in bed again sometime around midnight after eating a handful of crackers and a piece of squasy banana. His body felt pleasantly heavy, his thoughts blessedly dull and slow. He mumbled to Jarvis to hold his calls and fell asleep, praying for the nightmares to stay away.

There was something in the garden.

He couldn’t see it, but it was there burrowing underneath the petunias. He could hear it as it scratched about under the soil with its sharp claws, working to try and free itself from its earthy prison. It reeked like something that had died years ago and had just been pulled out again; he didn’t know how it was possible to smell the thing, considering it was buried.

Tony knew he was dreaming.

Logically he had to be dreaming because he was standing barefoot under the stars, and he hadn’t been out here from what he could remember. His bed had been his last destination, not the darkened garden with its damp grass and lumpy flowerbeds freshly turned over for new spring growth.

He felt cold all over.

He turned away from the stars and stared at the rectangular flower bed in front of him, mesmerized by the way the petunias were dancing, swaying and bobbing as the soil bumped up around them.

“Hello?” Tony called out, but the only response was that of the soil pausing in its dance just the once
and then it went back to its business; the creature underneath continued to scratch away.

Tony woke with a start. He sat up gasping, twisting his body to get a good look out the window; he could swear that something was outside watching him – but that was impossible. He stood up, hurling the sweat-damp blankets away and threw open the curtains, looking around to try and catch the spy.

There was nothing outside aside from a few bats searching for breakfast amidst the trees, snatching flies from the air with practiced ease. He clutched at the window frame, trembling as a cold draft went over his knuckles.

It was just a dream – nothing to be worried about.

“Sir?”

Tony swallowed hard; he glimpsed a swirl of colour in the night sky as Jarvis turned on the lights and felt his chest tighten as the air was seemingly sucked from his lungs. He dropped to the floor, narrowly avoiding the window frame.

He couldn’t breathe – oh god he couldn’t breathe – why couldn’t he breathe?

He clawed at his throat, leaving red scrapes across his skin and then curled up into a ball on the floor, squeezing his eyes shut as his hands started to shake. There was nothing there – no rope, no water – he was fine.

It was fine.

It was just a panic attack.

He could do this.

He had done this before so many times.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The shaking went away slowly as he mumbled nonsensical words to himself. He lifted his head, taking in deep breaths and propped himself up against the wall. Jarvis had left the lights on, thank god, or else he might have started panicking all over again. He ran his fingers through his sweaty hair and came up with a leaf. He stared at it, turning it over and over again until it fell from his hands.

It was brown and crispy, a pathetic husk of a thing. It had probably come in through the window when the cleaners had come by earlier in the week. It was nothing to be worried about.

“Jarvis,” Tony murmured, dropping the leaf to the floor beside him, “call Rhodey, will you?”

“Calling now, Sir.”

Tony wiped his forehead on the back of his arm. He wrinkled his nose, catching a whiff of stale
body odor and then gagged, remembering the smell from his dream. No. It was fine, he mumbled aloud as he staggered upright. He caught himself on the wall and felt his way to the bathroom, keeping his eyes on the carpet.

“Colonel Rhodes is unavailable sir. He had been deployed and is currently on a mission requiring radio silence,” Jarvis said, turning the lights on in the bathroom before Tony could accidentally stab himself in the palm with the light switch.

“Shit,” Tony grumbled, leaning against the marble counter. He tugged his slimy shirt over his head and threw it into the corner beside the cupboard, stripping himself of his filthy clothing with shaking hands; the bandages around his chest were greying and a little pink from where he had scratched at the stitches. He peeled them free and wiped the pale skin underneath clean with one of the medicated wipes the doctors had given him. He made sure to tape the plastic covering over top before he stepped into the shower. “Is Steve up?” Tony asked, turning the shower head to mist so that he wouldn’t get a face full of lukewarm water.

“Captain Rogers is currently in an emergency meeting with Director Fury. Shall I leave a message sir?”

Tony grabbed for the mint and pineapple shampoo, scrubbing at his damp hair as quickly as he dared; the soap smelled boring by comparison, but at least it didn’t smell like that carbolic shit they had forced him to use in the cave. He shuddered at the thought and pressed his forehead against the wet tiles, hoping that he had the strength to keep it together; the last thing he needed now was for Steve to call back and find out from Jarvis that he had smacked himself on the head and blacked out in the shower like some senile old man.

“No,” Tony croaked when he got a hold of his voice again, “no, just end the call. I’ll try again later. It’s no big deal.”

“Sir,”

“Just hang up Jarvis. He’s busy.”

“Captain Rogers says that he will call you back in a few minutes.”

“Jarvis – I told you to hang up!” Tony snapped, slapping his hand against the tiles. He scrubbed at his hair so viciously that it stung, wanting to leap out of the shower clean or not. Why couldn’t people just do what he told them? Couldn’t they just listen? Even his own AI was a goddamned traitor!

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was warm and fuzzy, like he had just woken up.

Tony sighed aloud, turning the water up higher so that he could wash the suds from his forehead. “Hi Steve.”

“Hey! I was wondering when you were going to call me back,” Steve said. “I was pretty sure you were avoiding me.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you,” Tony grumbled, wiping soap from his beard. “I was working.”

“I hope you’re taking it easy,” Steve said. “Ow!”

Tony tensed. “Steve?”

“Sorry – I walked into the vending machine on the fifth floor. Serves me right, too. Should have
been looking where I was going,” Steve chuckled.

Tony smiled. “I hope the machine’s ok,” he joked, closing his eyes as water dribbled down over his face. He tensed, ready to panic, but Steve’s voice was back to chase the fear away as easily as he might open a door for someone holding a heavy bag. He had to hand it to Steve; he always knew what to say even when he didn’t know he was saying it.

“If it isn’t, you’ll help an old man out, right?” Steve yawned. “Oh jeeze, it’s late. Am I keeping you up?”

“No,” Tony said, turning the shower off. “I’m alright.”

“That’s good. How’s the new place doing? I asked Jarvis about it but he was kind of vague – said it was for security purposes and all that.”

“It’s alright. I wouldn’t say it’s great or anything, but it’s home. I’ve got the workshop all set up and all the important stuff’s where it should be at any rate. Lots of spare rooms too,” Tony said. He slapped himself in the head. What the hell was he doing?

Was he inviting Steve over?

He was losing his mind – no. Obviously he had already lost it. He should have put up posters for it – Lost: Tony Stark’s sanity. If found, please return – cash reward.

“Oh yeah?” Steve sounded hopeful, but that couldn’t be right.

Tony scowled. Maybe he really had hit his head on the windowsill. He was probably concussed right now; he was going to have to ask Jarvis to do a scan to make sure. The last thing he needed now was brain damage.

“That an offer, Stark?”

“Sure,” Tony said, grabbing for his towel. “Whenever you want – I mean, obviously if you have time. I’m not trying to twist your arm or anything. I mean, the Tower’s probably better – I don’t have a functioning gym here, but there’s space for one if I plan things right. You don’t need to come.”

“I’d love to come over,” Steve said. “When’s a good time for you?”

“Whenever you want,” Tony sighed in relief, scrubbing at himself with renewed vigor. “Jarvis’ll let you in.”

“Sounds like a plan. You want me to bring something to eat?”

“Sure.” Tony hoped that the offer wasn’t because his stomach had rumbled loud enough to be heard over the microphone. He grabbed for the first aid kit on the counter and cracked it open, fishing out the surgical tape and gauze he needed; peeling the plastic wrapper off his skin wasn’t all that pleasant, but it was better than getting his stitches full of soap. He had tried that once and only once – it had felt like he had stabbed himself with a hot needle over and over again. It had given himself a panic attack so bad it had taken almost an hour to recover from it.

“How’s the chest feeling?” Steve asked, very obviously trying to be casual about it.

Tony threw his soggy towel over the shower curtain rod and headed into his bedroom, forgoing
clothing entirely when he couldn’t find his robe. Food was a good idea now that he thought about it. He had missed breakfast, lunch and dinner the night before; realistically that handful of crackers hadn’t meant squat, and his body was ready to start threatening mutiny if he didn’t eat something soon. “The chest’s doing fine Steve.”

“Yeah? It’s not bothering you?”

“It’s as good as can be expected considering some guy had his hand in there. It’s not going to explode, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Tony – that’s not even remotely funny.”

“Can’t please everyone,” Tony chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “What are you up to? Having talky-time with Fury? Is he telling you scary bed-time stories? Do you need a hug?”

“I was being debriefed on some private stuff,” Steve sighed. “Believe me, it was no bed-time story. I’d rather it had been – then maybe I could go to sleep.”

“Private?” Tony asked, stalking down the hall and down the stairs towards the kitchen. He paused in front of the living room window, frowning when he caught a glimpse of the stars. Everything seemed still outside; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he brushed at them, trying to push away the thought that something was looking at him. “There’s no one outside, right Jarvis?” Tony murmured softly, just loud enough for Jarvis to pick his voice up.

“No sir. There is no human activity in the yard or surrounding area for three blocks, although there is a cat currently attempting to dig in the flowerbed.”

“No Tony,” Steve said, sounding annoyed. “Are you there?”

“I was being debriefed on some private stuff,” Steve yawned, “private. As in, I can’t say anything about it.”

“Right.”

“I’d tell you if I could.”

“Sure.”

“I’m not giving you anything,” Steve grumbled, “I’m not hiding anything either. I honestly don’t know anything about what they were talking about! Half of the files are in Russian. I can’t even read most of it without Jarvis’ help.”
“Well don’t strain yourself,” Tony said through a mouthful of cereal.

“Are you eating?”

“No,” Tony lied, swallowing painfully. “Why would I be eating? It’s… four in the morning.”

“Speaking of that… I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, alright? I’m going to head home now,” Steve yawned. “I’ll swing by later, alright?”

“Sure. See you tomorrow,” Tony said, stuffing his mouth with marshmallows.

“See you later.”

He forced himself out of bed early, but Steve hadn’t stopped by for breakfast – or lunch – or dinner for that matter. Steve didn’t call to say he was running late; he hadn’t even turned his phone on, and every time Tony tried to call him it went straight to voicemail. Tony tried not to take it personally. Steve was busy guy, and it wasn’t like they had set a time to meet. He retreated to his workshop and had Jarvis keep an eye on the front door so that if Steve did get a chance to swing by, he would be the first to know.

Steve didn’t come that night.

Tony worked on Extremis until five in the morning and then crashed as he crawled his way up the stairs to get to bed. He woke on the landing after battling his way through a nightmare where he was being repeatedly drowned to death and barely made it to the bathroom in time to throw up what little he had eaten the night before. The panic attack he went through as he was heaving left him twitchy and nervous as hell; it was lucky he wasn’t expected to be anywhere, because he was fairly certain he would have been a quivering mess.

He spent the day on the couch in the living room reading magazines someone had thoughtfully left for him when they had delivered his mail; he hadn’t had much energy to do much of anything after that.

His eyelids grew heavy around lunch time and despite his best efforts he drifted off to sleep.

He was standing in the garden, only this time it was daytime, and the birds were singing. Tony walked forwards and snatched a leaf off the maple tree, staring at it in wonder as it disintegrated in his hand. He looked around and saw that the light was fading in the sky above. The sun looked like it was being covered up by something black and smooth, like someone had thrown a blanket over it.

The darkness was colder than it had been at night.

He shivered; he was utterly alone here, and the darkness was everywhere he looked.

He started walking, but not matter how far he walked he couldn’t leave the flowerbed. He was tethered to it, returning after every few steps.

The ground began to bubble around him, the grass lifting and splitting as something moved towards him. Tony ran, trying to get away but there was nowhere to go – no place was safe. The soil beneath
his feet burst open and a rotting hand seized him by the ankles.

Tony screamed himself awake. This wasn’t the first time it had happened, but it was the first time he had ever woken with a red handprint shaped mark on his ankle. He swore it off as a figment of his imagination and stumbled towards the bathroom, dry heaving until his body was merely shuddering in time with his gasps for air.

“Sir? Are you alright?” Jarvis asked.

Tony rested against the toilet, shaking uncontrollably as he fought to keep his stomach where it belonged.

God, he wanted a drink; several drinks would do, now that he thought about it. An entire bottle of scotch was part of a nutritious breakfast, right?

“Sir?”

“I’m… fine…” Tony panted, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He rose from his crouched position, still shaking, and gave the toilet a courtesy flush even though nothing had come up. Better safe than sorry after all. No one would appreciate walking into a bathroom someone had just thrown up in. Not that Steve was here to be disturbed by the smell.

“Would you like me to try and call Captain Rogers again sir?” Jarvis asked, as if reading Tony’s mind.

“Sure, why not? I don’t think he’s going to answer, but go ahead,” Tony grumbled, leaning against the wall to keep from sliding to the floor. He closed his eyes, massaging his jaw with the palm of his hand. “What do we have in the fridge that’s easy to eat?”

“I believe we have some leftover wonton soup that was brought in while you were working.”

“Oh? Who brought it?” Tony asked, stumbling towards the door. Soup sounded good, although he wasn’t going to enjoy the whole heating it up thing.

“Ms. Potts brought it in, sir,” Jarvis said after a pause.

Suddenly soup didn’t sound so great. Tony paused, nearly falling down the stairs as he started to turn around to head back to his bedroom.

“If I may point out sir, she didn’t bring it with her. I was the one who ordered it; she merely carried it inside when the delivery driver arrived.”

“Oh.” Tony sighed, catching himself on the banister at the last second. “Alright. I guess that’s alright then.”

“There are also two boxes of rice noodles with black bean sauce that may still be acceptable if they are heated up within the next few hours.”

“Excellent,” Tony murmured, making his way to the kitchen. “You always say the sweetest things.”

“I try, sir.”
Tony didn’t see Steve the next day. To be fair, though, he didn’t see much of anyone the next day – including himself. He spent most of the morning drunk and then went on to spend the afternoon lying on the living room carpet, lounging in the patch of sunlight streaming in through the glass doors like a very manly cat. It was pleasant enough, but when the sun went down he found himself shivering as if he had been out in the snow for hours.

He wasn’t sure if he made it to the kitchen again or for that matter if he actually ate or drank anything other than whiskey. All he could remember was falling asleep with the feeling that something was watching him.

Tony was standing in the garden; it was his garden, really, but it didn’t feel like it was enjoying his company. He looked around, frustrated to find that he was standing in the mushy flowerbed in his bare feet amongst the petunias yet again. The petunias didn’t look all that healthy anymore; their pink petals were curling unpleasantly around the edges, rot touching the fragile flowers even though they had seemed infallible earlier. He scowled down at his mud-slick shins and toes, kicking a bit of rotting wood out of his way.

The mansion was dark when he turned to look at it, illuminated only by the moonlight; the back door was open, a tempting portal out of this nightmare-in-the-making. He started walking towards it, determined to get the hell out of dodge before the action started, but as in most of his dreams he couldn’t seem to leave the flowerbed. Sighing aloud, he kicked at the petunias, annoyed when they wouldn’t break no matter how much force he used.

The earth beneath his feet began to boil and pulse again, bulging upwards, tossing the petunias left and right; the flowers sailed free, landing like bodies might if they were dropped from an overpass. They looked like they were bleeding in the moonlight, their petals leaking fat splotchy tears of water as they flattened against the grass.

Tony gagged; he looked back to the now empty flowerbed.

Fingers emerged one at a time, poking through the murky soil like blackened sprouts; the nails were snagged and bloody, torn to the quick. Whatever it was, it must have had a hard time digging itself free.

Tony bolted, his toes sinking into the dirt as he tried to drag himself to freedom; it was no use. He couldn’t move no matter how hard he tried.

He could hear the thing breathing as it dug itself free from the filth, the sound dull and raspy in the once soundless void of his dreamscape. The sucking noise the soil made as the creature slithered up above the earth made Tony’s stomach churn; he tasted bile in the back of his throat and wrapped an arm around his middle as if to force his body to behave. He turned to look against his better judgement and –

Tony woke up screaming. He screamed again for good measure when his toe hit an open magazine lying on the ground beside him and flailed about until it was halfway across the room from the force of his kicks. He panted, pressing his hands to his sweaty face to try and block out the cursed
moonlight.

What the hell was going on?

Where had these goddamned dreams come from?

It wasn’t like he had been up all night watching a monster movie marathon; he hadn’t turned the television on in weeks, too afraid to see Pepper’s face amidst wave after wave of Stark International commercials.

Tony forced himself up onto his knees.

This was Aldrich Killian’s fault; he just knew it. That rat bastard was a pile of ashes in a box somewhere in SHIELD’s care and yet he was still causing problems from beyond the grave. Tony pulled himself up onto the couch and squashed himself against the cushions, shivering as goose bumps worked their way up the back of his neck. He wiggled, trying to get comfortable amidst the decorative cushions, accidentally dislodging an empty whiskey bottle which hit the floor with a sullen clunk.

“Jarvis? Call Steve, will you?”

It was stupid. Tony knew that, but he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to hear Steve’s voice now more than ever.

“Captain Rogers is not answering his phone, sir. It remains turned off. I have spoken with Agent Coulson, and he has told me to inform you that Captain Rogers is not in any harm, merely away on an undercover mission that requires complete radio silence,” Jarvis said. “Would you like me to try Colonel Rhodes sir? Or maybe Ms. Potts?”

“No!” Tony yelped, jerking further away from the cushions. “God no. Don’t bring Pepper into this – it’s bad enough I’m almost wetting myself from nightmares like some three year old. I don’t need her in here watching me doing it.”

“May I suggest sleeping in your bed sir? You seemed most distressed when you were asleep on the floor,” Jarvis said, turning the lights in the living room on; they weren’t bright, but the dim glow made it easier to see the stairs off in the distance.

Tony thought about dragging himself upstairs again; his bed was awfully nice, even if it was all the way upstairs. He rolled over, rubbing at his eyes to try and clear his bleary vision.

No.

He would work. He needed to work.

Working was better than sleeping; at least when he was working he wasn’t dreaming about things lurking under his petunias. He really fucking hated petunias.

Tony fell asleep sometime during the day and blessedly there were no dreams. He woke late in the evening and padded his way upstairs all too aware that his body needed food; the break he had taken to eat a granola bar before passing out on his keyboard hadn’t been nearly enough. He felt exhausted, weary to the bone, and while his head was still throbbing dully from his hangover, it
wasn’t nearly as bad as it could have been.

He made himself a bowl of chicken soup, using a can he found buried in his cupboard, and sat down at the kitchen table to devour his meal; the soup was nice, but it didn’t get rid of the achy feeling in his joints. He nibbled at an errant noodle, wiping at his face where it had slapped him in the chin.

Even he could tell that he needed sleep. Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion, and while he appreciated the way his mind was slowly shutting off one sluggish neuron at a time, he didn’t like the way the exhaustion was stealing away his basic motor skills. It was so much easier to eat soup when you could actually operate a spoon.

Maybe he would be able to finally get some decent sleep on the couch in the library. He had tried pretty much every room in the joint at this point, and if there was one room that would let him sleep in peace, he would have bet good money on it being the library; it was a the only room of his father’s private spaces that he had kept mostly the way it was, but that didn’t make it a bad space. When he had been younger, he had liked to sneak in and sit amidst the papers and collectable books his father had stored there, and it had been heaven for a nerdy little thing like him. It had been the one place screaming had never followed him; it had been peaceful to fall asleep on the carpet there and sometimes his father would even carry him up to bed if he found Tony sleeping and Jarvis wasn’t around.

Tony snatched a blanket off the back of the couch in the living room before hiding himself away amidst the collectables and books; all of it was vintage Captain America merchandise of course, although there were a few first editions of Asimov’s work in amongst his other rescued treasures from Malibu.

He curled up on the leather couch, tucking the blankets around him and closed his eyes. “Wake me up if something happens, aright Jarvis?” he said with a yawn. He didn’t stay awake long enough to hear Jarvis’ response.

Tony was in the garden. Again.

He cursed loudly and then clamped his hand over his mouth, looking around as the silence of night ate up his voice; usually it would have taken someone else to clap a hand over his mouth to shut him up, but here it felt like if he didn’t quiet down, something might hear him and come running.

It was night again, but that wasn’t exactly new. It was always night here in his dreams, but very rarely was it raining quite this hard.

Tony shivered, wrapping his arms around his middle as he suffered through the storm; his thin cotton shirt was soaked through already even though he hadn’t been standing here long – although, he thought to himself with a weak chuckle, he wasn’t really sure what time was like around here. This was a dream after all. For all he knew he had been here for years.

That thought alone was sobering enough to get him looking around again.

The petunias wilted as plump raindrops peppered down on them; they were soggy and pathetic looking now, far from the hearty looking things he had seen in his other dreams. The soil beneath them had turned into a pea-soup-like mash; he lifted his feet free and tried to find a good patch of grass to dry them off on, but there was nothing but brittle yellow grass around and it was anything
but pleasant on his soles.

He heard the sound of digging and cringed, turning slowly to see where it was coming from this time.

Sure enough, a few inches away from his feet, fingers started poking up through the sloppy soil. Tony stared at them, mesmerized by the way they seemed to be working all by themselves. They paused, tapping at the mush as if to get their bearings and then pushed up again as they wiggled to get free.

Soon enough a pair of grubby, dried out looking hands followed the fingers; Tony wasn’t all that surprised really. He would have been more surprised if the fingers had been traveling on their own – and wasn’t that a pleasant thought?

Tony took a step back, bumping against the invisible edge of the garden that never seemed to want to move. “For fuck’s sake!” He smashed his heels against the mushy soil to try and get some traction.

The hands stilled; the fingers started tap-tap-tapping the ground.

Tony froze. His breath caught in his throat as he got his first whiff of rotting flesh. He gagged, leaning backwards into the invisible wall, and covered his nose and mouth to try and block out the scent.

The hands dug deeper into the dirt, straining and thrashing to break apart the softening soil. Tony watched in horror as the top of the creature’s head started to push up through the hole it had made like some kind of hideous mole. The skin that appeared was blackened and worn like an old glove. Veins bulged across its leathery dome as the creature’s head finally pushed free; mud rolled down its face, pooling into its empty eye sockets.

Tony whirled around and started punching at the invisible wall, kicking at the soil.

No –

No – no – no – no!

He could hear that awful sloshing noise as it started pulling its entire body above ground.

No –

Tony kicked at the wall again one last time in frustration.

“Alright you bastard – come and get me then!” Tony snarled. He turned and lifted his arms to defend himself, willing himself to conjure up some kind of weapon. This was a dream after all, wasn’t it? He could do whatever he wanted in a dream –

The Iron Man armor wouldn’t come to him; the creature, however, did. It might have once been human, but there was little left that was recognizable now that time and death had taken their fill. Its shoulders were hunched and crooked where its shoulder blades had started poking through the remains of its tattered hide. Its body was twisted and emaciated, its skin barely clinging to its bones.

It took Tony by the face, its fingernails digging into his cheeks, and opened its mouth –
Tony screamed himself awake. He fought free from his blankets, rolling off the side of the couch with a squeal as his sweat-soaked skin slid over the leather cushions. The carpet was rough against his face, but despite the sharp pain it brought on contact, it’s touch was comforting enough to draw him from the dream. He rose, his body trembling uncontrollably, and gritted his teeth as his knees threatened to buckle, forcing himself to stand despite a sudden flare of vertigo.

No more fucking dreams – no more!

He ignored Jarvis’ concerned questions and stormed out of the library, throwing the back door open so hard he cracked the glass paneling.

It had rained outside sometime while he slept; darkness clung to the sky like a wet blanket, chased away only by the light of the moon. Tony hadn’t been out here since the landscapers had come in to rework the abandoned grounds, but it was all hellishly familiar even in the dark. The walls around the yard were at least fifteen feet tall, made of thick white granite speckled with flecks of black mica; they were topped with black spikes of wrought iron, custom made for the Stark family from some blacksmith in god-knows-where. Tony’s mother had picked everything out when they had first moved to the mansion, claiming that the wall would keep out burglars and riff-raff. Tony hadn’t seen the point, considering they had security guards posted everywhere, but she had been adamant about putting them up. Howard had called her crazy; she had called him a jackass for not valuing their safety, so here they had come to live.

Despite the walls there was very little in the mansion grounds worth protecting aside from the polished white marble fountain near the back patio. There were stone walkways zigzagging through the manicured grass, circling the fountain and leading back to the house; all of it was tastefully lit by miniature copper coloured lanterns, or rather it would have been had he told Jarvis to turn the lights on. He ignored the path as he charged towards the flowerbeds he knew had to be near the back wall, slipping and sliding in the mushy grass in his rush.

“Fuck you!” He snarled at the petunias, dropping to his knees so he could rip at them. He sprayed himself with muck as he tore the nearest petunia free, tearing it apart. His hands were stained a deep green by the time he was done eviscerating the garden; he sobbed hysterically amidst a pile of shredded petunias, trying desperately to catch his breath. “You’re not real,” Tony wheezed, throwing a handful of the mangled flowers towards the wall. “You’re just a stupid dream!”

The petunias thumped pitifully against a dark shape kneeling beside the stone wall; Tony hadn’t noticed it before, but he sure as hell noticed it now. From what he could see it seemed vaguely human shaped, although most of it was hidden in shadow so he couldn’t be sure.

What was someone doing here on his private property? And for that matter, how had they gotten in?

Tony stood up, slapping the mud from his knees. “You can’t be here,” he growled, taking a step towards the intruder. “Hey – did you hear me buddy? You’re not supposed to be in here – this is private property!”

The dark shape didn’t turn around, but it did move; it twitched, its arm dropping from its lap.

It began to rain, and the creature paused, lifting a hand up to catch the droplets, seemingly admiring them as they landed in the palm of its hand.

The light seemed to vanish the longer Tony stared at his unwanted visitor; his vision grew fuzzy around the edges. He rubbed at his eyes, wiping the rain from his face. “Did you hear me? I said you’re not supposed to be here.”
The shape lowered its hand back to the ground beside it, digging its fingers into the grass.

Tony froze. He recognized those fingers.

“You – you’re not – you’re not real! You’re just some fucked up figment of my imagination!” Tony murmured, walking backwards. He maneuvered through the dark, not taking his eyes off the figure until he bumped into the fountain, toppling over.

When he righted himself, dripping wet from his impromptu bath, he saw that the shadow was gone. He perched on the edge of the fountain for a moment, steadying himself, breathing raggedly.

It had been a hallucination – there was no other explanation for it. Jarvis would have said something if it wasn’t, he reasoned, wringing his shirt out. Clearly, he was far more sleep deprived than he had thought.

He cast another glance at the flowerbed but saw nothing in the darkness. He turned around, sighing wearily to himself when he saw the cracks in the glass door.

He flinched at a sudden sharp pain in his neck; he raised his hand and touched gingerly at the skin below his left ear.

His fingers came back red with blood –

Tony came awake with a grunt. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to get his bearings, aware that his hands were trembling. Well, this definitely wasn’t the library; he highly doubted that his couch had morphed into a bed while he was sleeping. He prodded the mattress underneath him, grumbling to himself when his finger came back sticky and damp.

Great.

Now he had a soggy mattress. Hopefully he hadn’t wet himself in abject fear.

He sat up slowly, scrubbing a hand through his greasy hair. “When did I end up here Jarvis?”

“Oh!”

“Never mind,” Tony sighed, crawling out of bed. He threw open the curtain, wincing when he got an eyeful of bright mid-morning sun. “Well, at least I got some sleep last night.”

There were still faint traces of the previous night’s rain on the ground and in the trees when he stumbled outside, scratching idly at the side of his neck. He made his way down the stone path to the flowerbed at the back and frowned at the perfect looking petunias he found there; the soil in the flowerbed looked a little tousled, but there wasn’t much out of place from what he could see.

Had he been outside?

He glanced at his feet and saw that his toes were still clean as ever.

“That was one freaky dream,” he sighed, rubbing at his neck again. He stalked back inside and went to fix himself breakfast.
Tony stared at the cup in front of him, determined to finish his drink. His stomach churned as he tried to swallow the mouthful he had taken; he gagged on the now lukewarm coffee, almost inhaling the liquid. He coughed until he could breathe again, wiping his nose and mouth on the back of his hand.

“Sir? Do you require assistance?” Jarvis asked in concern.

Tony waved a hand in the air, gasping as he sucked in a precious lungful of air. He wiped at his lips, his hand coming away sticky with sugary coffee. He shoved the coffee cup away, resting his forehead on the table. “No, no,” he croaked, “it’s fine. It just went down the wrong tube.”

He stood up once he could breathe again and grabbed a box of day-old pizza, slinging it onto the counter. He nearly ripped the cardboard in half trying to get at the cheesy goodness inside; his stomach felt a little like it was going to rip itself to pieces. He lifted up a piece, saluted Jarvis with the slice and took a bite.

He chewed slowly, swallowed and then doubled over, gagging. After a few horrifying seconds he managed to choke the food down, but by then he was dreading going for the next bite. He wiped his runny nose, reaching for his coffee and took a sip before he remembered that it hadn’t ended well the last time.

He hacked and wheezed as the coffee caught in his throat, knocking the cup off the table in his haste to grab onto the counter.

“Sir?”

“m…m…f…m’fine,” Tony huffed out, clinging to the counter. He rested his head against the tabletop again, trying to focus on breathing before his panic attacks could start acting up. “I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine,” he chanted. “I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Sir? Shall I call for help?”

“I’m fine,” Tony coughed, throwing up a mouthful of greenish phlegm. He stared at it in horror, repulsed by the sight of it. “I’m fine,” he croaked, getting to his feet. He grabbed a paper towel from the rack and swabbed up the mess. “I’m going to the lab,” he said, pitching the paper towel and the pizza in to the garbage can in disgust.

“Are you sure that’s wise sir? You haven’t eaten in seventy three hours by my last count –”

“I need to work,” Tony said, shaking his head. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got some crackers down there still, right?”

“Yes sir. The cupboard beside your drawing board still contains three bags of Ritz crackers and one box of saltines.”

“Saltines sound pretty good right about now,” Tony sighed. He shuffled his way to his workshop, rubbing at his forehead as he went. His head was pounding worse than it usually did when he was coming off a bender. “Do I have any Advil left?” he asked. He nearly smashed the back of his head against the doorframe when the lights came on. It felt like someone had turned a spotlight on right in front of him. He staggered, blinking back stars and raised an arm to cover his eyes. “Jesus, Jarvis – turn the goddamned light down!”

“This is the lowest setting sir,” Jarvis said, sounding confused. “I am incapable of lowering it any more without turning the light off entirely.”
“Then turn it off,” Tony growled, squeezing his eyes shut.

His headache flared up, roaring to life all at once; his skull felt like it was being squeezed tighter and tighter.

Jarvis turned the lights off.

Tony staggered along the wall, feeling his way towards the cupboard. “There’s Advil, right?” He asked with a croak, his voice breaking. It felt like he had a mouthful of sandy cotton; his face felt like it was on fire.

“Sir? Are you alright? You appear to be feverish.”

“Advil, Jarvis – Where’s the Advil?” Tony fumbled about and found the nearest handle, yanking the cupboard open. He squinted in the darkness of the lab, trying to guess if what he was looking at was food or tools.

“There should be an ample supply of Advil in the third drawer to your left sir,” Jarvis said soothingly. “I’ve sent Dummy to get you a glass of water. Please sit down before you fall.”

“Water?” Tony yanked the right drawer open, seizing the plastic Advil bottle like it was a rattlesnake trying to jump out at him. He fought with the lid, forcing it open. The pills scattered everywhere, hitting the floor with a clatter. He cursed and dropped to his knees, feeling along the cement for the round pills. He snatched two up, shoving the rest out of the way and sat down on the floor.

Dummy rolled up with a beep, waving his arm up and down slowly as to not dump the water out of the glass clasped in his hand; Tony was mildly impressed. Dummy beeped and cooed until Tony got his hands around the glass, whirring warily when Tony popped the pills into his mouth as if concerned that Tony was trying to eat nuts and bolts.

Tony took a slug of water and managed to choke the water and pills down despite the fact that it burned the entire way down. His stomach began to rumble unhappily as the water settled. He prayed that he could keep everything down.

“Sir?”

“I’m just going to sit here for a few minutes,” Tony rasped, wiping tears of pain from his stinging eyes. He leaned back against the cupboard, staring up into the inky darkness of his workshop. “Is Extremis ready for production yet?”

“Yes, sir. Would you like me to initiate the final building sequence?”

“Yes,” Tony murmured, bumping the back of his head against the cupboard, “build it. I want this over and done with. Fuck this headache, and fuck the dreams.”

“Would you like me to try and contact Captain Rogers again sir?” Jarvis asked.

“Sure,” Tony snorted, trying not to sound as bitter as he felt. He struggled upright, feeling around to find the edge of the cupboard so he wouldn’t scrape himself. “Why not? He’s not going to answer, but go ahead. I’m going to go take a nap.”
Tony woke up on the living room couch with no memory of how he had managed to drag himself there. He groaned, rubbing at his eyes and sat up, looking around the room. His headache had vanished while he was sleeping, becoming nothing more than a distant memory.

“Jarvis?”

“No, let’s leave it off for now. What time is it? Any sign of Steve?” Tony asked, creeping towards the kitchen. He stumbled around, half-blind even with his eyes already adjusted to the darkness, nearly taking out a stack of books with his hip as he rounded the corner. He steadied the rickety pile, chuckling to himself as it teetered.

“It is just after one in the afternoon, sir. Captain Rogers has not checked in with SHIELD yet, but he has left a message stating that he is sorry that he was away for so long. He has asked for information when you are available and says that he will likely be trapped on the Helicarrier for at approximately two more days. He says that he will bring dinner and dessert as he owes you one,” Jarvis said.

“Damn right!” Tony grumbled, throwing open the fridge. The light inside nearly blinded him; he turned away, squinting through the brilliant white haze until his vision cleared again. “Tell him he can drop by whenever he likes. I’m always up for free food.” He scrounged around in the fridge, slipping the milk free when he found that it was the only thing left edible. He opened the carton and gave it a cursory sniff to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him.

“I have delivered your message sir. Captain Rogers says that he will call you back when he gets out of his latest debriefing.”

“Fantastic,” Tony said. He felt giddy, like he had swallowed a bowlful of sugar.

Steve was back!

Finally!

God, he was being stupid. He shouldn’t have been so excited about seeing Steve – it wasn’t like Steve was all that interesting, aside from the whole wholesome sweetie pie thing he had going.

Oh god…

No.

Nope.

He was definitely not thinking about that.

Tony shut the fridge, milk clutched delicately in one hand, and grabbed himself a bowl from the drying rack. He gave the bowl a once over, making sure that it wasn’t covered with caked on filth seeing as how he didn’t remember the last time he had actually done dishes and then grabbed a box of shredded wheat from on top of the fridge; he would have preferred something else, but bending down to forage under the cupboards wasn’t all that appealing a proposition at the moment.

He poured himself a generous helping and sloshed milk on top.

He glared at the cereal. “You’re going down buddy,” he growled, scooping up a tiny chunk of soggy wheat.
“Sir?”

“Just talking to my food,” Tony grumbled.

He ended up eating three bowls of cereal and drinking half the carton of milk; afterward he stumbled into the living room to take a nap on the couch, too tired to trudge down to his workshop to tinker.

When he woke up next, night had fallen. He blinked awake, yawning into the heel of his hand and struggled upright, leaning against the arm of the couch. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Any news from Steve?”

“I am calling him now sir. He requested he be phoned when you woke up.”

Tony lounged against the cushions, yawning to himself. He gathered up the nearest pillow and tucked it against his belly to block the cold draft that was trying to steal away his warmth. He gazed around the room slowly, trying to force himself to wake up.

“Tony?” Steve sounded exhausted.

“Guilty, Tony sat up straighter, clearing his throat so he wouldn’t sound like he had just woken up from a night of debauchery. “Hey Steve. How are things going?”

“It’s… complicated. Look, I know I told Jarvis to call me back whenever, but I’m really tired right now…”


“Tony –”

Steve’s voice died abruptly.

Tony rubbed at his face again, feeling like a fool. What the hell had he been thinking? He shouldn’t have bothered to call Steve. God, what was wrong with him?

“Sir? Captain Rogers is trying to call. I believe he didn’t intend to end the call that way,” Jarvis said.

“It’s fine. Tell him I’ll talk to him later,” Tony sighed, getting up. “It wasn’t that important.”

“Sir? I believe Captain Rogers thinks otherwise.”

“He should get some sleep. He’s been busy.” Tony walked over to the living room door. He traced his finger along the cracks in the glass, scowling at the damage. He never had gotten around to calling the repair people. He made a mental note to tell Jarvis to make an appointment when he was feeling better; having strangers wandering around his house while he was feeling like shit was never fun, even if he hid out of sight and only watched them through the security cameras.

He frowned.

Something was out in the garden. He couldn’t see what it was, but there was no mistaking the dark
human-like shape near the flowerbed. “Jarvis?”

“Yes sir?”

“Who’s that out in the garden?”

“The garden, sir? My sensors indicate that there is no one currently in the garden or on the mansion’s grounds at the present time.”

“What? But it’s – can’t you see it?” Tony thumped a finger against the glass in frustration. “It’s right there!”

“Perhaps you should lay down, sir. There isn’t anything in the garden.”

Tony threw open the door. “Like hell there isn’t!” He charged out into the backyard, guided by the light of the living room behind him.

The grass was wet, the ground muddy and slippery beneath his bare feet. He stomped past the fountain and stormed towards the petunias with his fists clenched at his sides. “You’re not supposed to be in here – this is private property buddy!”

The dark figure didn’t move or react to Tony’s words. It was sitting with its back against a tree, casually peering at the granite wall as if impressed with the masonry. As Tony got closer, the light seemed to cut away. The figure was blurry around the edges, its skin peeling and cracked as old leather; its hands were folded in its lap, its body held stiffly at attention.

Tony faltered. He slipped in the mud, going down on one knee.

No.

This couldn’t be happening – this – this wasn’t real! This was a goddamned dream – it couldn’t be real!

He pushed himself up and started backing away.

He hit the fountain and fell backwards into the water; the cold was more startling than the fall and for a split second it felt as if he wouldn’t be able to push himself back to the surface. He clawed at the water, slapping at it and scratched at the sides of the fountain. He gasped as he pushed himself up, sucking in a lungful of air that smelled strongly of chlorine. “Fuck!” He pulled himself upright, shakily looking around, searching the garden for the figure, afraid that it might have moved.

When he spotted it again, he saw that it was still sitting beside the petunias staring at the wall.

Tony relaxed marginally and dragged himself from the water, dimly aware that his hand was bleeding from where he had torn his nails against the slippery marble. He lunged towards the open door, his feet slapping wetly against the smooth concrete.

He flinched; the pain in his neck was unbearable, the sensation so strong it took the air from his lungs and the strength from his knees. He went forwards, his eyes widening and clasped a hand to the side of his slippery neck –

Tony woke up with a gasp; he was drenched in sweat, lying sprawled on the carpet in his bedroom.
He rolled over, curling in on himself. “No, no, no,” he chanted, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m fine – I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Sir? Are you alright? Your temperature has dropped much lower than normal and you appear to be feverish. Shall I call a doctor?” Jarvis asked. “I can alert Captain Rogers if you would prefer him instead.”

“No,” Tony snapped, shaking his head. “No – I don’t need a doctor. I’m fine. It was just a dream.” He forced himself to get up, wiping his sweaty palms on the carpet. “Steve’s not back yet – he’s not going to be home. Don’t worry about it.”

“Sir? Captain Rogers is home – you spoke with him earlier in the afternoon.”

“What?” Tony snapped, standing up; he made sure to lock his knees when his legs began to shake. His skin felt cold and slimy all over despite the warmth of the room. He pushed the curtains out of the way and stared out the window down into the garden below. It was pitch black outside, but he could still clearly see the strange shape sitting by the back wall. He shuddered, jerking away from the window; he could have sworn he had locked eyes with it for a moment.

“No. It’s not – Jarvis? Lockdown the compound. Nothing in or out,” Tony said, clambering onto his bed. He dragged the blankets up over his head, burying himself amidst his pillows. “The doors are all closed, right? Nothing can get in? It can’t get in?”

“Sir? Is something wrong?” Jarvis asked. “Captain Rogers has called three times since you fell asleep. Shall I put him through?”

“No! Just lock the damned doors! I don’t want it getting in!” Tony said. He curled up in a ball, fighting his way through the panic attack he could feel building in his gut. “Just keep the doors locked. Lock the doors. I don’t want it getting in.”

“Sir, I believe you are hallucinating.”

“Don’t let it in.”

“I won’t let it in, sir – please, go to sleep. I will watch over you. You will be fine.”

“Thanks Jarvis,” Tony murmured, squeezing his eyes shut. “Please don’t let it in.”

The next morning Tony woke up coughing; his ribs ached every time he breathed in and when he breathed out it felt like had been punched in the gut. He could barely lift his head from his sweat-soaked pillow and when he tried to turn to look at the alarm clock on the side table it felt like he had tried to peel all the skin off the side of his throat with a cheese grater.

The sunlight creeping through the curtains felt like it was made of molten iron when it touched his skin; he was surprised he wasn’t red and blotchy all over considering how long he had likely been lying in the sun’s path. He hid beneath the blankets until it was too hot to stay there and then reluctantly forced himself to get up, wrapping the thinnest blanket he had around his head and body to keep the sun away.

His mouth tasted like someone had dumped an ashtray into it while he was sleeping. He coughed, expecting to cack up a few used cigarette butts and was surprised to find only the same disgusting
green phlegm he had found a few days before. He washed his hands in the sink with the lights turned off and then staggered downstairs to try and find something to eat so that his Advil wouldn’t make him ralph all over himself.

It was no use.

No matter how small the bite, no matter how slowly he tried to swallow the water, he couldn’t get anything to go down; it wasn’t that it wouldn’t stay down either – it wouldn’t go down *period*. He coughed for what seemed like hours after his last sip of water managed to find its way up his nose and then sat down on the floor with his back against the cupboard, wiping his drippy nose on the back of his hand.

“Sir? Would you like me to call for someone to deliver something for you to eat? Some soup perhaps?”

“Can’t eat,” Tony managed to croak out. He started coughing again, doubling over when the force of his hacking became too much to handle.

“No ambulance,” Tony said hoarsely when he caught his breath. “Just let me sit for a while. I’ll be fine.” He closed his eyes, sliding slowly to the floor as his strength gave out. “It’s fine.”

The floor was nice at least. It was pleasantly cold against his face, and while it was hard and uncomfortable lying there on cold linoleum, the change in temperature was worth the discomfort. He wasn’t sure how long he lay there on the floor, but when he finally came back to himself he was acutely aware that everything around him was vibrating. It wasn’t a quite hum but it was damned close; he could feel the sound in his head. He could feel it in his *teeth*.

He raised his head, peering around the kitchen to try and find the source of the sound. It seemed louder in the direction of the fridge, but that couldn’t be right. The fridge was brand-spanking-new! He had checked the thing out himself and it was supposed to be on silent-mode, not destroy-your-ears-loud-mode. “Jarvis?”

“What’s that noise?” Tony murmured, lying back down. He pulled the blanket up over his head when the humming grew impossibly louder; clasping his hands over his ears did as much as pulling the blanket over his head had, but at least it muffled the sound enough to let him think clearly. “What’s is that? No, scratch that – whatever it is, turn it off!”

“Sir, nothing is turned *on*. Perhaps you are hearing the electricity?” Jarvis said. “Do you require your migraine medication?”

“Probably can’t swallow it,” Tony grumbled, inchworming his way towards the hallway on his belly to try and put some distance between himself and the fridge. “Can you…”

“Would you like me to call Captain Rogers sir?”

Tony froze in mid-crawl.

Did he want Steve coming in here to find him like this? He was a mess; his clothing was sweat stained in ways he hadn’t even thought possible. He hadn’t showered in *days*. Was this how he wanted Steve to see him? He probably smelled awful. The blurry reflection he had seen of himself in
the fridge had been bad enough; he probably looked much, much worse.

“No. Don’t call Steve,” Tony croaked, pushing himself up onto his knees. “I’m going to get some sleep, alright? We can call him when I wake up again.” He managed to pull himself upright and puttered over to the couch in the living room, pulling the blanket up over his head. “And kill the appliances in the living room, will you?”

“I have rerouted power as requested. Do you require anything else?” Jarvis asked.

“That’s good,” Tony said with a cough as he collapsed onto the couch. He dragged a blanket out from underneath the coffee table and built himself a cocoon, pushing all the pillows in front of his face so that they blocked out what little light came in through the curtains. “Thank god for hangover curtains,” he groaned, manoeuvering the pillows so that he had a little gap between them so that he could breathe.

“Indeed, sir. Would you like me to order take out while you sleep?”

“I… I guess some soup would be nice,” Tony conceded with a grimace. His stomach clenched sharply and he choked down a mouthful of bile.

“Sir? I insist that we call a doctor,” Jarvis said.

“I’ll sleep it off,” Tony grunted. “Just let me sleep.” He let out a sigh, pinching the web of skin between his forefinger and thumb to try and make his headache more bearable. “Hey Jarvis?”

“Yes sir?”

“When you call Steve, can you have him bring over doughnuts or something for dessert?”

“Dessert?” Jarvis sounded confused. “Sir, I really think I should call someone.”

“Just tell Steve to bring doughnuts,” Tony murmured as he drifted off. “And tell the man in the garden to stop staring at me. It’s annoying.”

Tony took a lurching step forwards. He blinked, waking as his foot collided with a copper lantern. He looked around, squinting in the darkness; his head pounded dully as he moved and his stomach gurgled each time he opened his mouth to cough. Everything seemed to hurt, and where it didn’t hurt it felt like it had been soaked in ice water instead. Somewhere along the line during his impromptu sleep-walking trip he had dropped his blanket and stripped off his dirty shirt.

It was dark again. Somehow it always seemed to be dark these days.

The grass wasn’t wet today, but there was still a hint of freshly turned earth in the air. The stones beneath his feet felt cold but he continued to shuffle forward towards the petunias instead of avoiding them.

Tony scratched idly at the side of his neck. He squinted, noticing something sitting off in the distance beside the back wall.

It was looking straight at him.

The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end; he could feel it staring at him through the
darkness, and even though he couldn’t quite make out what it looked like, he could see its eyes glowing as it watched him.

He took a step and then started to backtrack, praying that he wasn’t going to trip on anything; he turned to see how far he needed to go and by the time he looked back it was standing in front of him. He hadn’t even heard it move.

Even with the way decay had warped the creature’s body Tony could tell that it had been a man at some point in its life. The man was naked, his shrunken cock and balls hanging like dehydrated fruit between his legs. The cheekbones jutting out against the stranger’s taut blackened skin were sharp, features that would have looked handsome on someone living. He was bald, with little wisps of black hair hanging from his misshapen skull. His eyes were ruby red; they were the only part of him that looked even remotely alive.

Tony couldn’t stop looking at the stranger’s eyes. He opened his mouth to speak but the words wouldn’t come and neither would the screams.

The man placed a finger on Tony’s lower lip. “Hush now,” the man rasped, his voice barely above a whisper. “Hush.” He rubbed a scabby hand over the side of Tony’s face, his fingers lingering on the coarse hairs of Tony’s beard. “You’re a sweet little thing, aren’t you darling? I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been so good.” He took Tony by the face, his ragged nails digging into the meat of Tony’s cheeks. “Now be a good boy and let me feed.”

Tony couldn’t move.

The man turned Tony’s head to the side as easily as he might move a doll. He leaned forward, brushing his lips against Tony’s exposed throat. His breath was cold and stank of old earth. “You smell so good. Did you know that?” He bit down, his sharp teeth piercing Tony’s skin painlessly, and began to feed suckling at Tony’s neck. His hands cradled the back of Tony’s head, tangling his fingers in Tony’s hair.

Tony struggled feebly to break free, but his strength had gone leaving him weak like an exhausted kitten. He drifted forwards as his knees began to give out, bumping against the stranger’s chest. He was surprised to find that the man could hold him up even though he was so thin and boney. The man stroked the back of Tony’s neck as if trying to offer him some kind of comfort; he quickly gave up when Tony tried to shove him away, and instead dug his teeth deeper into the flesh of Tony’s throat.

Tony drifted in and out of consciousness. He felt heavy, as if he was going to drop through the floor. His teeth chattered as the cold night air claimed him.

The man pulled back, licking at Tony’s throat with his leathery tongue. Once he seemed satisfied with his work he sliced himself across the shoulder with his clawed fingernails, pushing Tony’s lips against the wound. “Drink,” he murmured, his words heavy and slurred, “drink.”

Tony couldn’t stop his lips from mashing against the man’s wounded shoulder. The blood was warm, flowing freely from the shredded flesh in a way that didn’t seem natural; it stained Tony’s lips red and tasted stale and coppery. When Tony wouldn’t drink, the man plugged Tony’s nose with one emaciated hand, shoving Tony’s mouth against the wound with the other.

“Drink,” the man ordered.

Tony couldn’t help it. Woozy from blood loss and lack of oxygen, he opened his mouth to drawn in air and instead took in a mouthful of blood. He wanted to gag on it, but for some reason he
swallowed and by then there was no stopping him. He drank and drank till the blood grew cold and flowed sluggishly against his lips.

The man pulled Tony away, wiping its grimy thumb over Tony’s lower lip. He seemed pleased when Tony struggled against him. He even smiled when Tony found his legs and stood up. His lips were on Tony’s in an instant, his tongue pushing its way into Tony’s mouth.

Tony retched and pushed the man away, shoving hard enough to trip him on the ornamental lanterns. The man stumbled but didn’t fall; it was enough to give Tony a head start.

Tony ran. He could see the open back doors ahead of him and dove towards them, hitting the frame with his foot as he made it inside. He crashed head first into the carpet and lay there panting, sprawled on top of his lost blanket and shirt.

The stranger was coming –

Tony could sense him in the distance – he could hear the man’s feet lazily hitting stone as it made its way up the path towards the house. The sound was methodical, the footsteps heavy and even. There was no rush after all; it wasn’t like Tony was going to go anywhere. He was already down, spent and exhausted from the short dash into the house. He struggled to sit up, clawing at the carpet to find some kind of handhold and resorted to simply turning to face the man instead. If he had to die, he would do it with his head held high and his eyes locked on his killers. He wasn’t going to look away – not for this.

“You have beautiful eyes,” the man rasped from the doorway. He stood there, framed in the moonlight, a grim creature of nightmares alive at long last. The burnt texture to his skin was fading away, but it wasn’t quite gone. His flesh hadn’t returned to his bones, yet he looked years younger. He peered down at his hands, marveling at them and then looked up, cracking a smile; his teeth were pearl white, tinted with the faint remainder of the blood he had so lovingly gorged upon. “Be a good boy,” the man said, turning to look up at the sun. “I’ll be back later and we’ll sort this mess out together.”

Tony watched as the man walked back towards the petunias, then he laid down and passed out.

Tony banged his head on the coffee table when he woke up; he barked out a curse and gave his head a slight rub, his hands too weak to do much else. He stared meekly up at the underside of the coffee table for what felt like hours trying to gather his strength before crawling out from his hiding place.

The back doors were still wide open. He sat up slowly, fighting off an unpleasant mixture of vertigo, exhaustion and nausea, and picked his blanket up, wrapping it around his trembling shoulders. That faint cottony feeling was back in his mouth, but now there was a hint of copper and earth with it. He wanted to throw up; even bile would have tasted better, but there seemed to be nothing left in his stomach to use for even that.

Tony stumbled over to close and locked the patio doors, taking care to feel along the cracked glass before sitting down on the couch.

He hunched over, clasping his hands over his ears.

He could still hear the stranger’s voice in his head – his words looping over and over, distorting until they were nothing but a mishmash of broken syllables and consonants.
“Sir? Are you alright?” Jarvis’ voice was like honey to Tony’s ears, so sweet and kind he was afraid for a moment that he was dreaming again. Tony lifted his head sluggishly and blinked blearily up at the television, unable to focus on anything other than the blackened square sitting in front of him.

“There was a man in the garden last night,” Tony grunted, stroking the side of his neck. The skin there felt wet and sticky even though the wound had long since closed up and scabbed over. He pulled his hand back, staring at the flecks of dried blood on his fingers, unable to look away once he knew it was there.

“Sir? I don’t understand. Did something happen when you went out into the garden?” Jarvis asked, sounding puzzled.

“There was a man in the garden last night,” Tony repeated slowly, forcing his heavy tongue to form the words.

“I have no records of anyone being on the property last night, sir,” Jarvis said, “should I call security?”

“S’ no point,” Tony murmured, wiping his hand on the blanket pooling around his shoulders. “I’m going down to the lab.”

“Sir?” Jarvis sounded frightened. “Your temperature isn’t reading properly – I believe I am malfunction. May I call someone to verify my results?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Sir, according to my sensors you appear to be… dead.”

Tony laughed so hard he started coughing; he wheezed painfully, his body still shaking despite the pain. “Dead. That’s a good one,” he wheezed.

“May I please call Captain Rogers now that you are awake?”

Tony shook his head, wiping spittle from his lower lip. “No. Steve doesn’t need to see this. I’ll be fine.”

“If I can’t call Captain Rogers, may I at the very least call Doctor Banner or Ms. Potts? You are unwell and I am worried about your health,” Jarvis said. “If my sensors are not functioning at one hundred percent, I will not be able to help you.”

Tony stood up, pulling the blanket tight around his shoulders.

The sun would be rising soon.

He could feel its warmth even away from the windows and for the first time in his life the thought of the sunrise scared him. He padded over to the wall, staggering when his vision blurred as something started dripping down his face from his eyes. He began to cough again, spraying the wall with a gummy mixture of reddish phlegm and spittle. He slid down the wall, panicking as his throat began to close up, clawing at the drywall to try and keep from crashing face first into the floor.

No! Not now – not now!

“Sir!”

Tony coughed harder, forcing himself to keep coughing even when his body wanted nothing more
than to give up. He spat out another glob of phlegm and suddenly he could breathe again. He gasped, clutching his throat, massaging the lower half of his jaw where it felt like he had gone three rounds with Thor’s hammer.

“I’m fine. All I need is Extremis. It’s ready, right?” Tony said, trying to stand. He doubled over as his gut clenched up, catching himself on the corner of the wall, gouging marks in the paint.

“Sir!”

“Extremis – it’s finished, right?” Tony gritted out.

“Yes, sir. It finished production two hours ago. I would advise against using it in your current condition – the consequences could be disastrous if you don’t have immediate medical supervision.”

“It’ll be fine,” Tony hissed, forcing himself to move down the hall. “It’s not like I’m dying. This is just a really bad cold – the flu maybe. It’s nothing. You said it yourself – I was hallucinating. There was nothing in the garden.”

“Sir – your temperature has dropped again. I am calling an ambulance.”

“No!”

“Sir, please! You are severely malnourished and dehydrated!”

“Call Steve,” Tony said, stumbling into his workshop. He was glad that he hadn’t had the energy to put the electronic locks in down here yet, because he was sure that Jarvis would have locked him out by now. He crashed into the corner of the production table, grasping feebly for the small vial of Extremis that sat gleaming amidst the darkness of his workshop. He was relieved that he had had the presence of mind to leave the injector beside the production chamber, or else he was sure he wouldn’t have been able to find it in the gloom.

The room hummed deeply as he locked the Extremis vial in place. The injector felt right in his hand, better than even a glass of scotch. This would fix everything.

“Sir, I must protest – please, at least wait until you’ve spoken with Captain Rogers to use Extremis,” Jarvis pleaded.

“It’s fine, Jarvis,” Tony said, lining the injector up against the side of his neck just below his ear. “It’ll be fine.” He pulled the trigger; the needle pierced his skin and for a split second it felt like he was floating up above his body.

His knees buckled.

He crashed into the floor, hearing the injector hit the ground beside him as he blacked out.

Everything hurt all at the same time; there wasn’t an inch of him that wasn’t screaming for mercy.

He could feel every bone in his body shattering and rebuilding; he wanted to wail as every muscle and every ounce of fat broke down and reconstructed itself as Extremis did its work, chugging along at a pace far too slow for Tony’s liking.

Tony hadn’t been prepared for the itchy feeling the rebuild brought with it. He wanted to scratch everywhere, but something had grown around him while he was sleeping and now he was covered
in some kind of black carapace; he couldn’t move even if he had wanted to, and so he was forced to lie still and wait for Extremis to finish with him. His eyes were the first organs Extremis regrew. He wasn’t sure why he was thankful for that regrowth in particular; it wasn’t like he could watch what was going on, considering how thick the shell around him had grown. Everything was dark and moist, but it was warm so at least it wasn’t like he was freezing anymore.

He must have shrieked at some point – it was probably when his lungs and internal organs grew back –because Jarvis started talking, and the AI had sounded concerned. Tony wanted to tell Jarvis that everything was fine – that it was all going as planned, but somehow he couldn’t find a way to express the sentiment. Maybe that was because Extremis was busy rebuilding his brain.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Extremis has installed perfectly... or has it?

Chapter Notes

Warnings for, violence, suicidal thoughts (on Tony's part) planning to die and depression - and for blood drinking/accidental blood drinking. Just a heads up :) See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony came to lying naked in a pile of glittering black sand. He groaned, rolling onto his side as the rest of the room spun from kaleidoscopic swirl into crisp, clear reality. The sand smelled like cinnamon and sugar; he sneezed, wiping at his nose where some of the dust had decided to cling to his skin.

Well, he hadn’t written that into Extremis. Why the hell had it built a shell around him?

He sat up with a start, running his hands over his face. Oh thank god! His beard was still the way he liked it. His hair felt a little oily and a tad on the crusty side but he was sure a few showers would get rid of that. He felt around on his chest, giddy when he couldn’t find the bandages over his sternum. It was gone! He was free he was – oh.

Wait.

There it was.

He scowled when he found the last shreds of the bandage, ripping it free; how it had stayed on was a miracle in of itself. He felt his way along his chest and found a circular indentation in his skin, situated where the arc reactor had once been. He ran his fingers around it, sighing to himself. Well, at least it wasn’t a hideous mess of scars anymore; now it was just a fancy circle. He could probably pass it off as scarification if he wanted. He gave the circle a prod with his finger, and was ecstatic to find that it was solid again. “No more wiggly bones!” he crowed, punching the air. “Fuck yes!”

He felt around the rest of his body, gleeful when he saw that his other scars had vanished, leaving behind nothing but smooth, fresh, skin – young skin, too. Everything felt a lot tighter and springier. He was excited up until he prodded his hip and found that to his horror, his body fat hadn’t disappeared like he had hoped. “Aw man!” He gave his hip fat a sullen squeeze. “I guess I’m stuck with you. I should have coded that in somewhere...”

“Sir? Are you awake?” Jarvis sounded tentative, as if he wasn’t sure Tony was going to answer him.

Tony frowned. “Of course I’m awake. Can’t you see me?”

“I’m afraid my sensors are malfunctioning sir,” Jarvis said, “your temperature still shows in negative
degrees, and I’m afraid I’m no longer able to pick you up with my cameras.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “I’m invisible?”

“I’m afraid so, sir. I can hear you, but I am afraid you are, for the time being, a non-entity.”

“Hold on,” Tony muttered, closing his eyes. “I’ll fix it.” He licked his lips and reached out in his head for Extremis’ connections, slipping to Jarvis’ network as easily as he might walk into an empty room. He saw the network connections in his head, all of it crisp and blue. The operating system itself was beautiful; the numbers flew in front of Tony’s eyes like fireflies, and for a moment he almost lost himself while chasing the lines of code as they scrolled past. He caught himself gaping at files and cleared his throat; anyone who watched him work now would start think he was staring off into space, having fried his brain at long last. Tony tapped into Jarvis’ main server after a brief venture into his base code, searching through the network for errors. “You have some very sexy looking code my friend,” he teased, pulling up the modules that controlled the security cameras and temperature sensors in the mansion.

“Indeed,” Jarvis said. “Shall I operate as usual, or would you like to limit my application usage?”

“Work with all your usual limitations, but prepare for downtime and a debug if you need it. I’ve already tagged the malfunctioning systems, and… we’re not looking at a forced bug or intrusion. Hell, this doesn’t look like a hack either,” Tony watched the code in his head as Jarvis worked, frowning at the modules as they whizzed past. Nothing caught his attention, but then again he had to admit he was a teensy bit distracted by the amount of data streaming in front of him. He had always known his systems were made up of a massive collection of code; he would have been a pretty poor programmer if he didn’t know all that, seeing as how he had written every last line of what he was seeing. But looking at it in his head made it feel like he was staring at a galaxy instead of numbers and letters.

“Are you alright sir?” Jarvis asked, pausing his program.

“Oh yeah,” Tony whistled, rubbing his hands together. “Extremis is perfect.”

Extremis was sleek and elegant, able to tap into any technological device around him with ease; he could even use it to turn the armor on if he wanted to, and it would come running from the Tower to find him. Electronics would obey his every whim, springing to life so long as they had the right chipset; old tech was fairly useless to him, but everything newer than a Commodore 64 was fair game. Tony connected to the mansion’s Wi-Fi just for the hell of it, cackling as he streamed videos in his head while simultaneously debugging code and viewing the latest Iron Man blueprints. “This is… god… this is what it’s like for you all the time, isn’t it Jarvis?” Tony had always dreamed of being this efficient – of being able to work as quickly as he could think and now those dreams had come true.

“I believe so sir, although I am fairly certain you are doing far more work than I am at the moment,” Jarvis said dryly. “Would you like me to activate the nanites sir?”

“They went in alright?” Tony watched the AI page through its tasks, laughing when he saw the names of some of the processes Jarvis was using. He had forgotten just how much of a learning system Jarvis really was; it was easy to overlook how many things the AI had going on at one time, and even easier to ignore the fact that while he had written the code for most of it, Jarvis had supplemented and refined the rest all on his own, turning it into an almost alien language to someone who didn’t know what they were looking at. Tony watched in awe as Dummy wheeled towards him, seeing the code implementing before Dummy even got close enough to see; it was beautiful. “Hey buddy,” he said with a grin. Dummy offered him its hand; Tony gave the robotic claw a shake,
laughing when Dummy started cooing loudly, begging for attention.

“The nanites were administered properly, sir. They latched onto the Extremis signal and deployed shortly after you broke from your cocoon. Your under-sheath is currently housed in your bones, accessible after the nanites finish their work. Shall I turn the lights on? Or would you prefer to sit in the dark like a mushroom?” Jarvis asked.

“Nah, leave the lights off,” Tony said, grinning, “I got this.” He flicked the lights on with his mind, looking up at the fluorescent tubes above his head. That was a bad, bad idea; he threw himself flat onto the floor and wrapped his arms around his head, adjusting the brightness settings as he cringed in agony, his vision a mess of purple and blue spots. “Shit, shit, shit – forgot my new eyeballs aren’t as crappy as my old ones,” he groaned in agony.

“So it would seem,” Jarvis said. “Have you discovered the reason for the malfunction yet, sir? I have gone through my code several times, but I have found no reason for the temperature variations or the sensor failures. By all accounts, you should be showing up on the feed, yet you are not registering. The nanites are not showing up either, although they are connecting to the system just as Extremis is.”

“Let’s see,” Tony hummed. He scrolled through Jarvis’ visual modules as well as the household security ones, absorbing the information almost instantaneously. He still couldn’t see anything that could be causing the recognition failures; if it was there, he would find it, but so far the systems looked pretty clean. It was his system after all – he hadn’t expected to find any sloppy code. He did rebuilds and debugs every week to make sure nothing was out of whack, and if something had been there, he would have seen it by now.

He pulled up the feeds for the workshop and saw that as Jarvis had said, he wasn’t appearing in the video feeds; he wasn’t casting a shadow. There wasn’t any distortion left behind either – it was like he wasn’t even there. He scrolled backwards in time through the security footage, trying to find when the errors had first started and paused, surprised to see Steve’s startled face on the kitchen feeds. “Jarvis?” Tony looked at the timestamp. The feed wasn’t old – he had barely gone through the previous day! “Why didn’t you say Steve was here?”

“Captain Rogers arrived shortly after you injected yourself with Extremis. Since you were sealed away and immobile, he decided to head upstairs to sleep in the guest room. He then headed out this morning to get groceries when he saw that your cupboards were essentially bare,” Jarvis said, sounding weary. “He seemed distraught when I informed him that you have been suffering through an unknown illness and rushed right over to see if he could help.”

Tony winced. He could vaguely remember telling Jarvis to call Steve, but he hadn’t actually thought Steve would show up. He had been fighting the flu after all, not flesh eating disease. “How mad is he?”

“He insisted that I call an ambulance and when I refused as per your instructions, he punched a hole in the wall.”

“Ouch. That bad, huh?”

“I believe the term for his emotional status was livid, sir. He repaired the hole after he calmed down.”

Tony sighed, running his fingers through his greasy hair. “Well, I’m feeling fine now, so he doesn’t have to worry. I’m not going to be getting sick anymore, remember? I’ve got enhanced healing now and super immunity to boot – well, it’s not at Steve’s level, but its way better than mine ever was.”
“I don’t believe Captain Rogers will find that information as comforting as you do, sir. He was quite irritated when I explained your Extremis project to him. I’m not sure if he was able to adequately process what I told him,” Jarvis said. “I believe he will need a more direct approach.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed with a sigh. “You’re probably right. What’s his ETA? Do you think I have time to take a shower before Spangles gets back?” Tony gave himself a cursory sniff; he didn’t smell like he hadn’t showered in a week anymore, but there was a faint coppery odor to him that hadn’t been there earlier. A shower probably wouldn’t hurt. Now that he was thinking about it, some clothes wouldn’t hurt either. Steve probably wouldn’t appreciate walking in on him naked.

Tony stood up, brushing blackened dust off his thighs. He wandered over to the emergency shower, snatching up a bottle of dish soap from the counter. It wasn’t the fancy soap or shampoo he normally used, but it was always great in a pinch. He stepped into the shower, setting the pressure gauge to low and scrubbed at himself with a handful of yellow liquid soap. He made sure to work some of it into his hair and beard for good measure. It was better to smell a bit lemony than it was to smell like some teenager after gym class, after all.

God, he felt hungry. His stomach rumbled in irritation as he hosed himself off. He slapped himself across the gut in a vain attempt at getting it to shut up.

When was the last time he had eaten something?

It felt like he hadn’t eaten in years. On the plus side, at least he could eat now without throwing up, and if Steve had gone out for groceries there would probably be goodies galore waiting to be shoveled into his cupboards. Steve might even have remembered the doughnuts. Tony groaned, pressing his forehead against the side of the shower stall. He would eat an entire pizza if Steve brought him one – hell, he might even eat all the vegetables in the crisper if he got a hold of them. Everything sounded so good.

“Sir? Captain Rogers has arrived at the mansion and is currently heading to the kitchen in order to put his groceries away,” Jarvis said.

“Shit,” Tony grumbled, scrubbing the last of the bubbles from his hair. He turned the water off and grabbed the scratchy towel Dummy held up for him, rubbing himself down with it despite the grease stains on the side; he pulled on a spare pair of sweat pants and his emergency shirt and headed upstairs with a spring in his step.

Steve smelled great.

He usually smelled great, but today there was something so… yummy about him. Usually the idea of saying that someone smelled yummy creeped the hell out of Tony, but today it seemed oddly fitting. He sauntered into the room, grinning like a fool and grabbed Steve from behind.

“Jeeze – Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“Sorry,” Tony chuckled. “Caught you sleeping at the wheel, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess you sort of did,” Steve said.

Up close Steve looked even better than he had from a distance. He was all hard muscle and smooth
skin; his hair sparkled like spun gold under the kitchen lights and his eyes might as well have been carved sapphires. Tony gave his head a shake. His new eyes were a little too good. He could practically see Steve’s irises and if that wasn’t creepy as hell, he didn’t know what was.

“You brought me doughnuts!” Tony circled around Steve, catching sight of the familiar paper box.

Steve watched him wander with an amused but drowsy smile on his face. “Don’t tell anyone. They’ll think I’m enabling your bad habits.”

“Aww, you’re just the sweetest,” Tony purred, slinking forwards to snatch the paper doughnut box off the butcher block. He lifted the box and gave the sugary sweets a sniff, trying valiantly not to accidentally huff powdered sugar. The doughnuts smelled great, but it was weird to be smelling them clean through the cardboard; chock one more up for Extremis and his new super senses. Tony wiggled his fingers, about to yank the box open when another smell caught his attention: Steve. Tony should have known that something was wrong the moment he started sniffing the air like a hound searching for prey. To be honest, he had sensed something strange the moment he walked into the kitchen, but the sight of Steve standing there in a pair of worn jeans and a soft-looking sweater was too mesmerizing to ignore.

Steve set a bag of groceries onto the table beside him, letting out a yawn. “Sorry. It’s been a long few days.”

Tony’s mouth watered, but it wasn’t because of the doughnuts. He could smell Steve – he could smell the blood flowing in Steve’s veins – and it was better than anything he had ever smelled before. He dropped the doughnut box onto the table, drifting closer to Steve on auto-pilot, grabbing Steve by the chin. Steve blinked lethargically at Tony’s touch; Tony smiled and leaned forwards, sniffing his way up the side of Steve’s neck, chasing the delightful ambrosia he found there.

“Uh…Tony? Are you alright? Why are your eyes red?”

Tony sank his teeth into Steve’s neck.

It was easy – obscenely easy – to lap up the delicious nectar he found there as it flowed freely into his mouth. He felt Steve tense against him; it only lasted a moment before Steve was slumping against him, dead weight, his breathe coming out in short stuttered gasps.

Tony moaned into Steve’s throat, biting down harder when the super soldier serum tried to heal over the wounds. He suckled as a fresh wave of blood spurted into his mouth, swallowing down every last precious drop. It was heavenly – better than coffee, better than sex – better than any technology he could dream into existence. He would never get tired of this –

Steve’s jaw hit Tony’s shoulder as his knees gave out; the shift pulled him free from Tony’s fangs, and suddenly Tony came back to himself. He could feel Steve’s heartbeat through his cheek, and while Steve looked like he was still alive, the paleness to his skin made it look like that might not last for long.

Tony grabbed Steve delicately around the middle, giving him a shake, terrified of what he had just done. “Steve? Oh god – Steve!” He patted Steve’s face, trying to get a reaction out of him, but Steve wouldn’t move. He hugged Steve close, tears welling up in his eyes, panicking. “Oh god, oh god, oh god – Jarvis, what did I do? Why did I – was it Extremis? Did I mess something up?”

“Sir! What’s happened? Why is Captain Rogers bleeding?” Jarvis sounded frightened, almost as frightened as Tony.
Tony set Steve down.

No.

He couldn’t – he could still smell the blood and oh god – Steve’s heart was beating so loud – oh god – no! He couldn’t – but Steve had tasted so good and – oh god!

He had tried to eat his best friend – he had tried to drink Steve down like a glass of water on a hot day –

Oh god.

No – it was fine.

Steve was fine – he was breathing, he could hear Steve breathing and that was all that mattered but – no, he looked so good lying there and – oh god!

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was hoarse.

Tony huddled closer to the wall, hugging his knees to his chest. It wasn’t fine – it wasn’t ever going to be fine again. His body felt warm all over; he wanted to scream, but all that came out was a whimper. He had messed it up. He had done something wrong, and now Extremis was broken as hell and it was making him lust after Steve’s blood.

Tony ran his tongue over his teeth, and then immediately regretted it, tasting Steve’s coppery blood on his lips.

It wasn’t fair!

He had checked the code over and over again until it had been nothing but meaningless symbols and he still hadn’t been able to find his mistake. Jarvis hadn’t been able to find anything either but that had been no comfort. Something was wrong with Extremis. Tony had never been afraid of himself before; he had never thought himself capable of hurting his friends. He stared at his blood-stained sweatpants, wondering just where it had all gone wrong.

“Tony? Come on – it’s alright. Come down from there. I’m alright – I’m fine, ok? You don’t need to be afraid,” Steve murmured. He was standing underneath Tony, looking up into the corner of the kitchen ceiling where Tony had taken roost. Steve should have been running away; he should have been getting his shield so he could finish Tony off, but instead he was standing against the wall, swaying, trying to coax Tony down like he was a treed cat.

“I hurt you,” Tony whimpered, squashing his face against his knees so that Steve couldn’t see him crying.

“I know, but you didn’t mean it,” Steve said softly. He stood on his tip toes and reached up until he could gently wrap his fingers around Tony’s bare foot. “It’s fine. Jarvis told me about what’s been happening the past few days. He said that you were getting sicker and sicker and then you started hallucinating that there was something in the garden. Is that right?”

“That’s right,” Tony mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut. “I went outside to check.”
“Did someone hurt you Tony? Was someone there?”

“I don’t know,” Tony shouted, refusing to lift his head for fear of seeing the anger he knew must be there in Steve’s eyes. “All I remember is having nightmare after nightmare about this… this thing in the garden. It kept sitting by the petunias. It smelled like it was rotting.”

“Can you tell me what happened step by step? Let’s talk it out, ok? Just tell me what happened.”

Tony sighed, his shoulder slumping. “I started getting sick after I moved in. I mean, sicker than usual.”

“What’s usual?” Steve asked, sounding unhappy.

“I have nightmares all the time – ever since New York,” Tony said. He couldn’t quite bring himself to tell Steve about the panic attacks of hydrophobia; those still seemed too taboo. “Pepper knows about them. So does Rhodey. They tried to help, and for a while it was… alright, I guess. Not better – just… survivable. But then the nightmares came back after I moved into the Tower and I… I couldn’t stick around. Not after Pepper left me. It didn’t feel right.”

“So you came here,” Steve said, patiently taking the time to rub his thumb over the top of Tony’s foot. His hand was clammy, but still warm; Tony tried to pull away but Steve’s grasp was a lot stronger than he had made it seem and he couldn’t break free.

“Steve,” Tony protested.

“It’s alright Tony. Go on. I’m right here.”

“That’s the problem,” Tony snapped, wrapping his arms tighter around his shins. “You should go get your shield.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steve said, squeezing Tony’s foot. “Just tell me what happened. You started having nightmares and then you got sick, right? What kind of sick? Like the flu or something?”

“I guess,” Tony said. “I had headaches all the damn time and I got nauseous. Couldn’t eat anything – I’d throw it all back up, and when I tried to drink water I couldn’t swallow it. It felt like I ate a bunch of cotton balls and it just kept getting worse and worse.”

“And you didn’t call a doctor?” Steve growled.

Tony shook his head, startled by Steve’s reaction. “It was just a cold.”

“So you got sicker and sicker and you didn’t talk to anybody,” Steve said with a sigh, moving on despite his obvious displeasure, “and then the dreams started? Jarvis said you were moving around like you were sleep walking. He said you were staring out the window all the time – that you were obsessed with the garden.”

“I wasn’t obsessed!” Tony snapped. “I was – it was out there! Every time I dreamed about it I was out in the garden with it! I didn’t want to be there!”

“I never said you did. When was the last time you had one of those dreams?”

“Last night. I went out into the garden again, and it was waiting for me. He bit me – did what I did to you – and then he made me drink his blood,” Tony mumbled. “But that’s insane. That’s what vampires do and vampires aren’t real, Steve.”
“Tony… don’t you think that maybe it’s possible you weren’t hallucinating?” Steve asked carefully.

Tony looked down, his eyes finding Steve’s even in the darkness of the kitchen. “What do you mean? Vampires aren’t real – they’re stories – legends and myths told by people who aren’t mentally stable. They’re storybook creatures – things parents use to scare naughty kids!”

“I’m not so sure about that. We can check it out together. We’ll talk with Doctor Strange, alright? He’ll know what’s happening.”

“I already know what’s happening,” Tony growled. “It’s Extremis. I fucked something up and now it’s gotten corrupted somehow. There’s no way to stop it now that it’s finished coding – you should go get your shield. You need to kill me before I hurt you again.”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Steve said, sternly. “You’re my friend, and I’m not going to put you down like some rabid dog just because we don’t know what’s wrong. Jarvis says that Extremis shouldn’t have done something like this – he says you built safeguards into the programing, and you and I both know that you don’t half-ass things, Tony. I’d bet dollars to doughnuts that something is going on, and that you didn’t do this to yourself. Just come down from there, and we’ll figure something out.” He gave Tony’s foot a tug. “Come on now.”

“No,” Tony shook his head. “You need to go get your shield and you need to kill me. I’m out of control – I’ll hurt you again and I can’t do that. You’re my friend Steve – I can’t hurt you!”

“Well, I’m not going to kill you!” Steve shouted angrily, slapping his free hand against the wall. The blow wasn’t hard, but Tony could feel it through the drywall; he shuddered, wiggling and twisting so that his foot could slip free from Steve’s grasp.

“You’re my friend too, Tony!”

“Steve – you don’t understand! This is for your own good!” Tony shouted. “That fucking thing said it would be coming back.”

Steve froze. “What?”

Tony ran his hand over his face; he was shaking, growing colder by the second. He could feel something in the air now, and it wasn’t just Steve’s anger. The man from the garden was waking; it was a soft sensation, somewhat comforting yet all the same Tony was filled with dread at the thought of him finally getting inside the house.

“Alright,” Steve said, his lips set in a straight line. “I’ll go get my shield.”

“You will?” Tony asked, relieved and terrified at the same time.

“Yeah. I will. But I’m not still not going to kill you.” Steve said, turning towards the living room. “I’m going to go meet your mysterious friend in the garden.”

“Steve! Don’t – it’ll kill you!”

“No. I think I’ll be just fine. Do me a favor,” Steve said as he hefted up his shield, plucking it from the carrying case he had brought it in, “stay here until I get back. I know you don’t like to follow orders, but do this for me – alright? Call it a favor.”

Tony wanted to protest, he really did, but the look in Steve’s eyes made him simply nod in agreement. He felt something – an itchy numbness in the back of his head – and realized belatedly what it was. The creature outside had stirred again, finally waking from its slumber.
Tony shuddered. He could see the man in his head now; he could smell the scent of damp soil as the man dug his way free from his earthy prison. The man was calling for him, murmuring his name like he thought he was uttering prose to some lovesick sweetheart. “Alright,” Tony said, baring his teeth, “I’ll... stay here.”

“Good,” Steve said, throwing open the back door. “Jarvis? Initiate lockdown on the mansion. I don’t want anything getting in or out until I’m back.” He lifted his shield up and stepped outside, closing the door behind him with a click.

Tony closed his eyes and pulled up the security cameras in his head. He might not be allowed outside, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to watch what was going on.

Watching Steve walk out into the garden was frightening, not because Steve was facing down what might conceivably be a vampire, but because Steve looked like he was in the mood to rip the limbs off of something with his bare hands. Tony had never seen Steve so angry before; he had seen Steve angry, sure. He had been responsible for more than a few of those moments, but he had never managed to make Steve this angry. Steve’s glare could have peeled paint it, was so harsh.

Tony watched with apprehension as Steve approached the garden, slipping silently past the fountain and copper lanterns. Steve wasn’t taking any chances. He had his shield up the entire way there.

The man in the garden hadn’t seemed all that strong when Tony had seen him last, but then again, looks were usually deceiving, especially in their line of work.

At first Tony couldn’t see the man standing beside the petunias, even with his superior vision and access to the security cameras. The lighting was poor, even though Jarvis had turned on every damned light in the joint to try and give Steve every advantage available; the backyard, unfortunately, had been built for garden parties and had soft mood lighting. It wasn’t exactly favourable for someone hoping to get into a fight.

The vampire didn’t seem to be hiding, even if he was lurking in the shadows. He staggered out from the petunias, taking care to not damage a single delicate blossom as he moved, sauntering casually across the grass towards Steve as if he was out on an evening stroll and they were merely going to pass one another on the street as they made their way home. He looked much the same as he had in Tony’s last nightmare – or whatever that had been; Tony was fairly certain it hadn’t been a fever induced hallucination now. Instead it felt more like the man had come out of a nightmare. The vampire was still completely naked, and while his leathery skin was once more pulled taut over his boney frame, shredded in places, it looked smoother than it had before, like someone had scrubbed him down and given him a dusting. Some of the man’s skin had even regrown and stretched out enough to cover up some of his dried out muscle tissue and bone; it didn’t make him any more appealing.

The man gave Steve a grotesque smile of sharpened fangs and torn lips. “You’re not the one I was expecting, but you’ll do,” he said with a hoarse cough. He thumped himself on the chest, spitting out a glob of dirt. “Feh. The soil here does not appreciate me the way it did in my homeland.”

“Who are you, and why are you here?” Steve growled. “And what did you do to Tony?”

The man gave the air a casual sniff, cocking his head to the side. “You do not know? Come now – the people in the new world can’t really all be this stupid, can they?”
“Watch your mouth buster,” Steve said as he glared at the man.

“Oh calm down,” the man grunted, picking a beetle larvae out of his shoulder. He flicked it away in disinterest. “I see the sweetling decided to hide himself away. Pity. I wanted to get a look at him now that he’s free from the curse of mortality.”

“Free from mortality?” Steve looked annoyed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Mortality,” the man chuckled. He gestured to himself, smirking when Steve’s eyes followed his movement, apparently very proud of his appearance, even though it looked like he was a few minutes away from falling apart. “I am undead.”

“So I see,” Steve snorted.

“I am a vampire – a creature of the night, drinker of blood, a creator of nightmares. You must have heard the tales. Humans these days seem to be far more interested in tomes than they once were. You should know this sort of thing already. I should not have to explain myself,” the man growled impatiently, crossing his arms over his chest.

“A vampire…” Steve gritted his teeth. “Great. So you really did bite Tony and change him, didn’t you?”

The man nodded curtly, his bones cracking as he moved. “Of course. That is what my people do. It is in our nature. The need whispers in our ears every waking moment. You understand hunger… don’t you?”

“You still haven’t told me your name,” Steve said, stalking closer. He circled the vampire, wary, his eyes never leaving it even for a second. Tony was impressed; standing that close to the creature had to be uncomfortable. The smell alone was likely worse now than it had been in his dreams.

“You may call me Walter,” the man said, heaving a sigh. “Frankly, I would rather you call me nothing, but since my sweetling has already decided to sink his teeth into your lovely throat, I suppose I shall have to gift you with my name.” The man – Walter – bowed dramatically, giving his head a shake. Soil dislodged itself from an open wound on his chest. “I suppose it is only fair to inquire as to what you are named, my dear.” He picked at the slice in his chest, pushing it closed as if that would fix it.

Tony shuddered, recognizing the slice.

“I’m Steve,” Steve said, his eyes locked on Walter’s, refusing to be stared down.

“Well, my dear Steve, sadly, you will never know how sweet your friend tasted. I’m afraid his blood will never be as delicious as it was,” Walter lamented.

“You’re sick, pal,”

“But of course,” Walter said, with a raspy cough. “What else is there to be but sick? Did you expect flowers and crochet? Perhaps a box of chocolate?”

“You’re pathetic,” Steve snorted. “If you think talking cute is going to get you anywhere with me, you’d better get your head checked.”

“I don’t need to get somewhere with you,” Walter laughed, “He’s the one I’m interested in. You’re dessert.”
“I hate to break it to you,” Steve chuckled darkly, “But Tony isn’t the least bit interested in you or your bullshit.”

“I suppose you think you’re speaking for him?” Walter pursed his lips. “Really, what is with humans and their obsession with defending life? Child, life is a disease no matter how you look at it. Human eat up and destroy their world as easy as any vampire could. I was brought into this world just like he was, squalling loudly in birth and squalling loudly in death. There is nothing else to do. Consuming is the only reward we get.”

“I’m not playing a philosophical game here,” Steve said, clenching his fists. “This isn’t a joke.”

“This world is a joke. I just find it easier to take something sweet along to keep one company. Eternity is a… tedious adventure. At least my newest sweetling has good taste.” Walter smiled fondly, his lower lip tearing at the corner of his mouth as a fang poked through crookedly. “He tasted good and has good taste. A most excellent discovery. Will he be out this evening? Or is he going to continue to hide like a frightened rabbit?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to be your dance partner. Tony’s unavailable.”

“Anthony,” Walter called out wearily, turning to face the mansion. “Come out. Don’t be such a baby. Come give your father a kiss, sweetling.” He looked directly into one of the security cameras, cocking his head to the side. “I know you can see me.”

At the sound of his name, Tony pushed himself backwards across the wall, wedging himself in behind the cabinets. He clapped his hands over his ears, hating that he couldn’t block Walter’s voice out without blocking Steve’s out as well.

“He’s not your child – and he’s not your sweetling either,” Steve said, raising his shield. “Fix what you did to him, and maybe I’ll consider letting you live.”

Walter started cackling. He doubled over, wheezing, waving a hand at Steve as if to send him on his way. “You… you can’t be serious! I can see why he keeps you around – you’re so adorable! I suppose everyone needs a fool now and again.”

“So you’re saying you can’t undo what you did? You’re not helping yourself out very much.”

“Oh?” Walter straightened up, flashing Steve his fangs again. “How so? Did you expect me to offer you a trade of some kind? A dark bargain perhaps?” He chuckled, scratching at his lumpy head, shearing off a scrap of brittle hair that got in his way. “This is a forever sort of deal, little one. Anthony is trapped in this state. Now, if you don’t mind I would like to go collect my errant child. I have things to do – he has things to do,” Walter smirked. “So get out of my way.”

Walter attacked so fast Tony almost could keep an eye on him through the cameras; they couldn’t seem to keep up with the movement. He watched in horror as Steve was thrown backwards, soaring halfway across the garden before he could recover from the initial blow.

Walter eyed the back door, scowling at it as he approached, ignoring Steve who was getting back on his feet behind him. “Your locks are pointless sweeting,” Walter grumbled, grabbing the door handle. He hissed and pulled his hand back, staring at his burned flesh in disbelief. “How it this possible? What have you done?”
“You’re not welcome here,” Steve snarled, leaping the last few feet over the fountain, smashing Walter in the side of the head with his shield. The blow was so powerful it split Walter’s skull down the middle, shattering bone like it was glass. The vampire staggered, clutching at the jagged remains of his face, hissing shrilly as air rushed through the new holes in his face, gouged out by his broken bones. He glared venomously at Steve through his one remaining eye. “Well now,” Walter grunted. Half of his teeth tumbled from his shattered jaw, hitting the grass like fallen petals. The skin holding his chin in place sagged as he frowned, pulling the edges down at the corner as if his body had been made of hot wax instead of flesh. “Humans aren’t usually this feisty. My, my, what have they been feeding you?”

“You picked the wrong guy to mess with, pal,” Steve said, smashing Walter across the face again. The vampire went down with a groan, unable to defend himself from the flurry of blows Steve dealt to his body; the solid half of his skull crumbled, leaving his head nothing more than a fleshy sack filled with dust and bone. The light faded from his eye as Walter slumped, sprawling across the patio. A strangled wheeze escaped his mouth as his decaying lungs emptied, and then he was still.

Steve waved a hand in front of his face to chase away the stink. He stood over the vampire, ready to strike again.

Tony flinched as pain shot through his head and chest; he gasped, hitting the side of his head against the cupboard, convulsing as if he had been electrocuted; the pain was blinding and swift, stealing its way through every cell. It dimmed into a dull throb in the back of Tony’s head, there but in a manageable sort of way. Tony winced, rubbing at the back of his neck.

What the hell had that been?

“Oh god – Tony!” Steve jerked around, nearly dropping his shield in his haste to get back into the mansion. He banged on the door so hard it shook in its frame. “Jarvis – is Tony alright? I didn’t hurt him did I?”

“Mr. Stark remains in good health, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis said. “He is watching through the cameras, although he did sound pained for a moment.”

Steve’s shoulder sagged in relief. “Oh, thank god. For a second there I thought he was going to turn into a pile of ash.” He looked down at the vampire’s remains, scowling at the mess. “What do you think we should do with this guy? Should I go get a broom?”

“I believe storing him would be beneficial. I have taken the liberty of requesting aid from Doctor Strange on Mister Stark’s behalf, and while his assistant Wong has been less than helpful,” Jarvis said. “I believe it would be smart to store the remains to be stored somewhere cold, as rot might set in, although judging by the creature’s current appearance I’m not sure if rot is indeed possible.”

Steve let out a shaky breath, adjusting his shield on his arm. “Alright. Is there a tarp around here or something? I’d feel better if he was locked up instead of lying on the patio like this, that’s for sure.”

Tony shut off the feeds, his eyes drooping shut; his body ached like his body was made up of stitched together bruises, and he couldn’t fight the exhaustion creeping through him, even though he needed to hear what Steve was going to do next. A quick nap would be nice right about now – just a
little one, until his headache and the soreness went away. Tony leaned against the cabinet, grimacing when the door hinge poke him in the ear. He dimmed the lights in the kitchen using Extremis. This wasn’t the softest place he had fallen asleep, but it would do.

Tony woke sluggishly, easing into wakefulness, sniffing at the air before he really became aware of what he was doing. He knew what it was that had woken him after a few more sinful sniffs; Steve was standing below him, and he smelled fantastic. He smelled better than freshly baked cookies.

Steve smiled when he noticed that Tony was awake. He gave Tony’s foot a gentle tug to get his attention, his fingers lingering on Tony’s toes. “It’s alright. I took care of it. He’s not going to bother you anymore.”

“What happened?” Tony groaned. He rubbed at the side of his head, trying to smooth away the red lines left behind when the edge of the cabinet had dug into his face.

“You were right. There was someone in the garden,” Steve said dryly. “And he wasn’t a very nice guy.”

“I know that,” Tony said with a huff. “I was watching, remember?”

“I remember,” Steve murmured, running his fingers through his hair. “I took care of it, alright? I dumped the vampire in that big freezer you have downstairs and locked the door. I hope that’s alright – it didn’t look like you were using it all that much, and we – Jarvis and I – we figured that it would be sturdy enough in case the guy’s not entirely dead, although judging by the condition his head is in, I don’t think he’s going to be going anywhere anytime soon. Jarvis is going to keep an eye on him through the cameras just in case, so don’t worry about it. Why don’t you come down so we can talk about it?”

“No. It doesn’t matter that he’s locked in a box, Steve. That’s not going to stop me from hurting you,” Tony said, stubbornly shaking his head. He wrapped his arms around his middle, turning his face away so that he wouldn’t have to look Steve in the eye. Steve’s scent was getting harder to ignore, as was the ache of hunger in Tony’s belly. It was starting to get unbearable, and no matter how much he tried to think about something else to distract himself, he couldn’t seem to focus on anything other than that unhappy growling sound his stomach was making.

“Tony,” Steve said, trying to catch Tony’s attention. He leaned his shoulder against the wall when Tony refused to look at him, peering up at Tony with calm, solemn eyes. “You know I trust you, right?”

“I know,” Tony mumbled.

“You’re not going to hurt me. I fought off that other vampire. I can fight you I have to. You don’t need to worry. I can take care of myself.” Steve reached up and grabbed Tony’s ankle, tugging gently. “Ok?”

“Oh,” Tony allowed himself to be pulled free, landing roughly against Steve’s chest; he wished that he had landed somewhere else, because the moment his face mashed against Steve’s throat he bit down and his teeth were far too sharp for their own good. Steve’s blood smelled sweet, and Tony’s stomach felt so painfully empty. He needed to fill it and quickly, before the hunger burned a hole clean through him.
Steve rested against the wall, maneuvering Tony so that he could hold him upright more comfortably. He tucked Tony against his chest, running his fingers through the soft hairs on the back of Tony’s neck. “It’s alright. If you need to eat, that’s fine,” Steve murmured.

Tony struggled briefly after he realized what he was doing, wanting to get as far away from Steve as possible; Steve’s grip didn’t tighten, but it also didn’t loosen either. He seemed fine holding Tony up as if they weren’t doing anything strange. Tony clamped his mouth shut, embarrassed by what he was doing. He ordered his rebellious stomach to shut up, but it wouldn’t listen. He sank his teeth into Steve’s neck again, licking and sucking at the blood dribbling from the wounds he had made, trying not to purr in pleasure as he fed. It was a miracle he hadn’t hit an artery, or else Steve would have bled out in minutes.

Steve continued to rub soothing circles on the back of Tony’s neck with his thumb, seemingly oblivious to how close he had come to death. “It’s fine. We’ll work it out together. We’re Avengers – that’s what we do.”

“Steve,” Tony slurred wetly into Steve’s neck, “I could kill you. Don’t you get that? I could turn you by accident! I don’t even know how to control any of this.” He forced himself to stop feeding, licking pathetically at Steve’s neck instead of sinking his teeth in again. It was enough to just get a taste now. His hunger seemed mostly satiated, although he was sure if he had continued to feed it would have been more than happy to disappear entirely.

“I know,” Steve said. He ruffled Tony’s hair, hugging him close. “I heal fast, remember? I’m not going to pass out from a little blood loss, and besides, I think you’d need to do the same things the vampire did to you in order to change me. Somehow I don’t see you doing something like that on purpose.”

“You know I wouldn’t,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes as he let himself melt against Steve’s chest. His body felt tingly where Steve had touched him, making it seem like he was fighting off a case of pins-and-needles. They had never been this close before; they had been friends, sure, but Steve had never been overtly affectionate – not like this.

Had he done something to Steve?

Had his vampire body taken control of Steve?

“Are you alright?” Tony whispered. Please, he wanted to beg, please be alright.

Steve let out a deep sigh. “I’m alright. I’m a little dizzy, but it’s not too bad.”

Tony rested his chin on Steve’s broad shoulder, satisfied that Steve was in control of himself. He basked in Steve’s warmth; it was nice to be held so close after being alone for so long. He had almost forgotten what it was like to be touched like this. It felt safe here in Steve’s arms, like no one could ever hurt him again.

His stomach rumbled angrily, ruining the moment, and he flinched, fighting off the urge to feed again. It was far more persistent than he had expected, working its way through his thoughts as if it had a mind of its own. It reminded him that Steve’s blood tasted like coppery strawberries, tangy and sweet; all he had to do was bite down again, and he could be tasting that sweet drink again. He would have gladly sunk his teeth into Steve’s flesh again if he hadn’t been so convinced he would end up draining Steve dry.

“Sir?” Jarvis’ voice was tentative, as if he was afraid of disturbing them. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”
Tony groaned, thumping his head against Steve’s shoulder, using the pain to muffle the urge to drink until it was nothing more than an irritating itch in the back of his mind. He felt Steve move in place and couldn’t help nipping at the exposed patch of skin right beside Steve’s shirt collar, drawing a new trickle of blood. He daubed at the wound with his tongue, mesmerized by how fresh it tasted.

“Strange isn’t available, is he?” Steve murmured, sounding grim. He tucked an arm underneath Tony’s thighs and lifted him up higher against his hip so that he could move away from the wall; Tony grunted in surprise, refusing to look at what Steve was doing. He couldn’t stop himself from licking at Steve’s shoulder as Steve carried him to the couch. When Steve settled on the cushions, tucking Tony against his chest, Jarvis piped up again.

“I’m afraid Doctor Strange isn’t in this dimension at the moment. Wong, his manservant, has finally informed me that the Doctor might return in a week’s time provided things go well on his journey,” Jarvis said.

“A week?” Tony howled, pushing himself away from Steve’s tantalizingly bloody neck. He could barely keep himself from feeding for a minute and they wanted him to do this for a week? No. “I can’t – that’s impossible!”

“It’s not impossible,” Steve said, slumping against the couch. He yawned so loudly his jaw cracked. His eyelids drooped as he laboriously adjusted the pillows underneath him. His body went slack against the cushions.

Tony studied Steve carefully, unsure as to what he should do next. A part of him tried to order him to climb off of Steve’s lap and run; he ignored that voice. Steve’s skin had gone deathly pale and he was drenched in sweat. For a moment, Tony could have sworn that Steve had died, so he reached out, tentatively pressing his fingers against the side of Steve’s neck to see if Steve’s heart was still beating. It was stupid, really. Tony could hear the sound of Steve’s heart beating in his head, so realistically he knew Steve was fine, but nothing felt real anymore.

This had to be a dream – this had to be the hallucination he had been waiting for.

It couldn’t be real.

This couldn’t be his life.

He was not a blood sucking leech – he was an engineer with a fondness of shiny red and gold suits of armor.

Steve captured Tony’s hand in his own, scrubbing his fingers over Tony’s knuckles, his touch gentle and slow. “It’s ok,” he half-mumbled, half-yawned, not opening his eyes, “I’m just sleepy, that’s all. It’s been a long week.”

“Tell me about it,” Tony muttered, wiping his bloody mouth on the back of his hand. He couldn’t ignore the voice in his head this time as it screamed for more when his nose picked up on the blood. He ended up licking his hand clean, feel disgusted with himself.

He slid off of Steve’s lap and fell uncomfortably onto the opposite side of the couch, purposely moving away from Steve’s body heat. He had to close his eyes and bite his lip in order to ignore the tantalizing odor of Eau-de-Steve trying to drawn him back into range. He could to this, he muttered over and over again in his head; when Steve was finally asleep, Tony decided, he would sneak away and find something sharp to end this nightmare.

He couldn’t sit here feeding off Steve like he was a living, breathing, buffet table; he wouldn’t force
that on anyone, let alone Steve.

Steve was his friend.

But if he was a vampire now, Tony thought uneasily, it might not be so simple to kill himself. Weren’t vampires supposed to be immortal? He could remember hearing something about stakes and crosses doing damage to them, but he had always thought those were just things Hollywood had added in as a joke. He had never taken that kind of supernatural mumbo-jumbo seriously – because honestly, who would?

Would stakes work on him?

Could the solution be whittling a piece of wooden dowel down until it had a pointy end?

Tony began to comb through every database he could get his hands on using Extremis, looking for anything that might be of use. He needed to hurry, he thought, gnawing harder on his lower lip. If he didn’t he might not be able to stop himself –

“Tony?” Steve murmured, opening an eye. He fumbled about, patting at the couch until he found Tony’s leg; it took Tony a minute to realize that they were sitting in the dark, and that Steve couldn’t really see him.

“Hey, why don’t you get some sleep, huh? Turn that brain of yours off for a while,” Steve said, squeezing Tony’s knee. “You’ll feel better after resting.”

Tony snorted bitterly.

Sleep wasn’t going to help.

“Tony,” Steve grumbled, dragging his hand over Tony’s knee again, obviously displeased by Tony’s lack of response, “close your eyes and get some sleep. Jarvis will wake me up if something happens while we’re out, alright? Trust me. Go to sleep.”

“Alright,” Tony sighed. He did trust Steve’s judgement, even if he couldn’t trust his own. He bookmarked a few pages, saving them as invisible files on his private server so that Jarvis couldn’t see what was there. If Steve thought sleeping was a good idea, then he owed it to Steve to try and sleep. He could work more, later – there would be plenty of time once Steve was asleep. He couldn’t let Jarvis or Steve know about his plans; they were both too good at trying to save him from himself, and this time he didn’t need saving.

He would have to work things out so that everyone was taken care of once he was gone; he didn’t have it in him to leave behind a mess for someone else to clean up. Pepper was going to be really pissed off when he dumped the company on her, but at least this time she would be taken care of instead of burdened. He would have to write some clauses into his will to keep the Avengers Initiative funded, now that he thought about it. He couldn’t leave them out; Fury would be forced to go crawling back to the Council to get them to foot the bill if he didn’t, and then they wouldn’t be able to do half of what they did without being put on a severely short leash.

“Tony?” Steve mumbled, half asleep, his hand still heavy and warm on Tony’s knee.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t even think about running off, alright?” Steve grunted, shifting against the couch. He slid sideways and leaned against Tony’s shoulder, resting his cheek there.
“I won’t,” Tony said guiltily, praying that Steve wouldn’t hear the lie. He jumped when Steve slid down his chest and landed in his lap, amazed that Steve was willingly putting himself in danger. He opened his mouth to protest, but remained silent as Steve twisted his body so that his face was pressed into Tony’s belly. Steve yawned as he made himself comfortable, his nose rubbing against Tony’s bare skin, finding its way into the small gap where Tony’s shirt had ridden up.

Tony smiled sadly down at Steve, carding his fingers through Steve’s sweat-sticky hair.

He was going to miss Steve.

He was going to miss all of this; even if it had been awful after Pepper had left him, he had always had the Avengers to look after, and now he couldn’t even do that much. “I’ll take care of it, Steve,” he whispered when he was sure Steve had fallen asleep at last. “Don’t worry. You won’t have to do it, I promise.”

Tony woke when Steve rolled lazily in his lap, trying to get comfortable. He had sworn that he wouldn’t sleep until he had finished his grim research, but somehow he had managed to nod off after collecting only a few more bleak notes. He blamed Steve and his stupid, steady, rhythmic breathing. Steve’s heartbeat had grown even stronger as the night had gone on, thumping hypnotically every few seconds. Tony had started to count the beats; that was likely what had put him to sleep, he realized after a few bleary seconds of wakefulness. He was surprised when hunger didn’t rear its ugly head the moment Steve moved underneath him. The fear he had felt the night before was gone too, replaced by a vast sense of calm.

Steve jumped, up, suddenly panicking.

Tony stiffened, looking around wildly. “What? What is it?”

“The sun – you’re – oh god, are you alright?” Steve yelped. He picked up the pile of blankets, still lying on the floor from the previous day, and threw it over top of Tony before leaping across the room, nearly knocking over the coffee table in his rush to get at the back door.

“Uh… Steve?” Tony asked from underneath the mound of blankets, “What’s going on?”

“The sun’s up,”

“And?”

“And you’re a vampire, Tony!” Steve said, lunging at the curtains. “Jarvis, can you make sure the windows are covered?”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible, sir. The curtains were not updated when Mr. Stark refurbished the mansion. They are manual, not automatic,” Jarvis said apologetically. “My cameras indicate that most of the curtains are closed, however, so you will only need to close a few.”

“Oh – good!” Steve sighed in relief. He fiddled with the curtains, pulling them shut, killing the sunlight, and then returned to the couch, peeling the blankets back so that Tony could see.

Tony blinked owlishly up at him. “You do realize that I’ve been sitting in the sun for… oh… how many hours now Jarvis?”
“By my calculation you were in direct sunlight for approximately three hours sir,” Jarvis sounded surprised. “I… don’t know what to say.”

“Three hours?” Steve grabbed Tony by the face, moving Tony’s head left and right, inspecting him for damage as if he suspected it was somehow there and he wasn’t able to see it. “Aren’t you supposed to be… well…”

“Burned up like a marshmallow that got too close to the fire?”

“I suppose that’s one way to put it,” Steve agreed, tilting Tony’s chin to inspect his neck.

“I’m fine, Steve,” Tony said. Steve’s hands were toasty warm and big – bigger than he had thought they were.

Tony coughed, wiggling free from Steve’s grasp. It seemed cruel that this was how he got to be close to Steve. He worried at his lower lip when Steve didn’t move out of his space. “You’re lurking,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest, hoping that might deter any more careful manhandling.

“I know,” Steve murmured. He rubbed self-consciously at his neck and then flinched, pulling his hand back. “Ow.”

Tony paled. “Shit, Steve – I’m sorry,” he started, lurching forwards.

Steve shook his head. “No, no. It’s not from you,” he said with a chuckle. “I kind of dislocated my shoulder when I was trying to subdue someone on the Helicarrier. It hasn’t exactly healed up yet with all the fighting I did last night.”

“Oh. Are you alright? I mean, you lost a lot of blood,” Tony sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“No, no. It’s alright. I’ve lost more than this before and been fine, honest,” Steve said, lifting the blankets off of Tony’s lap. “How about you go take a shower and I’ll go get some stuff from the butcher shop.”

“The butcher shop? Didn’t you just go shopping yesterday?”

“I got people food,” Steve said, shuffling towards the kitchen, “but I think you might need something else.” He stretched, unconsciously giving Tony a very nice view of his neck.

Tony looked away quickly. “I’m still a person the last time I checked,” he grumbled.

“True, but we don’t exactly know what your stomach can handle now. Do you need to drink human blood? Or can you get what you need from something else?” Steve pulled open the fridge. He began to arrange ingredients on the counter beside him; the bastard even had the gall to start humming to himself as he hefted up a bag of flour and started assembling pancake batter. He even pulled a little carton of blueberries out of the fridge, leaving them in plain view. Tony would have snapped at him for humming so loud, but the scent of fresh blueberries made him bite his tongue.

“Go take a shower,” Steve ordered, lifting his bowl of batter up so that he could gesture at Tony with his spatula. “You’ll feel better.”

“Liar,” Tony grumbled. He pulled the blankets up around his middle, grasping them tightly.

“Tony,” Steve growled when he noticed that Tony hadn’t made a move for the stairs yet. He wrapped the bowl of pancake batter in cellophane, setting it down on the counter and then padded over to Tony, kneeling down in front of him. He took Tony’s hands in his, squeezing gently. “Go
take a shower. I’ll come back with some stuff to try, and we’ll work on getting a list of everything you can eat – it’ll make things easier in the long run, when we know what to avoid.”

“I should be avoiding you,” Tony grumbled, yanking his hands free.

Steve let out a sigh. “Look, I get it. You’re afraid of hurting someone. I felt the same way after I got the serum.”

“You did?” Tony looked up, digging his fingers into the blanket again.

“You bet your keister I did. I was terrified that I might squash someone’s hand, or rip a door off its hinges by accident. It took me weeks before I could get the hang of holding a pencil again without breaking it, and it took even longer to turn the pages in my sketchbook without ripping them in half,” Steve said. He untangled Tony’s hands from the blanket, rubbing his thumb over Tony’s wrists when Tony tried to cling to them. “The point is, it took a lot of work, but it got better. This will get better too, I promise. We’ll figure it out together.”

“How can you be so sure?” Tony whispered. He looked down at his hands trapped in Steve’s, afraid to look Steve in the eye.

Steve had been right about sleep making him feel better, but what if it never got any better than this?

“I’m sure because I know that we can do this. I know that I will do whatever I need to do to keep you safe,” Steve said, smiling.

“It’s not me who should be safe,” Tony moaned in despair.

“Tony,” Steve said, standing up, “trust me, alright? We’ll get through this together. We can talk with the team after breakfast. We’ll have your back.”

“No,” Tony said, jerking his hands free. He stood up, his heart racing as he knocked the blankets onto the floor beside Steve’s feet. “We’re not telling them anything.”

“Tony,” Steve said with a sigh. “We’re going to have to tell them eventually.”

“Yeah – keyword here, Steve. Eventually. As in, not now.”

“Alright.”

“Alright?” Tony stumbled to a halt, nearly tripping on his own feet despite his new vampiric agility. He turned slowly, afraid that he might have heard Steve wrong. “Alright? You’re agreeing with me?”

“Of course I’m agreeing with you,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. He walked around the couch, and grabbed Tony by the shoulders, giving him a little shake. “I’m not going to take the choice away from you. It’s your decision.”

“It is?”

“It is,” Steve agreed, turning Tony around and pushing him towards the staircase. “Now go take a shower. I need to go to the butcher, and breakfast isn’t going to cook itself.”
Tony stood under the showerhead letting scalding water drip down his back; he was fairly certain
that it was painful, but he was so numb inside, he couldn’t even feel the burn. He hadn’t bothered
changing the showerhead’s setting to mist. It felt right to be pelted with water like this; it felt like he
deserved it. He peered down at his feet. The tears streaming down his face blended with the water,
vanishing from sight before even he could notice them.

It wasn’t fair.

Here he was, coded and rebuilt by Extremis and it had all gone to shit anyway. He was a vampire – a
fucking vampire – and nothing he could do could fix it. He had tried diving into Extremis’ code in
order to find the vampire-parts in it, but he hadn’t been able to locate them; nothing had looked out of
the ordinary, even in the nanites and under-sheath. Everything was functional and read to go.

Tony hated that all he could think about was sinking his teeth into Steve’s perfect neck; he should
have been concentrating on gathering information on his transformation but no, he couldn’t stop
thinking about the way Steve tasted.

What the hell was wrong with him?

It would have been better if Steve had bashed his head in with his shield, like he had with Walter –
then he wouldn’t be such a danger.

“Tony?”

Tony lifted his sodden head, staring unfocusedly through the water dribbling its way through his
hair. Steve was standing just outside the shower, peering in with a frown on his face. He had a towel
in one hand, held at the ready. “Tony? Are you alright? Jarvis says you’ve been in there for over an
hour,” Steve said, pulling the shower curtain open a crack.

Tony shrank back; the hot water amplified Steve’s sweet smell until it was almost completely
overpowering. He wanted to lash out, to slap at Steve to chase him away but couldn’t manage to
gather his thoughts enough to do anything other than slip through the water into Steve’s waiting
arms. He sank his teeth into Steve’s shoulder, suckling roughly until Steve pulled him off.

“Stop that,” Steve grumbled as he wrapped a towel around Tony’s shoulders and started patting him
dry. He fussled over Tony’s reddened skin, completely ignoring the fact that his shoulder was now
bleeding.

“What are you doing?” Tony croaked, struggling to get free.

Steve’s grip was just as impossible to break as it had always been; Tony was thankful for that much,
even if it was keeping him in Steve’s grasp. If he had been stronger than Steve he would have been
terrified of what he might be capable of; it was bad enough he could easily sink his fangs into super
soldier flesh, but the thought of him being able to rampage unchecked made his stomach twist into
knots. At least this way Steve could stop him when he went out of control.

“You’re lucky Extremis helps your skin regenerate so fast,” Steve grumbled, patting Tony’s hair dry
with one hand. He moved on, scrubbing at Tony’s chest next.

“Steve,” Tony whined, flushing when Steve started toweling down his lower half. “I can do it.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, clearly doubting what he had just heard. “I know you can – are you going
to do it? Because I’d really like to get back to my pancakes at some point today,” Steve said, giving
his head a shake. He let Tony take the towel away and stepped back when Tony started furiously
scrubbing at himself.

“You can go – I’ll meet you downstairs,” Tony grunted, wrapping the towel around his waist when
he was done. “I still need clothes, remember?”

“Alright,” Steve said. He seemed reluctant to go, but went anyway, giving Tony a funny look as he
left.

Tony didn’t really want to go eat ‘breakfast’. He was pretty sure he wasn’t going to enjoy anything
Steve laid out, but it felt rude to hide away upstairs while Steve slaved away over everything. He
dressed quickly, wanting to get it over with, pulling on his baggiest clothing and stalked downstairs.

Steve whirled around when Tony walked up to him, startled by Tony’s sudden appearance. “Jeeze –
what’d I tell you about warning a guy? Don’t do that!”

Tony smiled sheepishly and made a mental note to start making more noise. “Sorry.”

Steve had plated food and left it out along the dining room table. Most of it was their usual breakfast
fare; some of it, however, was raw steak still dripping with blood, likely the spoils Steve had earned
from his trip to see the butcher. There was a glass of something richly red beside the steak, and while
Tony prayed it was tomato juice, his nose told him otherwise.

Unenthusiastically, Tony took the seat on the very end of the table, trying to avoid temptation. While
the blueberry pancakes smelled amazing, he still couldn’t help thinking that Steve would taste so
much better; it was hard to keep from throwing himself clean across the table to get at Steve’s throat.

Tony picked up a fork, dropping a pancake onto his plate with a splat. He gave it a tentative sniff and
started cutting it up into pieces, taking the time to organize the resulting chunks by size and shape.

Steve made himself a plate of eggs, bacon and pancakes, stacking food as if he hadn’t seen it in
years, and sat down. It was surprising to see that Steve still had an appetite considering what had
happened the night before; the hunk of raw, bloody meat sitting a few plates away should have put
him off food too, yet there he was, practically inhaling everything on his plate without taking a single
breath between bites.

“Try the pancakes,” Steve said, hiding his mouth behind his hand as he chewed. “They turned out
great this time.”

Tony sighed wearily. He lifted his fork, parting his lips enough to let the bite sized morsel in and
tried to eat. The moment the piece of pancake touched his tongue his mouth watered so much he was
surprised he wasn’t drooling all over the tablecloth like an excited dog. He chewed cautiously, his
eyes studiously on his plate and its stack of pancake pieces.

Alright.

He could do this.

He took a deep breath and he tried to swallow.

As expected, the food didn’t want to go down; he started coughing and gagging, gracelessly spitting
up the mouthful of mushy pancakes into his palm.

Steve looked worried and started to rise, his fork still in the air from his last bite. Tony waved him off, wiping the remains of his pancake on his napkin.

“Well, looks like that’s not going to go down,” Tony said with a grimace, pushing his plate away.

“Try the steak maybe? I got it as fresh as possible,” Steve said. He went a little green when Tony speared a chunk of raw steak on his fork and began to stare at his eggs as if they had started to tap dance in front of him.

Tony sighed again.

His stomach should have been trying to make a break for his mouth, yet he could only feel indifferent to the fact that there was raw meat in front of him. He sliced it into chunks with his knife and tried to eat a piece; it was just as disgusting as he had expected.

This time he didn’t mind spitting it out so much.

The blood didn’t taste right. It had a sort of moldy taste to it, like it had gone bad or sat out too long. He pushed the plate of bloody steak away, turning his gaze balefully to the glass of not-tomato-juice. “Do I really have to drink that?”

“Just try a sip,” Steve said, his eyes still on his eggs.

Tony wished he could look away too. He debated on plugging his nose and chugging the glass and then decided against it. The last thing Steve needed today was a face full of spit-and-blood. He took a slow sip and then spit the mouthful back into the glass, suddenly glad Steve had brought out the paper napkins. He wiped his mouth on the piece by his hand, smearing it an ugly brownish red.

“No good?” Steve sounded disappointed.

“That was awful,” Tony grumbled, pushing the glass away. He had to lunge to catch it when it started tipping over; he smiled uncomfortably at Steve. “I guess I don’t know my own strength anymore.”

Steve frowned at his eggs. “That’s alright. Let me finish breakfast and then you can eat.” He said it so simply, as if feeding his vampire friend was something he did every day; it was a little baffling the way he didn’t even look put out by the idea of being bitten and drained like some kind of living breakfast smoothie.

“You don’t have to do that,” Tony said. He couldn’t suppress the way his mouth watered as he watched Steve eat. The food looked good, but it looked even better in Steve’s mouth; it might have sounded disgusting, but it sure didn’t feel that way. He stared at Steve’s jugular as if it was the last piece of chocolate torte in a meal filled with over boiled, unseasoned, broccoli. He licked his dry lips.

“I want to feed you,” Steve said, reaching for more bacon. “It doesn’t seem right to starve somebody just because they can’t eat the same food.”

“You shouldn’t offer something like that, Steve,” Tony said, licking his lips again. “What if someone else tries to steal a bite?” He stood up and took the plate of raw meat to the sink, leaving it there with the glass of blood. He watched Steve eat from a distance, digging his fingers into the countertop so hard he left indents behind when he finally let go.

God, Steve was being such a tease!
Did he know what he was doing?

Or was this just like all the other Steve-things he did when he didn’t realize he was being watched, like taking his shirt off or bending over? Maybe he didn’t know just how perverted Tony really was. Tony smacked himself in the forehead. No, he was being absurd. Steve wasn’t teasing him; at least not intentionally. He was just being weird. He tipped the glass of blood into the sink, swishing the sink out with a burst of hot water, washing the red away.

Steve chuckled, finishing his bacon in two bites. He pushed his plate away, finally done after scraping off the rest of the plates and devouring all the pancakes save the one Tony had cannibalized for science. “Alright, just be –ophf!”

Tony tackled Steve. He managed to keep them both from going backwards and then stood with his hands on Steve’s shoulders, nibbling on his neck.

Steve still tasted good – better than good, really.

Delicious didn’t even capture the flavor, any better.

Tony leaned against Steve’s leg, trying to vie for a better angle. After a few uncomfortable moves on Tony’s part, Steve grunted in discomfort, put his hands on Tony’s hips and lifted him up, settling him on his lap so that he wouldn’t have to crane his neck so much. Tony couldn’t help the way his face flushed at the change in position. Not only was he now sitting on Steve’s lap, they were also groin to groin. He muffled a groan by squashing his face into Steve’s throat and started drinking in little sips, afraid to take much more than that at a time.

Steve’s hand settled on the small of Tony’s back, his finger drumming idly as Tony drank. He let out a sigh, shifting in his chair, inadvertently moving Tony along his thighs, closer to his belly.

Tony pulled free, panting. He shifted his hips, praying that Steve couldn’t feel just how hard he was. He hadn’t ever gotten turned on while eating before. Sure, he had been homy before eating, but never during. Today seemed to be a day of firsts. “Sorry – I guess I kind of jumped you,” Tony said hoarsely, licking the last traces of coppery-strawberry-goodness from his lips.

Steve shifted again, his fingers pressing heavily into Tony’s back. “It’s fine. You can drink a little more if you want. I don’t feel too sleepy yet.”

“Yeah?” Tony swallowed hard, his eyes drawn to the now-healing bite marks on Steve’s throat. His stomach growled in sullen protest when he moved to climb off of Steve’s lap; he hung his head. Would he ever feel full again? It didn’t seem to matter how much he drank, there was always that horrible voice in his head begging for more.

Steve wrapped an arm around Tony’s middle, tugging him back onto his lap. “You’re new at this. It probably means you need lots of food – you know, like a kitten.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You’re comparing a newly made vampire to a kitten? Maybe I did drink too much,” he grumbled, dragging his thumb along Steve’s collarbone. “You sound like you’re delusional.”

Steve flicked Tony in the ear. “I am not,” he laughed.

“Well, I’m sitting here on your lap. I think I’m allowed to doubt your mental faculties,” Tony snorted.

Steve smiled softly. “It’s not a big deal.”
“Oh?” Tony smirked, leaning forward until they were chest to chest. “I’m not making you uncomfortable, am I?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “If you were making me uncomfortable, you’d be flying through the air right about now, don’t you think?”

Tony chuckled. “I guess.” He let out a long drawn-out sigh, resting his chin on Steve’s shoulder. It had been a long time since he had felt so comfortable around someone; even being around Pepper hadn’t made him feel like this. It scared him to feel so safe around someone he could easily devour. That thought alone killed the boner he had been so diligently hiding. He wasn’t sure whether he should feel relieved by that or not though; somehow it felt like he had lost something else when it disappeared. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s middle, hugging him for all he was worth. This might very well be the last time he ever gave Steve – or anyone else for that matter – a hug. He used Extremis to pull up the folder he had been storing his notes in, sifting through files and pages he found on the internet as while he digested. Just a little more, he thought resignedly, and he would have enough information to try a hand at killing himself. Then Steve wouldn’t have to do it for him.

“Tony,” Steve grumbled, gently rapping Tony on the back of his head.

“What?” Tony murmured back.

“Are you going to finish? You said you were still hungry.”

“Oh, uh…” Tony ran his tongue over his teeth, lifting his head. He stared at Steve’s neck, wishing that it didn’t look so appetizing. “Ok,” he managed to get out before biting down on the old wound, opening it up again.

Steve shivered beneath him; the move was so slight Tony might have missed it if he hadn’t had Extremis and a vampire’s senses. Tony eased forward, moving to press his body closer to Steve’s. “Sorry – I guess you’re getting cold from the blood loss,” he mumbled into Steve’s neck, licking at the wound he had made.

Steve swallowed, giving a slight, jerky nod while trying not to disturb Tony’s feeding. “Yeah – sure. Can we take a nap after this? I want fresh eyes for the scans later.”

“The scans?” Tony asked, perplexed. “What scans? When did we talk about scans?”

“We didn’t talk about it. Well, you and I didn’t,” Steve said, giving Tony’s hair an affectionate ruffle. He scratched gently at Tony’s scalp, waiting calmly while Tony finished suckling at his neck. “Jarvis and I think it would be a good idea to start cataloguing all the changes that happened to your body since you used Extremis and became a Vampire.”

“Oh. Alright. That sounds fine.” Tony went back to enjoying his meal, reveling the way Steve’s blood seemed be turning even sweeter. “God,” he purred, rubbing his beard against Steve’s throat. “You taste so fucking good.”

“Tony?”

Tony licked at Steve’s neck, trying to get every last drop of blood before the wound he had made could heal.

“Tony,” Steve said flatly, flicking Tony in the ear.

Tony looked up, grinning sheepishly. “Sorry.”
Steve rolled his eyes, his lips twitching into an amused smile. “I think taking a nap would be a good idea right about now,” he said, reaching for his napkin. He daubed at the side of his neck, pressing down until the bleeding stopped. “You’re pouting,” Steve chuckled.

Tony scowled. “I am not.”

“You are too,” Steve stood up, not bothering to dislodge Tony and started towards the stairs, taking them one at a time, his hand braced on the banister. “I don’t know about you, but I think sleeping in a real bed would be a good idea. My neck’s sore as hell from sleeping on that couch.”

Tony nodded along, bouncing against Steve’s hip as the ascended the stairs. He felt weightless and warm, cuddled against Steve’s body; it was a strange sensation. No one had ever carried him before, even when he had been young. Well, he had been carried in the suit, but that was different. He wanted to be angry at Steve for toting him around like he was some kind of toy, but he was far too drowsy and content to muster the willpower to do anything other than sag onto Steve’s shoulder, nuzzling at his Steve’s neck.

Tony went from asleep to awake in a matter of seconds. He found himself tucked against Steve’s chest; Steve’s arms were wrapped loosely around Tony’s middle, with one of his hands buried underneath Tony’s hip. It should have bothered Tony that they were sleeping together like this. After all, they were curled up together in the middle of Tony’s bed wrapped up in blankets like this was something they did all the time after breakfast. Didn’t Steve remember that Tony was a vampire? Apparently not, because he had curled up beside Tony after wrapping them in clean bedding that smelled like lavender, nodding off within seconds of his head hitting his pillow. He had even done Tony’s laundry at some point, for crying out loud! Hell, he hadn’t even bothered to bring his shield up with him!

Steve snorted loudly into Tony’s shoulder. He let out a little mumbled grunt and then squashed Tony into his chest again; he was soon drooling on Tony’s shoulder, his snores dampened but not gone. Tony moved slowly, trying to slip out from under Steve’s arm; Steve followed along. Every inch Tony tried to put in between them, Steve casually removed.

Tony let out a frustrated huff, wriggling in Steve’s grasp. He could already feel his stomach rumbling, and with Steve so close he wondered if he would be able to hold back for even a few more minutes. He nudged Steve in the gut with his elbow, swallowing a mouthful of saliva, pinching his arm to try and distract himself from the way Steve’s throat was so goddamned close to his mouth.

No.

He couldn’t – just a taste. Steve wouldn’t mind – no!

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and started doing every multiplication table he knew in his head, praying that Steve would wake up before he could do something he regretted.

Steve started twitching. The tremors tore through him bit by bit, traveling down his body towards his feet; Tony watched, still multiplying anxiously in his head, as Steve finally stirred.

Steve yawned, lethargic and quiet, before uncurling himself, kicking his feet free from the blankets. Tony tried to jerk away as soon as Steve’s grip loosened but before he could get so much as a millimetre of clearance Steve had reeled him back in.
“Jeeze, Tony! You’re freezing!” Steve said, groggily. His teeth were chattering, but he didn’t seem to notice; the sound reverberated in Tony’s head, making him wince.

“I am not,” Tony grunted, locking his jaw to keep from pushing himself onto Steve’s throat. He could do this – he just had to calm down. Calm down, he ordered himself. Calm the fuck down!

“It’s… oh! Are you hungry?” Steve asked. His hand was like fire on the back of Tony’s neck when he reached up, pressing Tony’s face to his neck. “Go ahead.”

What Tony wanted to do was say no – what he wanted to do was wiggle his way out of Steve’s grasp and make a break for his workshop so that maybe, just maybe, he could lock himself away until the hunger pangs passed, but instead he decided to feed, sinking his teeth into Steve’s neck. He drank quietly this time, afraid of accidentally wasting the precious ambrosia that was Steve.

Steve stroked Tony’s hair, humming softly to himself. It was oddly soothing to hear his voice, even if he wasn’t saying anything aloud.

“How long has it been since Tony ate last, Jarvis?” Steve asked after a while, moving them so that they were lying on top of their pillows instead of under them. He continued to slide them across the mattress until he had worked them into a seated position with Tony draped over his chest and thighs. He slipped a towel over his shoulder, pulling it out from underneath the pillow where he had apparently stashed it earlier, and went back to stroking Tony’s hair as if nothing had happened. Tony wasn’t sure whether he should have been offended or impressed by the move.

“You have been asleep for approximately four hours and fifty six minutes, Captain. From my calculations, Sir became hungry at approximately four hours and thirty minutes,” Jarvis said. “I have added the calculations to the database as per your instructions.”

Tony pulled free from Steve’s neck with a growl, furious that his AI and friend were talking about him. “You two are making a file on me?”

“We need to, remember? This way we can see how long you can go in between meals. It’s easier to plan that way,” Steve said, gently nudging Tony back towards his neck. “I want you to be able to feel safe around other people, and if you don’t need to eat, you’re not a danger, at least not in my books.”

“I could still snap your neck,” Tony grumbled, easing back into position, the surprise burst of anger vanishing. He gave his head a shake before nibbled at the wound he had made in Steve’s neck, tonguing at the trickle of blood trying to make a break for the towel Steve had so thoughtfully tucked over his shoulder.

“I could snap yours too you know,” Steve said dryly, working his fingers through a particularly stubborn patch of matted hair on the top of Tony’s head.

“Fair enough,” Tony grunted. He stopped drinking when he noticed Steve’s fingers were moving slower. “Hey, are you alright? We did this earlier – don’t you need time to heal?” He pulled away, turning to get a good look at Steve’s face and was surprised to see that Steve looked like he was going to fall asleep. He prodded Steve in the nose to get his attention, smirking when Steve gave him a dirty look.

“Quit it,” Steve grunted.

“I’ll quit it when you stop falling asleep on me.”

“I’m not falling asleep,” Steve protested, straightening against the headboard. He wiped absently at
his neck and winced when his hand came back sticky with blood. “Aren’t you still hungry?”

Tony shrugged. The ache in his gut was nothing more than a dull throb now, and while he could probably have settled in and kept drinking to his heart’s content, he didn’t feel like pushing his luck. “I’ll be fine.”

The stern look Steve sent Tony’s way said that he didn’t agree. “If you’re still hungry, you need to keep drinking. The system’s not going to work properly if you aren’t full when you’re done,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I said I’m full,” Tony grumbled, turning away. “If I say I’m full, then I’m full.”

“Tony,”

“I’m full Steve. Leave it alone.”

“Tony,”

“Nope. I’m full,” Tony said, scooting towards the edge of the bed. He squealed in frustration when Steve pulled him back towards him, struggling until one of his flailing arms struck Steve in the chin by accident.

Steve went backwards with an audible oomph, hitting the headboard so hard he cracked it.

Tony leapt across the bed to get to him, grasping Steve by the shoulders.

“Oh jesus – Steve, are you alright?” Tony said, tugging Steve free as the headboard creaked angrily and dropped to the floor, split evenly down the centre where Steve had struck it. “Shit –”

Steve winced, looking around woozily. “I’m alright,” he mumbled. “You’ve got a hell of a swing.”

Tony froze. “I didn’t – I mean, I didn’t mean to…” he stuttered. He could feel the panic attack brewing, and pitched forward, desperate to catch his breath, close to hyperventilating. His heart hammered in his chest so hard he was sure it was going to rip clean through his ribs.

Oh god he had done it again.

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Steve said hastily, sitting up straighter. He winced and rubbed at his shoulder before scooting closer so that his knee was resting against Tony’s. “You just caught me off guard, that’s all. It’s alright, Tony. I’m fine. You’ve hit me harder than that when you’re in the suit and we’re sparring, remember?” He clasped Tony on the shoulder.

Tony curled in on himself. “The headboard’s made out of solid oak Steve,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I broke a headboard using you – and I didn’t… I didn’t even feel it. I’m a danger – I could kill somebody!”

“You’re not a danger,” Steve said. He turned until he was sitting beside Tony, their thighs touching, and wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulder. “We’ll learn how to control your strength. We already knew the risks involved, and this wasn’t anything we didn’t expect.”

Tony jerked his head up. “You’re – you knew and you still slept in the same bed? I could have eaten you in your sleep!” He snarled, giving Steve a shove.

Steve shoved Tony back, knocking him over onto his side, trying to be playful and failing miserably. “I know you, Tony. You would have found a way to warn Jarvis or wake me up if you weren’t able
to control yourself. You were fine – I’m fine!”

“You can’t just play with your life like that Steve,” Tony hissed as he sat up, jabbing a finger into Steve’s chest. “I can’t take the risk anymore – and I can’t let you take it! You should go. Get out of here before you end up a super soldier husk. This isn’t some sort of stupid game – this is your life!”

“And this is your life now,” Steve said, calmly taking Tony by the shoulders. “But this isn’t the end of your life or mine. We are going to move forward together and the only way we’re going to be able to do this is if you trust me. Please, Tony, trust me. I can’t help you if you don’t trust me.”

“What if I don’t want help?” Tony muttered bitterly, looking down at his hands. They were stained with blood – Steve’s blood – and while they were relatively clean aside from that reddish stain, they felt alien to him, as if he had pulled them off of someone else and slapped them onto his own body.

“Tony,” Steve murmured. “Please – just take the chance, ok? Doctor Strange will find a solution to this, I promise. We just have to keep going. I know we can do it – I can feel it in my gut.”

“Yeah?” Tony said, tearing his gaze away from his hands. “You sure that’s not just nausea?”

“It’s not nausea,” Steve said. “If it was nausea, I would have thrown up by now. Let’s go downstairs and run those scans, alright? Trust me on this. We can hold off anything bad together. We’re Avengers. This is what we do.”

Tony nodded along with Steve’s words, telling himself to calm down. Steve was right after all; Tony was an Avenger, and he had a job to do. If he wanted to protect people, he needed to know what he could do, and this would be the only real way to test his strengths out safely – to make sure he could keep Steve out of harm’s way if he failed to stop himself. He looked down at his hands again, trying his hardest not to gag because of the drying blood trapped in the folds of skin around his knuckles.

“Alright. Let’s see what I can do.”

He slipped out of his sleep clothing and donned a red silk robe, figuring that it would be easier to get the scans done without all the excess baggage; he tried not to watch as Steve changed into fresh clothing a few feet away. He couldn’t help sneaking a look; he liked what he saw.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if there is anything confusing in here : )
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tony tried to adapt to his new life, but things didn't seem to want to go as planned...

Chapter Notes

Warnings for violence, blood drinking and suicidal thoughts. Also, warnings for Dummy and his tennis ball being far too damn cute ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jarvis had impeccable timing as always, and by the time Tony had been walked down to his workshop by a fretting Steve there were already renders of his body queuing in memory, waiting to be called up. The first holographic image flared to life as they walked towards Tony’s work desk, spun into life from brilliant, blue light. It was a little embarrassing, truth be told, to see himself sitting out on display like that. Sure, he had done photo-shoots, and he had been known to walk around naked whenever he felt like it, but he had never been looked at for, well – for lack of a better way of saying it, science’s sake.

Steve didn’t seem all that disturbed considering he was staring at holograms of his naked friend as they hovered in front of him; he barely batted an eye at them before getting down to work, patting Dummy on the head when he rolled up to visit. If Tony had been in a better mood he might have been insulted that Steve was so blasé about the whole thing. He wasn’t a Walmart or jar of peanut butter. He was a sexy billionaire for Christ’s sake – Steve should have at least been blushing, or averting his eyes – or whatever it was that role models were supposed to do.

The first set of scans that appeared were ones Tony had taken as a test to make sure the cameras and software were working properly after he had first installed them; he hadn’t meant to keep them, but apparently Jarvis had kept them on file. They weren’t all that useful considering he was completely clothed in them; the only thing they really showed in detail was his face, and his hands, but they would do as a baseline for what had once been healthy-Tony Stark.

Unfortunately, having such a wealth of information also meant that Jarvis was dredging up more than just that one scan; the next full render Steve toggled through was one that Jarvis must have created shortly before Tony had injected himself with Extremis. The side by side comparison, with it standing beside post-Tower Tony, was startling to say the least. The pre-Extremis-Vampire version looked gaunt; he could have been mistaken for a prisoner of war, or maybe someone who was wasting away while being treated for some kind of incurable disease. He was more skin and bone than anything, and it was a miracle his papery skin hadn’t been any more bruised and battered than it was. If he had known about the pre-Extremis scans, he would gotten rid of them to spare himself and Steve the pain of having to look at them.

It was hard to look at the images, harder still to watch Steve getting an eyeful of them.

Steve looked a little like he might make a break for the nearest garbage can. He had gone even
whiter than before, and while Tony was pretty sure the colour change was because of his impromptu ‘breakfast’ upstairs, it still made him uneasy.

“Hey, are you alright?” Tony asked, fidgeting beside the holograms. He twirled the pre-Extremis version of himself around, wanting to flick it away and out of existence but stayed his hand when he saw the grim look of determination in Steve’s eyes.

“I just… I guess I never realized how bad it was when that… thing… was here. Did you, uh,” Steve paused, gnawing on the side of his thumb, “Did you know it had gotten that bad?”

Tony scowled at the holograms. No, he decided after giving them a longer, more scrutinizing look, he hadn’t known that it had been this bad. He had been more focused on the way he had felt like his insides had been trying to crawl their way up through his throat; he could see why Jarvis had been so concerned, why the AI had insisted on calling someone. “No,” he murmured, looking away from his emaciated hologram, “if I had known it was this bad I would have called someone.”

“Liar,” Steve said, his voice so low Tony might have missed it if Extremis hadn’t improved his hearing. He gave Tony a look, and then turned, walking out of the workshop so quickly Tony barely realized he was leaving until he was already gone. Dummy whirred unhappily, waving his arm in the direction Steve had fled as if calling him back.

Tony tugged at his silk bathrobe, playing with the ends of the sash holding it together. “It wasn’t that bad, was it?” he asked Jarvis, already knowing the answer. He pulled up a chair and sat, slumping forwards, hoping that the new position would make the weird pulling sensation in his chest go away. He flipped between the two holograms, trying to see if there was any way he could brush it off.

No, he thought, wishing he could forget the images now patiently carving their way into his memory, there was no mistaking the damage the vampire had done to him. Side by side the two renders looked nightmarish. He stood up and pulled his robe off, letting it drop to the floor. “May as well take the new renders,” he said.

“Initiating now, sir,” Jarvis said. The lights flickered once and then the scan was done. The Extremis-version would be a work of art, a full-on rebuild from a broken down version of Tony Stark no one would have believed was even alive. The pre-Extremis-him floating in blue light in front of him – well that one was a corpse that hadn’t realized it was dead yet.

Tony shivered, stooping and picking up his robe, pulling it back on. He scowled when Dummy grabbed the sash and tugged on it. “Hey, hands off the threads,” Tony grumbled, prying the fabric free. “Don’t you have something you should be doing?”

Dummy whirred and spun around in a slow circle, setting off for the kitchen; Tony didn’t have the heart to tell him not to bother making a smoothie.

He had been dying for a long time, he realized as he stared at the timestamp hovering beside pre-Extremis-him’s foot. Two days after this had been taken, he had been nearly dead on the workshop floor as Extremis ripped him apart and built him again from scratch. One more day and he would have been a vampire starving for blood, still looking more corpse than man. No wonder Steve had walked out; he was pretty sure he would have done the same thing if it had been Steve floating there in front of him, looking like something off of an autopsy table.

Tony scrubbed a hand over his face, letting out a frustrated sigh. He was going to have to go upstairs and try to have a talk with Steve. There probably wouldn’t ever be enough time to talk about this,
even if he had all the time in the world now; he had always been good at talking himself out of a
corner, but somehow he didn’t think he would be able to say anything to make this go away. What
he could do now was work; he always had been good at working, after all.

“Sir? The cameras were unable to pick up anything of value. The render has failed,” Jarvis said.

Tony groaned aloud. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m afraid I’m not. I have tried to rescan you fifteen times, and all of them have failed. I believe we
will be unable to proceed in this regard until the errors have been fixed.”

Great. Tony threw himself into his chair again, trying to ignore the persistent sounds of the blender
whizzing off in the distance. “Forget about the physical renders for now then. We need to take force
measurements still – let’s test everything we can before I get hungry again. How long do I have?”

“Sir?”

“How long do I have before I start craving Steve’s blood,” Tony said, snapping his fingers. “Before I
become a danger again. Quickly – daddy needs to work.”

“My calculations allow for approximately three hours and fifty seven minutes of work time until you
require blood again – three hours and thirty two minutes if we are to calculate in the onset of hunger
pangs,” Jarvis said. “I suggest we start running the tests now sir. Shall I call Captain Rogers back
downstairs?”

Tony scowled at the holograms.

Did he really want Steve in here after what he had just put him through?

It didn’t seem fair to force the guy to sit through something like this, considering what Steve had
gone through during the war. It was bad enough they were running these kinds of tests down in this
workshop; all his biggest and best equipment was still nestled within the comforting embrace of Stark
Tower, so there wasn’t much he could really do here. The equipment he had brought to the mansion
workshop was calibrated to be able to measure the suit’s capabilities and little else; he wished he had
taken the time to get new equipment trucked in, but at the time he had been too anxious to get away
from everything and everyone in the Tower to bother with it.

Well, he couldn’t go to the Tower now – that much was clear. He couldn’t risk bringing himself into
contact with anyone who had a pulse; it would have taken him a good forty minutes to get there to
begin with, and there wouldn’t be enough time to compile results, fend off uncomfortable questions
and get the hell out of there without ripping someone’s throat out. He ran the calculations in his head
a few more times, dipping into the Tower’s security feeds to see where everyone was in the building,
but the results turned out the same way. Even if he was careful and planned everything just right, he
still wouldn’t make it in time.

“Fuck!” He thumped his fist against the chair’s armrest; it crumpled like it was made out of papier-
mâché instead of reinforced steel and plastic. He glared at it, furious that it was bent and crooked
under his hand. Why couldn’t anything work the way he wanted it to? “Fucking garbage!”

“Sir? I have taken the liberty of informing Captain Rogers that we are running tests. You have been
standing idle for over twenty minutes.”

Tony tipped his head back so that he could growl stubbornly up at the ceiling. “Is he coming or am I
doing this alone?”
“He has informed me that he will be heading down after he has eaten his breakfast,” Jarvis said. “Shall we begin? Or do you wish to wait?”

“I’d rather start now.” Tony stood up, heading towards the machines in the corner of the room. At least he wouldn’t be able to break these.

“How the hell did I manage to break everything?” Tony moaned, tugging at his hair. “I didn’t even – I barely touched anything!”

“The readings say otherwise, sir,” Jarvis said, sounding far too amused. “It would seem you have strength on par with Captain Rogers – the readout indicates that you might even be stronger than him, considering you weren’t consciously trying to do anything more than grab the apparatus.”

“What?” Tony wailed. “That can’t be possible! The Extremis prototypes weren’t anywhere near Steve’s level!”

“Their power outputs were identical to that of your suit, sir,” Jarvis said, pulling up video of Tony’s last fight with Aldrich Killian he had gotten from god-knows-where. “Although it pains me to say it, Mr. Killian appeared to be of similar strength.” Tony would have preferred to never see that bastard’s smug face again, but he couldn’t deny the data streaming in front of him. Killian had strength– all the Extremis prototypes had been given enough strength to take out a small army – but they hadn’t seemed as strong as Steve. The suit yes – Steve no.

Tony frowned, watching as Killian strutted across the screen, smashing his way through Iron Man suits as if he were batting away leaves. He had to look away in the end, feeling the familiar itch of a panic attack building up; Killian was dead, but somehow he still seemed like he might leap out of the screen. Tony shut the video off using Extremis, not wanting to move for fear of tensing up further. “I thought I took the strength out of Extremis,” he muttered. “No. Scratch that – I know I took the strength out. I pared everything down – I didn’t put anything in that wasn’t essential. We worked through the code fifty times before I even started tweaking it. There’s no way this is Extremis-strength.”

“It’s not,” Steve said from directly behind Tony.

Tony couldn’t help jumping, although he went a bit higher than he would have if he had been human still; he hit the ceiling and hung there, attaching to the flat surface as if he had been covered in superglue. “Jesus, Steve – Don’t do that!”

Steve didn’t look much happier than he had when he had left the workshop, but he did look a lot less pale and exhausted. He pulled up Tony’s recently vacated chair, grimacing when he saw the dent Tony had put into the arm and began to scroll through the data Tony had gathered using the holographic touchpad Jarvis set up for him. “The vampire – Walter – he was strong. I could tell from the way he moved – he didn’t think anyone could hurt him. He wasn’t at peak strength I guess, but he was strong enough to rip my arms off if he had gotten a good enough grip on me. I’m probably lucky I didn’t get more than a few scrapes and bruises from that fight.”

“So you’re saying, what – that I’m a vampire?” Tony snorted, rolling his eyes. He dropped down to the floor, adjusting his robe so that Steve wouldn’t get another eyeful of his junk; once was enough. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think we knew that part already.”
Steve scowled. “I’m saying that if this is what you can do as a baseline, well, I think we’re going to have to get you to the Tower to run more tests.”

“No,” Tony said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No?” Steve looked startled. “We need data –”

“Obviously,”

Steve sighed. “Look, I know you don’t feel comfortable leaving the house, but I really think we need more information than this if we’re going to keep you safe. We’ll have to leave eventually to go visit Doctor Strange, you know that, but for now we need to consult with the others – to plan.”

“And while I agree with you, it’s not happening,” Tony said, stalking forward to stab a finger angrily at the holograms in front of him. “I crushed the goddamned scale, Steve. That thing is strong enough to withstand the Hulk hitting it.”

“You crushed the what-now?”

“The scale – you know, the one I use to test my armor,” Tony grumbled. “The one that set me back a few million dollars? Remember that one?”

“Oh! That one,” Steve snorted. “The Hulk wasn’t even trying when you measured him last time. He was bored and you told him that if he hit the damn thing he would get to eat his weight in pizza. I don’t think that counts.”

“He still didn’t even break it by accident!” Tony protested. He pulled up the security footage using Extremis, projecting it in front of Steve’s face. “I just touched it! I wasn’t hitting it – I was adjusting the damn pressure points!”

Steve blinked at the footage. “What?”

“I was adjusting it. I know you’re not deaf,” Tony grumbled, turning away to glare at the broken equipment lying in the corner of the room; its once beautifully polished casing was scattered around its metal skeleton like confetti, and what wasn’t broken was mangled beyond repair from his ill-advised attempt at catching the sensor when it had snapped off. Tony tugged at the front of his robe, trying to ignore the way his stomach was now growling incessantly at him, the sounds getting more vicious by the second. “This isn’t safe. I’m not safe,” he muttered quietly.

“What are you talking about? You’re not even – Tony, you’re not even on the tape,” Steve said.

Tony tugged at his robe again; Dummy rolled up, bumping a glass of noxious looking smoothie against his leg, offering it to him. Tony groaned. “No. I don’t need that, but thank you for making it. Can you go put it somewhere please – and don’t give it Steve. He doesn’t need to drink blended crackers and – is that a marshmallow I’m seeing?” Tony squinted at the lumpy smoothie. “Dear god, it is. Where did you even find those?”

Dummy meeped sadly, tipping the glass towards the floor as he lowered his arm; Tony caught the smoothie before it spilled all over the floor, holding it up in the air out of Dummy’s reach.

“You live to make messes, don’t you?” Tony grumbled, nudging Dummy gently with his foot. “Go. Shoo. Steve and I are working.”

“Look at it,” Steve said, gesturing to the video hovering in front of him, thankfully ignoring Dummy’s interruption. “Your voice is there, but you can’t even see your clothing – Jarvis, can you
throw a filter on top of that? He’s there, isn’t he?”

“Sir does appear to be here. Would thermal imaging be an acceptable addition?” Jarvis asked.

“Is Tony giving off a heat signature?”

“That appears to be the case. Sir’s heat signature is recordable through the cameras although it fluctuates much more rapidly than a normal humans does. Both Dummy and I have adapted to this situation by listening for Sir’s voice, but until we remedy the situation I’m at a loss for what to do,” Jarvis said. “I shall add the filters – one moment please.” The video lit up; a glowing orange Tony-shaped-blob appeared in the centre of the screen, whirling as he moved around setting up his tests.

Dummy rolled up beside Tony, bumping against his leg. “Not now,” Tony muttered.

“Jeeze, that’s a little creepy,” Steve murmured. He made the video play in reverse and then looped it again and again, his eyes glued to the screen, fascinated by what he was seeing. “It’s like you’re not even there. Everything else moves – but you’re just… gone.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “I guess it’s not a bug in the system after all.”

“You noticed it before?” Steve sighed. “You know, I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

“It wasn’t like I knew and was hiding it from you,” Tony protested. “We thought it was a bit of bad code throwing something off because of Extremis attaching to the system. How the hell was I supposed to know it was because I’m a vampire? It’s not exactly like I’ve got a manual sitting around here to search through!”

“It’s dropping,” Steve said.

“What’s dropping?” Tony snarled, losing his last shred of calm. He was just about ready to smack Steve upside the head with the glass in his hand. The rage pooled in his belly, filling Tony to the brim; the thought of hitting Steve – of getting him to just shut up – Tony froze, his breath catching in his chest as he choked on the thought. No. He would never do something like that! Where the hell had that come from?

“Are you alright?” Steve asked, cocking his head to the side, oblivious to Tony’s inner turmoil.

“I’m fine,” Tony hissed, turning away so that Steve couldn’t see his face. He clamped down on the unwanted anger, forcing himself to think about something else – anything – that didn’t have to do with vampires, Steve or feeding. He stalked over to the kitchenette with Dummy trailing after him, draining the disaster of a smoothie into the sink. He swished the glass out and cleaned up the blender, listening to show tunes in his head via Extremis. Eventually he managed to calm himself enough to turn and look at Steve without it looking awkward and stilted. He allowed himself to move back towards Steve again, standing beside Steve’s chair; Dummy nudged him in the arm, holding a tennis ball in his hand. Tony stared at him, annoyed by the interruption. “Really? You want to play with your ball now? You think that’s a good idea?”

Dummy nodded his arm.

Tony plucked the tennis ball from Dummy’s hand. “Well, alright then,” he said as he pitched the ball across the room. Dummy zoomed off after it.

“Your temperature is dropping,” Steve murmured. He frowned at Tony, and the look immediately had Tony up in arms again.
Tony took a step towards Steve, his body going rigid, his hands held clenched at his sides. What had he done to deserve a look like that? For crying out loud, he had been paying attention – he had been behaving himself –

“You can’t feel it, can you?” Steve’s hand was warm, warmer than Tony had remembered. Steve rubbed his hand slowly over Tony’s shoulder, his eyes still locked on the image floating in front of him.

It took Tony a few seconds to realize that he was looking at the security feed for the room. His mind felt like it was lagging, his vision going hazy and gray around the edges. He forced himself to focus on the video instead of on Steve’s enchanting warmth and was surprised to see that Steve was right; the temperature reading on screen was dropping, while Steve’s warm hand remained a constant source of heat, bright orange against an increasingly darker blue. He marveled at the way the temperature kept going lower and lower until it was practically at zero; had he been that cold before? Or was this something new – something different? Tony gave a low whistle. “Will you look at that,” he said dully, his tongue heavy in his mouth.

“You really don’t feel it?” Steve asked, pursing his lips.

Tony blinked slowly. His body felt slow, sure, but he didn’t feel cold; there were no telltale tingles where Steve’s hand was, no numbness in his limbs. The only thing actively moving was his stomach, rumbling and groaning in protest. A thumping sound echoed in the back of his head, joining in with his stomach, growing louder and louder until it could well have been a sledge hammer breaking through the glass walls around them. Tony turned deliberately, swallowing as a burst of saliva trickled over his suddenly dry tongue. Dummy bumped the tennis ball into Tony’s hip.

“Sir, I feel I should remind you that your hunger pangs should be returning,” Jarvis interrupted, shutting the video feeds off.

Steve gave Tony a dirty look. “Were you even going to say anything?”

Tony shuffled in place, coughing in order to force the words out of his dry throat. He took the ball from Dummy and threw it across the room again, watching his bot rush off to get it. “It wasn’t that bad,” he lied with a croak, praying that Steve wouldn’t notice the way he was licking his lips over and over again.

“Tony,”

“It wasn’t!” Tony protested, crossing his arms over his chest. “Look, you don’t have to drop everything just because I’m a little peckish.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Peckish? Is that what we’re calling it now?”

Tony scowled, staring down at his bare feet. He wiggled his toes; it should have been cold enough down here in the workshop to be a distraction, but it wasn’t. He hadn’t even noticed that he wasn’t wearing socks until now. He added the temperature changes to the list he had been creating using Extremis, huffing in annoyance when Steve took him by the chin. They locked eyes for a moment before Tony wavered, looking away. “I know, I should have said something.”

“It’s alright,” Steve said, giving Tony’s cheek a gentle pinch. “You know I love you anyway.”

When Tony looked back, he found that Steve was smiling at him; this time it was the real deal too. He couldn’t help smiling back despite his hunger.

“So,” Steve said, clearing his throat, ready to get back to business. His cheeks were a bit pinker than
normal, Tony mused, but that was probably because he was still slightly flustered. “Go ahead.”

Tony leaned in, wrapping around his arms Steve’s shoulders. He bit down slowly, licking at Steve’s now bloody neck, trying to muffle his groans with little success.

Steve led them backwards towards the rolling chair and its dented arm as Tony drank, pleasantly oblivious to the move; he eased himself down, tugging Tony along with him, aware of the looseness to the robe Tony was wearing when he accidentally slid his hand over Tony’s bare hip, his fingers skimming skin. Tony followed Steve’s lead with little resistance, sliding onto Steve’s lap with a soft moan, wishing that Steve’s hand had stayed. He settled there, leaning into Steve’s body, surprised by how safe and familiar the position was and went back to drinking, sucking up every last drop he could get. He would have been lying if he said it was anything other than heavenly, even if every last suck was harder to draw out than the next.

A tennis ball rammed Tony in the small of his back.

Tony move his mouth reluctantly away from Steve’s neck; he felt bloated and content, his mind filled with a sleepy warmth that hadn’t been there earlier. The anger he had struggled with was gone, and boy was he glad it had hit the road. He added ‘extreme rage when hungry’ to the list he had created, wondering how best to explain the words without scaring Steve.

“Here,” Steve said, wiggling his fingers at Dummy. “Give me the ball. I’ll throw it for you, buddy.”

Dummy trundled closer, dropping the ball into Steve’s hand; he waited while Steve wound up and scooted across the floor after the tennis ball when it flew across the room towards the kitchenette.

“I’m sorry he’s being so annoying,” Tony said, licking his lips until they were bland and boring tasting again.

“He’s not that annoying,” Steve chuckled. “I think he got kind of lonely while you were out of commission. He practically rolled over my foot when I came down here that first night to check up on you.”

“Yeah, he’s a brat like that sometimes.” Tony gave Steve’s neck another lick before pulling away, knowing he needed to speak before the words got buried. “I should probably tell you I got really angry back there… not while I was drinking, I mean,” he added quickly, preparing to get shoved off of Steve’s lap, “but before that.”

“Was it Dummy?” Steve asked, blinking sleepily.

“No. It was just… everything.”

“I think I know what you mean. I get cranky sometimes when I don’t eat. I guess that means we both need to keep on a schedule after all.”

“Clearly,” Tony snorted, rubbing his thumb over the abused patch of skin on Steve’s throat, tracing the raised bumps he found there. “I’m not the only one feeling drowsy, am I?”

“Clearly,” Steve agreed, yawning into the back of his hand. He leaned back in the chair, letting his eyes drop shut for a moment before standing up, gracefully manoeuvering Tony to his feet. “So,” Steve said, stretching as he stepped around the rolling chair. “I think I need to grab something to eat. I’m starving.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to eat after… this?” He gestured to Steve’s neck and then regretted the action because he had to force himself to not lunge at Steve’s throat. Clearly he wasn’t
as full as he had thought he was. He grimaced.

Steve shrugged, stalking towards the stairs without having seen the aborted lunge on Tony’s part. He grabbed the ball from Dummy’s outstretched hand and threw it for him one last time. “I’ve got a bunch of sandwiches up there calling my name. We can go over the data afterwards, alright? I figure we’ve got enough for today, all things considered.”

“I don’t know,” Tony said, turning to glare at the remains of his once beautiful lab equipment. “I’m not so sure going upstairs is a good idea. I should stay down here. I can uh, lock myself in or something. That would probably be for the best.” He barely had time to get the words out before Steve was calmly towing him towards the staircase.

“We’re doing this together, remember? That means no hiding,” Steve said, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulder.

Tony slumped against him. “You’re sure? I mean, I’m still kind of hungry…”

“Then you can drink more when I’m finished eating,” Steve said. “Trust me, alright? I can handle it.”

“I just hope I can,” Tony muttered under his breath.

True to his word, after wrangling Tony into the kitchen, Steve started assembling sandwiches; he methodically tore apart lettuce, sliced cheese and tomatoes all while keeping an eye on Tony without actually outright staring at him.

Tony, for his part, crawled up onto the ceiling and wedged himself between the cupboards and the ceiling, pretending that he was doing a routine set of strength and endurance tests with his spare time; it wasn’t clear whether Steve noticed what he was doing, exactly, but he seemed comfortable enough to continue building his skyscraper-sandwiches, so Tony graciously let it pass without comment. The cupboards were nice though, so it wasn’t like he was really hiding-hiding; he hadn’t had the chance to inspect them from this position before, and while they were stunning from a distance, up close they were really well put together. He couldn’t have done better himself, although if he had made them, he might have given them a few more inches clearance so that someone could comfortably sit on top of them without slamming their heads into the ceiling.

Steve put his fifth sandwich together, trying not to dribble horseradish mayonnaise all over the counter as he set his butter knife down. “Are you alright up there?” he asked, licking a blob of mustard off his thumb.

Tony stared intently at the hinges of the nearest cabinet, neatly avoiding eye contact. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have practice ducking conversations; that’s what banquets and awkward morning-afters were for after all. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine,” Steve said through a mouthful of sandwich. He made short work of his meal, moving on to the next sandwich without so much as pausing for a breather in between bites. Tony was mildly impressed that he hadn’t managed to bite himself by accident. He made a mental note to keep his hands to himself when Steve was eating; he’d probably lose a finger if he reached for anything on Steve’s plate.

Steve cleaned up when he was finished eating, stacking his plate neatly with the other dishes beside the sink. He sat down in his chair after, making himself comfortable and then gave Tony a wave as
he dropped a dish towel over his shoulder, trying to draw him closer. Tony continued to marvel at the oak paneling in front of him, drawing along the whorls in the wood with his pinkie.

“Tony,” Steve said, clearing his throat. “Are you coming down anytime soon? Or am I going to have to go get the broom?”

Tony rolled his eyes. He debated whether it would be worth it to stay firmly lodged where he was and then let himself slip down the wall to the floor; he knew Steve far too well. He probably would have been poked at with a broom like an errant spider. Tony shuffled through the kitchen towards Steve, scowling when Steve scooped him up as if he weighed nothing. “Easy with the goods, huh?”

He chuckled when Steve’s hand squeezed his hip a little harder than usual.

“You’re still hungry, right?”

“Yes,” Tony said. He wasn’t sure if there was ever going to be a time when he wasn’t hungry, but he hoped to god it happened sometime soon. He was getting tired of the near-constant ache in his gut. “You’re sure you’re up for this? I mean, I just ate and everything – hell, you just ate. Isn’t it going to make you queasy?”

“I’m not going to ralph all over you if that’s what you’re worried about,” Steve chuckled.

“Sure,” Tony snorted. He took an inadvertent breath in, and started trembling as Steve’s scent washed over him; it felt like he had chugged two bottles of vodka on an empty stomach. He felt pleasantly woozy, his vision blurring around the edges. He ran his tongue over his teeth, drawing his fingers over Steve’s smooth neck, mapping out the space he had to work with. The bite marks he had made the first time he had fed were gone, but the set from earlier that day still stood out, jagged, raised slices of red against Steve’s cream coloured skin. Tony rubbed his thumb over the bumps, frowning, not liking the look of them. Were they supposed to stick around like this? Shouldn’t the serum have gotten rid of them already?

“I think I’m going to take a shower after – maybe go for a walk or something,” Steve said, clearing his throat. There was a little patch of mustard on his chin; Tony didn’t know what possessed him to lean forward and licked it off, but once he got close to Steve’s throat rational thought went out the window. He bit down after clearing off the last of the mustard, and drank unhurried, amused by the way Steve relaxed against him. It was nice to not be rushing; the hunger seemed happy to set itself aside and wait while he fed this time, watching from the background instead of egging him on to drink more, more, more. When Steve tapped him on the shoulder to tell him to stop, he pulled free with a slurp and gave Steve a grin that probably looked loopy as hell judging by the funny look on Steve gave him in return.

Steve deposited Tony on his feet, clearing his throat again, his cheeks sporting a faint pink glow. He gave Tony a nod, moving towards the door a little too fast considering he had just lost a lot of blood; he wobbled and caught himself on the doorframe before he could fall over. “I’m uh – going to take a shower. I’ll see you later, alright? Jarvis, can you set my alarm for when Tony needs to eat next?”

“The alarm has been set for three and a half hours sir. Is that acceptable?” Jarvis asked.

“Sure,” Steve said quickly, slipping out of the room. “I’ll see you later, Tony.”

Tony stared after him, wondering if he had done something wrong.
It was easy to slip back into his workshop to lose himself while sorting through the broken pile of machinery he had left behind; the damaged scale still needed to be cleaned up after all, even if Dummy had been downstairs toddling around near it with a dustpan for the past hour. Tony was used to retreating to his work, but somehow this felt more like a dismissal than a tactical retreat on his part. He gave up on the sensors ten minutes into it when he realized he didn’t have any of the parts he needed to rebuild it; they would have to be shipped in from his private distributors and even if he placed the order now it wouldn’t get to the mansion until well into the next day. He groaned loudly in frustration. He hated it when the only reason he couldn’t work was because he didn’t have the parts.

There were so many stupid little things he couldn’t do now. He could order the parts, but he couldn’t sign for them or even answer the door unless he wanted to risk jumping on an unsuspecting delivery person. He flicked a bit of burnt wire away, wrinkling his nose at the unpleasant sour odor the movement stirred up. Steve was going to have to do a lot of things for him now that he was a vampire.

Tony lay back and spun around in circles on his favourite rolling chair, pondering the marks on Steve’s neck again. Had they looked like that before? It was strange, but somehow he couldn’t remember what Steve’s throat had looked like before he had started leeching blood from him every few hours. Normally he was good with details, he had an eidetic memory after all, but for some reason all he could think about was the way Steve’s throat bobbed when he swallowed, or the funny way his cheeks went pink when he was thinking about something he didn’t want to talk about.

Tony pulled up the stored security feeds for the mansion. He hesitated before flipping through cameras to find Steve’s room; it seemed like an invasion of privacy – hell, it was an invasion of privacy – but he needed to see Steve, to compare and see if he was seeing things or not. He picked the first video in the list, the one from the day Steve had first stepped into the mansion and pressed play. Steve moved with grace no matter what he did. He seemed listless when he moved in the recordings, pacing back and forth in between rooms. He had bags under his eyes and sallow skin, likely from going without sleep, but he had enough energy to wander about the mansion checking up on things after he and Jarvis talked about Tony’s transformation and the resulting Extremis-cocoon.

Tony couldn’t help zooming in on Steve’s throat. Every time Steve talked, every time he breathed in or sighed, it sent a jolt to Tony’s groin; the man was unbelievably sexy, and he didn’t even seem to know it. Tony shifted in his seat, uncomfortably aware that he was pretty much lounging around in nothing but a red silk robe; that did nothing to calm his raging libido. The move against the chair didn’t help much either. In fact, it might have made things a little worse. He paused the footage and stared intently at the on-screen Steve’s throat. He had work to do; now was not the time to think dirty thoughts, but apparently his brain didn’t care about obeying orders anymore. He gave it a few minutes to ponder what Steve looked like naked and then jerked his attention away from the monitor in order to stare intently at Dummy, who was still trying valiantly to sweep up a pile of broken bolts with his poor, half-broken dust pan; that did more than enough to kill Tony’s sex drive.

There was no doubt about it though. Steve’s throat was as gorgeous then and it was now. The bite marks, however, weren’t part of the sexiness factor. They had seemingly appeared out of thin air, and while the other video files weren’t able to show where Tony had sunk his fangs into Steve’s throat every single time, the timestamps and Steve’s positions made it clear that they had appeared when he had been around. He tensed, digging his fingers into the arm rest a little more forcefully than necessary.

Was something going on that the cameras weren’t catching? Or was it possible that he was looking for something that wasn’t there? He played everything in reverse, looking for a shadow – for anything that might reveal something strange – but there was nothing to be found. He couldn’t see a
single thing out of place aside from, well, him. Chairs moved, cupboards opened, and all of it looked like it had been done by a ghost; Steve looked like he was having very spirited conversations with himself.

Tony ran his hand over his face, scrubbing at his beard, still crusty with traces of dried blood.

It was no use.

He would have to go to the source of his frustration.

“Jarvis?”

“Sir?”

“What did you guys do with… Walter,” Tony asked quietly.

The freezer room was one of Tony’s least favourite places in the mansion. Growing up here, it had always been the darkest space in the house, a place few visited unless it was absolutely necessary. Groceries for the household had always been ordered and brought in daily, so the freezers themselves had only been used on special occasions when a party or banquet was on the monthly schedule, something that Jarvis kept pinned to the fridge door upstairs. Howard Stark had always been loose with his money when it came to food; if it was being served to his guests or family, it was to be served fresh within a few days of purchase, so the idea of him having such a massive freezer was bizarre to say the least. Still, Jarvis – the butler – had utilized the freezer to store away surprises, and on occasion, leftovers he was particularly fond of. Jarvis – the AI – had utilized the freezer in much the same way once he had been installed, although the surprise inside was far less enjoyable than Jarvis’ – the butler- birthday gifts of ice cream and books.

It had given Tony the heebie-jeebies when he had found out what Jarvis and Steve had decided to do with Walter; the vampire was nothing more than a body now, but that didn’t make what had happened to his body any less creepy. After all, the only people who kept bodies in freezers were serial killers, and even if it was all being done in the name of science, Tony was pretty sure the police were going to haul them all away if they ever found out about Walter’s stay.

Tony crept through the cellar to get to the freezer room, noting that the floor was spotless. He could smell the stench of death, ammonia and Clorox in the air; he couldn’t miss it. There was something earthy down here too, now that he thought about it. He gave the air a tentative sniff, his hand hovering over the door handle. Yes. There was definitely something old down here, and it wasn’t just the wood paneling.

Did he really need to go in there?

He didn’t want to see Walter. Even in death the bastard was probably still grinning smugly, assuming of course that there was enough of his face left for that to be possible. Tony could vividly remember Steve’s fight with the creature, even though he hadn’t physically been outside to witness it. He wondered idly if Steve remembered it the same way.

Tony drew the door towards him, wincing when the hinges screeched in protest as the door slipped open. The lights inside were off, but the hallway lights were still burning brightly. He glared
nervously into the darkness, wondering if he could get away with turning on every light in the place. Grumbling to himself to keep from panicking, he flipped on the first switch he came to and slipped into the room as the fluorescent lights flickered on above him.

The room was quiet aside from the soft hum of the freezer and the lights. When the door shut behind him he jumped, startled by the way the place seemed to consume sound itself. Everything was spotless down here, just like it had been in the outside hallway; the white-grey tiles were immaculately grouted, and not a speck of dirt could be seen. His Extremis-enhanced vision let him see the wipe marks on the tiling, so he knew it wasn’t just a fluke that nothing was lying around. Steve had obviously been at work down here, cleaning up the mess he had left getting Walter into the freezer in the first place.

Tony approached the large room-sized upright freezer with trepidation, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as he got close enough to touch the door itself; the freezer was stainless steel and immaculate, refusing to be marred by even a smudgy fingerprint. It looked like something Tony might have found in a lab somewhere, housing unwanted specimens; he supposed, chuckling darkly, that it was doing the same thing here.

“Sir? I have reviewed the tapes for this room as requested and have seen no spike or drop in temperature for the past few days – in fact there have not been any readings worth noting since the delivery men came in to deposit the ice cream cake you ordered three weeks ago.”

“Ice cream cake?” Tony swallowed thickly. Oh great. Here was yet another thing he couldn’t eat. He had ordered the triple chocolate double brownie delight with caramel marshmallows even before he had moved in; it had been a personal favourite for as long as he could remember. The man that made it for him had put all three of his children through college and bought his house with the money Tony had paid him for ice cream cake over the years. Tony took a moment to mourn, leaning against the cold freezer door, hanging his head. Well, he thought, at least Steve was going to get to eat ice cream cake whenever he wanted – more importantly, he was going to get to watch Steve eat ice cream cake. That almost made it better.

Tony gently pried the door open, making sure he didn’t use too much force so that he couldn’t accidentally rip the door off its hinges; he might not have liked the freezer, but he wasn’t going to destroy it until Walter had moved on to another frozen crypt. He squinted as the freezer light turned on, looking around to find his quarry. There, sitting on the bottom shelf was Walter, wrapped in a blue tarp like some kind of morbid, hidden Christmas present. Steve had thoughtfully moved all the food and desserts somewhere else, leaving the rest of the freezer empty; he probably hadn’t wanted to eat anything that had sat with a corpse any more than Tony did.

Tony knelt down, eyeballing the blue lump in front of him with trepidation. He knew that Walter was dead – dead-dead, this time, not plain old undead – but that didn’t stop him from feeling like he was going to end up with a face-full of vengeful vampire. The idea of just looking at the corpse made his skin crawl. He rocked back on his heels, letting out a shaky breath.

He had to know. It was as simple as that.

Then why couldn’t he bring himself to open the tarp?

He scowled. He could do this – it wasn’t like he was going to have to autopsy what he saw, after all. All he had to do was look. Gathering his courage, he reached out and yanked the blue tarp back. The smell was repulsive, worse than it had been when he had opened the freezer door in the first place. Tony gagged, falling backwards on his ass as he tried to keep his lunch down. He pinched his nose, blinking back tears and hiccupped his way through a strangled sob when the tarp didn’t move.
“Sir? Are you alright?” Jarvis turned the lights on around Tony, lighting the cellar up.

Tony scrambled up, forcing himself to kneel, bracing himself on the freezer’s frame. All he needed was one look – then he could get the hell out of here and forget all about the monster in his freezer. He peeled the rest of the tarp back carefully to keep from getting soil and dried gore everywhere and peered down at Walter’s body. This was scientific, he reasoned with himself as his stomach roiled in revulsion. This needed to be done.

Tony catalogued everything he saw as quickly as possible, not wanting to linger. Walter’s skull was mostly gone, although the right-hand side of his lower jaw was intact for the most part. He had been laid out carefully, wrapped to keep the freezer and contents safe from cross-contamination. His arms lay stiffly over his ribcage, as if he was hugging himself, but other than that there was nothing about the thing in the freezer that felt even remotely human. His hands had become blackened claws, his skin papery-thin; the pile of teeth sitting on his chest were yellowed and dried out looking.

Tony wrapped the creature back up, carefully closing the freezer door as tightly as possible without smashing it shut. He stumbled a few feet away and sat down with his back against the wall, trying to slow his breathing. “Well he’s definitely not alive,” Tony said with a shaky laugh. He wrapped his arms around his legs, resting his chin on his knees. This wasn’t good. If it wasn’t Walter who had left that mark on Steve’s throat, then had to have been him. It was his marks that weren’t healing properly.

He held back tears, ready to start sobbing right then and there. He had hoped that it wasn’t him leaving vicious marks on Steve’s throat. He had known he was biting down, tearing flesh, to get at Steve’s precious blood, but he hadn’t thought he was doing it so viciously.

But it had been him. It hadn’t been anyone else who had hurt Steve – it had been him.

He didn’t care what Steve said; he was a danger, and he couldn’t keep risking Steve’s life by continuing to feed on him like that. Sooner or later, he would bite too hard and Steve would bleed out, dying in Tony’s arms.

Tony locked himself in his workshop and removed all the safety overrides from the main security module and Jarvis’ private database. It was the best course of action to take, he reasoned dazedly, powering down the consoles around him. He couldn’t hurt Steve again, not after everything Steve had done to help him.

He settled in the corner of the room on his work-cot, wrapping himself in blankets to try and hide away from the lights trickling in under the workshop door. He would have shut off the electricity entirely, but the locks needed to stay on, and the only way to keep them on was to keep the generators running; the sound of it was driving him up the wall.

Hopefully it would all go away soon when he lost consciousness.

Dummy wheeled up to the cot, prodding Tony in the back with the tennis ball; Tony refused to take it from him, so he rolled away, meeping dejectedly.

Tony knew that Jarvis had already told Steve what was going on; Jarvis might not have understood why he was doing what he was doing, but he knew that any change to the overrides was enough of a threat to warrant attention. He cursed himself for not thinking ahead, for not putting in a block in to keep Jarvis from getting so damned smart, but didn’t bother diving back into the code to fix the problem. Instead he ignored Jarvis’ questions and muted him after he got tired of hearing the same
questions over and over again. The locks would hold as long as Steve didn’t bring anyone in to hack the door for him; they were Hulk proof too, so he wasn’t going to be punching a hole in them any time soon.

Hopefully he would starve quickly.

Steve banged on the glass two hours later. He was careful about it, hesitant even; Tony rolled over and faced the wall. Dummy thumped his tennis ball on the door, offering up to Steve, trying to lure him inside to play.

This would have been easier to do alone, but he couldn’t shut Dummy off; it didn’t feel right to turn the bot off, not after all the good times they had shared together. Tony pulled the blanket up over his head again. If he could starve long enough he would become weak and if he became weak he could be contained. It would be better this way. The alarm Jarvis had set for his feeding time went off, wailing shrilly for attention; Tony shut it off with Extremis and gritted his teeth as the first wave of hunger crashed over him.

It wouldn’t be long now.

Steve banged on the glass again, almost once every five minutes; Dummy bumped his tennis ball against the same spot Steve had touched, whirring in annoyance when Steve didn’t come into the workshop. Tony wasn’t sure why he kept an eye on the time, but it was the only thing keeping him from throwing himself at the glass. He composed a letter to Steve, telling him what he was doing and deleted it before finally giving up, his words and thoughts too mangled to make any sense.

Tony pressed himself up against the walls of his workshop. He could smell food outside – familiar and delicious and **human**. Something tugged at his sleeve and he looked down, curious at the sudden touch. He looked away from the strange hand grabbing him. It wasn’t interesting; it wasn’t warm. He licked at the glass wall, tasting it to see if it had anything of interest on it and then gave up the search, slapping his hands on the wall instead.

The reaction was immediate.

The food outside stood up, giving Tony a wary look.

Tony didn’t care. The food was getting closer, and all he needed to do was get through this damned wall to get at it. He could hear the food making sound – some kind of words, maybe English and a name – **Tony**.

Wait. He was Tony, wasn’t he?

It didn’t matter.

The hunger refused to be ignored. He clawed at the glass, whining when it didn’t even scratch. He moved his way carefully along the glass, feeling for variations and weakness with his fingers and tongue.
The food was making sound again, but its voice was muffled and dull.

He heard a funny sound – something hissing – air maybe; the strange hand whirred and charged towards it. He turned when the smell of food got stronger. His mouth watered. He whirled, attacking and grabbing the food before it could get away.

It was delicious. It said words again, but he didn’t understand them; all he knew was that he needed to feed and that food was here for the taking.

Tony came back to himself little by little. He was licking something off his fingers and it took him a moment to realize that it was blood he was so diligently lapping at. He looked around, dimly aware that something was wrong. He looked down and saw that his toes were slick with blood. He frowned at them, noticing red footprints on the cement below, leading away. He stood up, rubbing at his eyes.

Oh.

He was on the ceiling.

Well that explained why everything looked so strange.

He turned slothfully, trying to get his bearings while still upside down. He heard a whirr and click below, and turned to look where the sound had come from. It was then that he saw Steve lying sprawled on the floor below; Dummy was tugging at Steve’s arm, trying to get him to move. There was a tennis ball by Steve’s arm, and it was dripping with blood.

Tony dropped from the ceiling, landing roughly on his knees. “No!”

“Sir?” Jarvis sounded scared.

“Oh god – oh god oh god oh god oh god – what did I do? How did he – oh god – what did I do?” Tony wailed, hiding his face in his hands. He scooted towards Steve, knocking the tennis ball away; it rolled across the floor, leaving a bloody streak in its wake. “Steve?” He leaned down, letting his hands drop to the floor, forcing himself to look at what he had done. Steve was just lying there on in a pool of blood; there were bite marks all over his body, some so deep it looked like he had been mauled by a wild animal. His shirt was torn around the shoulders, strips of flesh peered out pale white against dark blue fabric. Dummy whirred unhappily, tugging at Steve’s arm again.

“Sir? Captain Rogers is alive and well. I have been monitoring his vital signs and while he is injured, he is not going to die unless his wounds remain untreated for another two hours,” Jarvis said. “Please sir. You need to calm down.”

“Why – how did he get in?” Tony rasped, pressing his forehead against the cool cement. It was a mistake; he knew that the moment his skin touched the blood-sticky surface. He jerked away, scrambling across the floor towards the corner of the room, nesting amongst the metal fragments and mangled machinery that had once been his scale. “No – no, no, no – I can’t. It wasn’t supposed to be like this! I wasn’t supposed to – he wasn’t supposed to be in here!” His breath came out in pants. He felt like he was choking. “Steve, oh god what have I done? Steve…”

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was slurred and rough, weak but easily picked up by Tony’s Extremis enhanced hearing.

Tony cringed, looking up. “Steve?”
“Tony? Can you…. Are you… are you alright?” Steve coughed.

Tony wrapped his arms around his legs, stuffing himself deeper into the corner, out of sight. He could still taste Steve all on his lips; he could smell Steve on everything he wore, on every bit of skin. He wanted to tear at himself and chase the scent away but couldn’t bring himself to move for fear of losing control again.

“Tony? Can you answer me, please?” Steve murmured. He must have found his way upright, because his voice was closer, his scent drifting as he moved. Dummy wheeled alongside him, tugging at Steve’s sleeve again.

Tony bit himself to keep from attacking, sinking his teeth deep into his own flesh.

“Tony – hey, no. Don’t do that,” Steve said. He dropped to his knees with a grunt and struggled weakly with the mangled wreckage of the scale that Tony had chosen to hiding underneath, managing to yank it away after a few laborious tugs. Dummy cooed, pushing the debris away as he wheeled it towards the wall.

“Tony? Honey? You need to scoot forward, alright? I need you to help me get upstairs,”

“I can’t,” Tony whimpered into his bleeding arm. “I can’t.”


“I hurt you.”

“You didn’t mean to hurt me,” Steve said, inching forward, “you know that. Come on. We’re in this together, remember?”

“Why are you even here? You should be running – you need to run Steve,” Tony whispered. Steve’s knees bumped against Tony’s as he pushed himself closer; the scent of blood was thick in the air, so powerful Tony moved forward without meaning to, following it. He bumped into Steve’s shoulder and recoiled in horror, startled that he had let himself get so close to losing control again.

“It’s ok,” Steve whispered. His hands were sticky with half-congealed blood, but they were gentler than they had any right to be. He took Tony by the face, moving closer until his forehead was pressed against Tony’s. “You’re ok. I’m ok. We’ll be alright.”

“It’s not alright!” Tony snapped, thrashing in Steve’s grasp. “I hurt you – goddamn it Steve, I could have killed you!”

“But you didn’t,” Steve said, taking Tony by the chin. “You won’t kill me.” Steve let out a grunt of pain, tipping forward until he was half in Tony’s lap. “Oh…”

“Steve?” Tony ran his hands over Steve’s back, finding bite after hideous bite with each sweep he made. He tugged his robe free, ignoring the fact that he was now naked and tore it to strips, wrapping them as tightly as he could around the worst of the wounds, trying to staunch the bleeding. “Jarvis – can you call an ambulance?”

“No ambulance,” Steve said through clenched teeth. “No hospital.”

“Steve – you’re hurt. I can’t do anything for you – I don’t have medical training,” Tony said, wrapping the last of his robe around Steve’s bloody neck with trembling hands.
“I need you to bind the wound and let me sleep,” Steve said, trying to force himself upright. He braced himself against Tony’s shoulder, his arms shaking. “Just get me to my room ok? I need to sleep – and when I wake up, I need food. It’ll be alright.”

“Alright,” Tony nodded fanatically, wrapping an arm around Steve’s middle to steady him. He swatted the remains of the scale away, ignoring the shriek of metal as it collided with his desk, knocking it over. He heaved them both upright, lifting Steve off his feet to keep him from stumbling and cutting himself on the metal fragments littering the floor; he cradled Steve against his chest, tucking one arm under Steve’s back and the other under Steve’s legs. It felt wrong to have Steve in his arms, but there was nothing else he could do to get him upstairs short of dragging him; his hunger was sullen and quiet, but still lurked in the back of his mind. “I’ll get the first aid kit when you’re settled.”

“Ok,” Steve mumbled, resting his cheek in the crook of Tony’s neck. “It’s ok, Tony. It’s ok.”

“Don’t,” Tony hissed, trying to keep his hold on Steve’s blood slick body without digging his fingers in any more than necessary. “Don’t tell me its ok. It’s not ok!”

Steve didn’t respond. He passed out as Tony got him to the stairs, becoming dead weight in Tony’s arms. He wasn’t heavy though; if there was one good thing about becoming a vampire, it was that he could finally carry Steve with ease.

Tony sat at Steve’s bedside in a chair, rocking back and forth. He had scrounged himself some new clothing, and was wearing a pair of baggy sweat pants and a loose long sleeved shirt.

He had cleaned them both up as much as was possible, but he could still smell the coppery scent of blood all over his skin no matter how much he had tried to shampoo and soap it away. He had bound Steve’s wounds using enough gauze, antiseptic and bandages to care for a small army; Steve would laugh at him when he woke up and tell him it was too much, but for Tony there would never be enough bandages to keep the red out.

There wasn’t a spot of blood to be seen at the moment, but Tony knew it was still there waiting slyly under the bandages to spring free. The wounds weren’t deep – thankfully. Some might have needed a stitch or two if Steve had been a normal human, but the super soldier serum, taxed as it was, had taken care of it before Tony had even gotten out a needle and thread. There was nothing left to do but wait for Steve to wake.

Tony rested his head in his hands.

This was his fault. It was all his fault – he should have known better. He should have been thinking – should have taped a note to the door to tell Steve to stay out. He hadn’t done enough. He had almost cost his friend his life and it was on him.

Steve stirred, raising his head a little so that he could glance around the room. He lay tense, breathing shallowly until he spotting Tony and then, to Tony’s surprise, he relaxed, sinking willingly into the pile of pillows Tony had wrangled into place around him to keep him from rolling over in his sleep. “Hey,” Steve whispered, reaching out to brush his fingers along the side of Tony’s knee.

“Hey,” Tony murmured, raising his head. “You hungry? I’ll go get something.” He stood up, shoving his chair away so hard it nearly flipped in the air.
“Wait.” Steve sat up, wincing as he tried to pull himself up the headboard.

Tony darted to his side, pushing Steve down as calmly as he could, not wanting to move Steve too fast in case it forcefully reopened his wounds. “You shouldn’t do that – wait till you’ve got some food in you first.”

Steve grasped Tony by the wrist, his grasp firm despite the bandages wrapped around his hand and fingers. “We need to talk about what happened.”

Tony sighed, hanging his head in shame. “I know. Just… can it wait until you’ve eaten? Till you’re stronger?”

“Alright,” Steve said, sounding reluctant.

Tony returned bearing a tray of sandwiches, soup and cake. He hefted an old breakfast-in-bed stand he had found in the cupboard onto the bedcovers and set everything up, trying to keep his mind on the food instead of on the way Steve’s bandages were starting to turn a little reddish. He helped Steve sit up, adjusting the pillows behind him so he could lean comfortably against the headboard and eat. “Here you go,” he said, pushing the tray towards Steve. He made to scoot backwards, intending to get out of range, but his plans were thwarted when Steve grabbed him by the sleeve of his t-shirt, tugging him back onto the edge of the bed.

“Sit,” Steve ordered, lifting up his bowl of vegetable soup. He sipped at it, ignoring the spoon Tony had left for him, swallowing everything down. He gave Tony the stink eye when he tried to wiggle away and patted the bed beside him, clearly wanting Tony to sit closer.

Tony perched where Steve wanted him, leaning into the pillows to keep from slipping off the side of the bed.

Steve finished his soup and moved on to the sandwich, finishing it far faster than Tony had expected. He was on to the next one before Tony could so much as blink and was then on to the cake, finishing it with a belch; he smiled sheepishly afterwards, as if he had done something really embarrassing. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony said, giving the now empty plates and bowls another glance. “Uh, did you want some more to eat?”

“Maybe later,” Steve said, pushing the tray away. “I think we need to talk now.”

“Right,” Tony sighed. Talking. Great. “Alright. Let her rip.” He winced at the choice in words and then fell silent, staring down at his hands to keep from fidgeting.

“Why did you lock yourself in?” Steve asked.

Tony had been expecting the question; it should have been easy to answer, but somehow everything he could use as an explanation sounded wrong. He twiddled his thumbs, pursing his lips, speaking even though he knew that what he said would likely make no sense to Steve. “I went to look at Walter.”

Steve winced. “That couldn’t have been fun.”
“No,” Tony grunted. “No, it wasn’t. But it gave me an idea.”

“You locked yourself away because of him?” Steve looked startled.

Tony shrugged. “He was emaciated – controllable – because he had been starving. Doing the same to myself seemed like the best option, considering the information I had. I mean, I didn’t know how long it would take to get that way or anything, but I assumed that no one would be able to get in so…”

“You thought I’d wait for you to starve to death. Is that it?”

Tony scowled down at his hands. “I don’t know. I guess I just thought you’d be willing to let me die.”

“Tony,”

“I know, I know. I guess I was just afraid of what would happen to you.”

“So you were acting on what exactly?” Steve said, frowning. “A suspicion? Why didn’t you just say something?”

“There’s a really bad looking bite mark on your neck that hasn’t gone away. I think I put it there,” Tony blurted. He shifted, wanting to pull away when Steve’s thigh bumped up against his. “I shouldn’t have brought you into this – I should have dealt with it alone.”

“Don’t say that. I’m glad to be here to help you Tony – even if it hurts, you’re still my friend, and you… you mean a lot to me. I’m not going to let you do this alone – I told you already. We’ll do this together.” Steve sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “You were worried about me? That’s why you locked yourself away?” He smiled softly, the stern look on his face melting away. He threw an arm around Tony’s shoulder, his warmth leeching through the fabric of Tony’s flimsy shirt. “I’m sorry I worried you,” he said.

Tony looked up, startled. “What?”

“I wish I could say that things will get better, but I can’t. We don’t know what the future will hold – at least not until Doctor Strange gets back in our dimension – and I’m sorry you have to suffer because of that. I’m sorry you felt like you had to hurt yourself to keep me safe,” Steve said.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Tony muttered. “It’s my fault. I should have known better.”

“You didn’t bring this on yourself, Tony. You didn’t call Walter to you. You were grabbed and he took your life without permission. That’s not your fault – that will never be your fault,” Steve said. He took Tony’s hand in between his own. The bandages were rough against Tony’s skin. “I want you to make me a promise.”

“What kind of promise?” Tony asked, meekly, not sure he could agree.

“I want you to promise me that you’ll wait until Doctor Strange gives us all the answers before you do what you’re planning to do. I know all about your file – your how-to-die list.”

Tony opened his mouth to speak but remained silent when he saw how serious Steve looked; it was more than just serious. Steve looked like he was trying not to break down and cry. He had put on a brave face, but his eyes were watery and sad.

“Don’t blame Jarvis. He’s worried about you too, you know. I think I probably abused my access
codes getting him to spill the beans.” Steve sighed, leaning back into the pillows. “He doesn’t want to lose you either. I know you don’t want to wait. I know you don’t think you can wait, but I don’t want to lose you – not to this. I know it’s selfish – I know you’re afraid of hurting someone and I know now that I won’t be able to keep you from hurting someone all the time, but I’ll damn well try.”

“I need to think,” Tony said, pulling his hand free from Steve’s grasp. It was ridiculously easy, which made him feel all the worse for doing it. “I need to think about this alone.”

“Alone?” Steve winced. “Are you sure?”

“I need to be alone,” Tony said. “But I will promise you this much. I won’t do anything until we’ve talked again, alright?”

“Alright,” Steve nodded. He didn’t look happy about the decision, but there wasn’t a whole lot he could do about it either considering his health. Tony stood up, cautiously untangling himself from the bedspread so that he didn’t yank at it when he left. He reached out, hesitated and then took Steve’s hand again, giving it a squeeze. “I’m just going to sit outside and think, alright? Stay here and get some rest. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure you want to be outside?”

“Sure,” Tony said, cracking a weak smile. “You always tell me I need some fresh air. Maybe it’ll help.”

The garden was damp; sometime during the day, while he was implementing his crazed plan to starve himself into submission, it had rained. He walked outside barefoot, trekking through the wet grass in the moonlight. The goddamned petunias looked fabulous, although a few of them looked like they were going through a rough patch. The topsoil was still ripped up here and there, tossed about from Walter’s digging, but other than that no one would have known that there had been a creature burrowing underneath.

Tony sat down amongst the flowers, crushing them beneath him, satisfied by the way they crunched as their stems broke. The sky was clear, free from clouds and stars alike. If he had wanted to, he could have counted the craters on the moon, it was so clear.

He snatched up a clump of soil, breaking it apart in his hands.

Was this what he wanted to do?

Did he want to live? Did he want to stay here worrying every last minute of the day that he was going to hurt someone?

He let the soil drop and plucked a petunia from the soil, shredding the flower until all he had left was a mass of gangly, unkempt, dirty roots; he spun them about between his fingers, watching the way they flailed about. If Steve saw him right now he would probably give him shit for messing up the garden. The gardeners worked so hard, Steve would say, and you’re sitting here messing it all up.

Tony sighed, flopping backwards, lying spread eagle in the flowerbed. “Fuck the petunias,” he
grumbled, kicking his legs out so that a few more hapless flowers went flying off into darkness. He accessed his files in his head and drifted through the refuse of his life, aimlessly searching for something that could catch his attention.

Was there even a reason to bother trying?

Sure, Steve was here and he had asked him to stick around, but no one else would miss him. He was a bag of money to them – a perpetual mountain of cash and prototypes – and a jackass to boot; Pepper had made that last one pretty clear when she had left. Once he was gone, the world would move on without him. It would be like he hadn’t even been there to begin with. He plucked another petunia from the earth, giving it a vicious shake before tossing it away.

He didn’t want to leave his inventions in the hands of idiots, though; that was more dangerous than wandering around as a vampire. He sure as hell wasn’t going to give SHIELD access to his files either. His files were his – no one, not SHIELD, or any of his competitors were going to get their hands on those files if he had something to say about it. What he couldn’t save, he would take to his grave.

He started updating his will, cataloguing and searching his possessions for things he had left out the first time around. At least this way someone would remember him, even if it was only in passing. Pepper always had liked the art collection. She deserved to get to bring it home for good this time. Hell, Rhodey would probably appreciate a few of the cars and a house or two. It wasn’t like Tony could take any of it with him. And Steve… well, Steve would probably be the right guy to leave his money with; he could have the rest of his stuff, too – everything that Pepper and Rhodey didn’t want. He could feed a whole lot of orphans with that kind of change. Hell, while he was at it, Happy deserved something too. He could leave him the Malibu house – leave him that Ferrari he had always liked.

He could give Steve that promise he wanted too.

It wouldn’t even be that hard. All he would have to do was wait for Strange to come around and he would probably help Tony along to the next life without a second thought. Who knew? Maybe Strange already knew what was happening. Maybe he had already seen it in his voodoo mirrors or whatever it was he had kicking around in his pompous mansion filled with cursed artefacts.

Tony flipped between files, searching for a full list of patents and inventions currently owned by Stark International. He paused when he spotted a picture of Steve, one he had forgotten he had gotten his hands on. It was an old picture, one that Steve likely regretted posing for; whoever had taken the shot had included it in Steve’s file for Project: Rebirth. This was pre-serum Steve – genuine Steve Roger’s goodness – a little guy glaring at the camera for all he was worth. Tony couldn’t help but smile at the scrappy, scrawny teenager fresh from boot camp, dog tags gleaming from being polished a little too hard. Steve always had been a sweetheart, even when he hadn’t even been able to bench press a brick.

Tony closed his eyes.

Steve wouldn’t give up. If this was him – if Steve was the vampire, he wouldn’t give up. Steve never had been good at taking no for an answer and he had never let his disabilities get the better of him, even if it had meant he had to suffer through bad health, beatings and cruelty.

Steve hadn’t given up on him either.

So why was he giving up? If Steve Rogers could see something good in Tony Stark – if someone like Steve could decide to suffer through bite after bite to help him, then he had to be worth
something. He had to be.

He couldn’t let Steve’s gift go to waste.

Tony blinked away tears.

Alright.

He could do this. He would update his will just in case the worst happened and he needed to be put down, but he would keep going. Even if Doctor Strange couldn’t kill him, and even if he couldn’t be cured, he would stick around and give his all to the Avengers; he owed it to them – he owed it to Steve.

It wasn’t like he was useless.

He had a computer in his head for crying out loud and a suit of armor that could cut him off from the world if need be. Hell, he could tweak it a little – improve the ventilation and tensile strength – and then he would be fine around people even if he was starving. He could make his own protection – he had been building weapons and defensive armor for years. He hadn’t given up the fight back in that cave in Afghanistan, and he wasn’t going to give up now.

If Steve could believe in him, he could do this.

If he had been holding Steve’s picture in his hands, he would have kissed it.

Steve was struggling to get down the stairs when Tony slipped through the back door; his movements looked awkward, but that was likely because he was still wrapped in bandages rather than because he was hurting.

“Where’s the fire?” Tony said, catching Steve under the armpits as he tried to take the stairs two at a time.

Steve flashed Tony a relieved smile, letting Tony help him down the last of the steps. “I was coming to find you.”

“I see,” Tony said, manoeuvering Steve towards the couch. He rearranged the pillows and then went about picking at Steve’s bandages while he gathered his thoughts. “Looks like you’re healing fast,” he commented, flicking a chunk of lint off of Steve’s shoulder. That was a relief. At least Steve wasn’t suffering as much.

“It’s going slow, I think the worst of it will be healed up soon. I need to eat and sleep some more, but I should be good as new after that.” Steve allowed himself to be wrapped in the red-and-pink blanket that normally sat on the back of the couch, grimacing when Tony started tucking him in a little tighter than was strictly necessary. “Tony,” he grumbled, wiggling amidst the now towering pile of blankets and pillows. “I’m fine.”

“I know you’re fine,” Tony said with a sigh. He sat down, purposely slipping between Steve and the armrest.

“So,” Steve said. He picked at the blanket on this lap, playing with a crease that didn’t seem to want to flatten out.
“So,” Tony murmured back.

“Did you… did you have enough time to think?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?” Steve raised an eyebrow.

Tony cracked a smile. “To be fair, I never guess.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Right.”

“You know what I mean.” Tony crossed his arms over his chest and then uncrossed them, tapping his fingers on his lower arm. “I’m going to stick around.”

“You are?” Steve’s smile was hopeful but scared, as if he wasn’t quite sure Tony was telling him the truth.

Tony wasn’t sure what made him take Steve’s hand; it just felt right, and somehow he didn’t think he could speak without having it there trapped between his own. “If Strange can’t change me back, I want to stay away from everyone – until I get a handle on this whole… eating thing. I can still be a part of the Avengers with Extremis, and I don’t really need to physically be in a fight in order to help you guys out.” He took a deeper breath, willing himself to stay calm. The last thing he wanted to do was start sobbing uncontrollably in front of Steve like some kind of child. Stark men were made of Iron, his father had once said, and Tony wished that it was true. “I need you to make me a promise this time.”

“Alright.”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” Steve agreed.

“If I get too strong or out of control I’m going to need you to kill me.”

Steve nodded. “Alright.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” Tony said quickly, “but you’re the only one who knows everything and you’re the only one I trust to do it right.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be necessary, but alright,” Steve said. “If you need me to kill you, I’ll do it.”

“Good, good. So, I’m going to modify the armor so I can’t get out of it if I get uncontrollable – you know, just in case. I think that’s the best solution to the starvation problem. I don’t want to hurt you again.”

“Well, you’re not getting rid of me any time soon,” Steve said, giving Tony’s hand a squeeze. “You’re stuck with me.”

“God knows why,” Tony muttered. He avoided Steve’s gaze. “I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. If we can’t figure something out, I’ll ask Strange to find a way to either kill me or seal me away so I’m still useful.”

“Who said we can’t work something out?” Steve shifted, turning so Tony was forced to look him in the eye. “It sounds like you’ve got some pretty good ideas to work with right now. And when I said
I’m here, I’m here forever. You’re not going to do this alone.”

Tony’s eyes blurred with tears. “Steve – you can’t just say something like that! You have a life – you deserve a life. You and Sharon –”

“Sharon and I aren’t together like that,” Steve said softly. “It was too… weird. We decided to stay friends.”

“Oh.” Tony wiped his nose on the back of his free hand. He had always thought Steve and Sharon would move in together one day, maybe have a few kids; Sharon had never seemed like the mothering type, but Steve certainly was. It seemed strange that Steve didn’t want to chase after that.

“Well, the whole you having a life thing still stands. Mine might be over, but I’m not going to drag you down with me. I’ll find a way to make things easier – I’ll fix the armor, like I said. You can have date nights or something. Jarvis can babysit me – we’ll figure something out.”

“Tony,” Steve said, pulling Tony closer. “I don’t need all that.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony pulled his hand free, feeling cold all over. “I’m not going to keep you trapped here like some kind of slave – you have things to do. You’re the leader of the Avengers. You have responsibilities, Steve and I’m not going to keep you locked away. I won’t be like him!”

“Tony!” Steve reached out, snagging Tony by the shirt as he tried to get up and make a beeline for the back door. “Tony, I don’t think you’re like Walter. I don’t think you could ever be like that.” He guided Tony back onto the couch beside him, his hand settling on the small of Tony’s back. “You’re my friend, not some kind of monster.”

“Steve,”

“I mean it, Tony. You’re my friend. You mean the world to me,” Steve mumbled. “It’s not a burden to stay with you, you know.”

“Steve, don’t be stupid. I’m not worth the time.”

“Tony, you’re worth all the time in the world.” Steve wrapped his arms around Tony, trying to hug him. “You’ll always be worth the time to me.”

“You’re wrong.” Tony wormed his way out of the grasp, fleeing before Steve could say anything else.

Tony hid in the garden amidst the petunias, hunkering down so that he was harder to see. He wrapped his arms around his legs, banging his head on his knees. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he chanted, wishing he could get drunk. It was eerily quiet outside, all except for the sound of his breathing. God he hated panic attacks.

What the hell was Steve saying? He wanted to stick around forever? He was an idiot – a noble idiot who was trying to throw his life away!

Tony knew that he had always been more than a little selfish in life; if the best things were available,
hell yes he would take them. It had always been easy to smile and get what he wanted, but this – this was too much. He flicked a mosquito off of the wilted pink petunia beside him, decapitating the thing before it could fly off and suck someone’s blood. He scowled down at its flimsy remains, all too aware how similar they were.

“Goddamned vampires!” He slammed his hand into the soil, leaving a lovely fist-shaped dent behind. He swore again, striking again and again until the petunias beside him were nothing more than a pulverized lump of green-and-pink mush.

He wanted Steve around; of course he did. Steve was… Steve was perfection. Steve was sweet and kind and far, far too good for him. Tony let out a shaky breath, managing to hold in the sobs threatening to break loose. Why did Steve have to say that kind of stuff when he didn’t mean it? It wasn’t fair!

Why did he have to ruin Steve’s life too?

Shoulders shaking, he huddled amidst the debris of the once-garden, wishing he was a better person, one who could just kick Steve out and soldier on alone.

He slunk up to Steve’s bedroom hours later, his stomach growling uncomfortably. Part of him wanted to lock himself away again, but he had promised Steve that he would think before he acted and he wasn’t going to make the mistake of acting on his own again anytime soon.

It felt strange to be slipping into Steve’s room for dinner.

Steve was lying on his back wrapped in a flimsy blanket. He was sleeping soundly, or so it seemed as Tony approached. The moment his knee hit the mattress Steve’s eyes shot open and he rolled over, feeling around the mattress in the dark. “Tony?”

“I’m here,” Tony said, scooting closer. His mouth watered as he got closer.

“Hungry?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, wishing he had something better to say to Steve than that.

“Nothing you can do about it,” Steve said, pulling Tony closer. He bared his throat, tugging the bandages off so there was enough skin for Tony to feed. He tipped his head back, offering himself up. Tony sank his teeth into Steve’s flesh with a shudder, pushing Steve down into the mattress.

Steve stroked up and down Tony’s back. He tangled his fingers in Tony’s hair after a minute, his breath hitching.

Tony pulled back, panicking. “Shit, did I hurt you?”

“No,” Steve said with a sheepish smile. “It didn’t hurt. Kind of the exact opposite of hurt, actually.” He turned his head and buried his face in the pillow, his ears turning a pleasant shade of pink. “Oh god, I’m awful. I shouldn’t be…”

“What?” Tony rolled closer, licking the blood off of his lips.

“It’s nothing. Are you still hungry? Or can we go to sleep?” Steve said, still half-buried in the pillow.
“I’m good,” Tony said, pulling the blankets up around Steve’s shoulder. He felt warm all over, like he had just stepped out of a sauna. Thankfully his hunger seemed to have the sense to not push for more with Steve still weak. “Get some sleep.”

“Ok, Tony. You too, alright? Wake me up if you get hungry again.”

“Will do,” Tony promised, closing his eyes. He didn’t really need the sleep, but couldn’t help settling in, resting his head on the pillow beside Steve’s.

“Tony?”

Tony groaned, rolling over. “What?”

“Did you… uh… did you get hungry last night?”

Tony rolled towards Steve. “What?”

“Did you get hungry last night? My neck’s bleeding.” Steve rubbed his fingers over the bite marks on his neck, looking confused; the wound wasn’t deep, but it stood out against Steve’s skin in a crooked line. Some parts of the bite looked deeper than others, as if he had been gnawed on.

Tony frowned in confusion. He licked his lips, but couldn’t taste anything other than sweat on them. “I think I’d remember if I was snacking on you.”

“Oh. Maybe it just didn’t heal properly.”

“That’s strange.”

“Sometimes I don’t heal so well when I have nightmares. It’s nothing to worry about,” Steve sighed. He moved to wipe his bloody fingers on the pile of bandages by his head and flushed when Tony leaned forward and licked his fingers clean. “Oh.”

Tony grinned. “Sorry. Waste not want not.” He slid closer, nuzzling at Steve’s throat and started licking at the wound. He cleaned up as much of the blood as he could, hoping his saliva was more useful than it had been when he was human.

Steve moaned softly.

Tony froze, his tongue pressed to Steve’s throat. “Steve?”

“It’s nothing,” Steve squeaked. “Nothing – just go back to what you were doing.”

Tony, licked the last of the blood away and pulled free. “Are you alright?”

“I told you I’m fine,” Steve said, rolling over. He pulled the bandages around his neck and hiked the blanket up over his head. “Go back to sleep. I’m tired.”

“You’re tired?”

“Yes. I had a nightmare. Go back to sleep.”
“Do you want to talk about it?” Tony said, propping himself up on his elbow.

“It wasn’t all that special. I probably just picked it up from what happened with Walter,” Steve grumbled. “I dreamed I was out in the garden and he was there staring up at the sky.”

Tony froze. “What?”

“It was just a bad dream,” Steve insisted, refusing to face Tony. “That’s all. Just a bad dream.”

“Jarvis, is our friend still in the freezer?” Tony asked, sitting up. He felt tingly all over, like he had rolled in a patch of poison ivy and stinging nettle. He scratched at his arm absently, pulling up the security footage for the freezer room using Extremis, watching it play in his head as Steve tried to go to sleep beside him.

“My sensors have picked up no movement or temperature changes sir,” Jarvis said. “The freezer has remained at a constant temperature and there has been no increase or decrease in temperature in any other part of the house.”

“So it was just a dream,” Tony muttered, flopping onto his back.

“It would appear so, sir.”

“I told you it wasn’t that big a deal,” Steve murmured. “Go back to sleep. There’s still a few hours before sunrise.”

Tony closed his eyes and then reluctantly sat up again, throwing the blankets off. The itchy, prickly sensation didn’t seem like it was going to go away any time soon. “I’m going to go down to the workshop.”

“Are you sure?” Steve sounded disappointed. “Wouldn’t you rather sleep?”

“No,” Tony said, folding the other half of the blanket over top of Steve. “I need to do this – need to clean up my mess.” He planted a kiss on Steve’s forehead without even realizing what he was doing and then high tailed it out of the room before he could get clubbed with a pillow.

The itchy feeling didn’t leave Tony until he was an hour into scrubbing the blood covered floor; his knees ached bitterly, and the smell of bleach was making him light-headed, but the discomfort was worth it if it meant getting rid of the hideous rusty patch on the floor. He had thought that the smell of Steve’s old blood would be worse than the sight of it, but it was just plain awful either way. The Steve-shaped void in the centre of the room had made it hard to concentrate; he had spent at least twenty minutes sitting outside the workshop, lurking in the hallway, working up the courage to go in. Dummy helpfully scrubbed at the floor beside him, making clean circles as he moved a brush back and forth over a particularly stubborn sticky patch; he had ‘insisted’ on helping, and Tony hadn’t been able to tell him no. Sure, the bot wasn’t doing the best job, and he was smearing the floor with watery blood when he rolled over it, but at least it was keeping him busy while his tennis ball soaked in a bucket of bleach by the sink. Tony vowed to get a few more balls shipped in – ones without fuzz on them.

The rest of the mess in the workshop was taken care of with far less effort; the remains of the scale were easily swept up and dumped in the scrap bin with all the other refuse he had made while working.

His beautiful work desk was a disaster. In his rush to get Steve out of the workshop he had knocked
it over; it was slanted now, squashed on one side and wouldn’t stand upright without teeter-tottering every time he let go of it. There was also a very lovely handprint molded in the metal on the other side. It was a shame really. He had liked that desk. It was one of a kind; he had paid to keep it that way when he had ordered it. At least he could rebuild it if he needed to. He had resigned the desk to the repair pile, letting Dummy help him shove it over even though he could have done it himself. He would get to it after he had made the necessary modifications to his armor; those would take priority over everything until they were done.

“So?”

Tony gave his scrub brush another swish in his bucket of bleach water, peeling his rubber gloves off one at a time, turning them inside out. Dummy wiggled his arm and stole the gloves from him, wheeling off towards the sink to put them away. Tony sighed aloud. “Yeah?”

“Captain Rogers has eaten his breakfast and is heading out for a run. He wishes me to inform you that he will be back in approximate one hour assuming good weather conditions,” Jarvis said.

“Allright, tell him to have fun and avoid strangers with candy.” Tony picked up the bucket of bloody water and carried it to the sink, dumping it out. He rinsed everything, including the sink and then hung his cleaning supplies up with Dummy dogging his heels. The smell of bleach and ammonia was still heavy in the air, but it was tolerable for now. He slid into the last dent free rolling chair and got to work, pulling up the Iron Man schematics.

The work was easy; technically he could have done it all in his head, but somehow it was nice to be able to poke and prod the holograms. It was calming, and soon he was so deeply immersed in widgets and nanotechnology he almost missed Jarvis’ announcement that Steve had returned home. His stomach growled a few minutes later, and so he powered everything down and headed upstairs for a nibble of Steve.

Steve looked awful. He was hunched over the sink throwing up what was left of his breakfast when Tony stepped into the kitchen. Tony stooped and picked up Steve’s fallen water bottle, setting it down on the table before approaching; he gently rubbing his hand up and down Steve’s back until Steve stopped gagging.

“You alright?” Tony asked, looking around for a clean cup so he could fill it with water. It was weird to not use dishes anymore; he was going to have to start pre-loading the dish washer at this rate or he would never remember to keep the cupboards stocked.

Steve pitched forwards and started gagging again; his shoulders shook under Tony’s hand, although he didn’t seem unhappy about the contact. His shirt was soaked with sweat, sticking to his skin as if he had been out for a swim instead of a jog. Tony poured a fresh glass of water from the filtered jug in the fridge and returned, setting it down beside Steve’s hand for easy access. “Your runs don’t usually end this way. What happened?”

Steve rinsed his mouth out with a handful of water from the tap and then swallowed down the filtered water, wiping snot from his face. He gasped as he finished the water. “I was going down the hill and suddenly everything started spinning. Couldn’t keep my feet – almost didn’t make it back to the front step.” He set the glass down with a clink; his knuckles were scraped up and dirty with tiny stones stuck in his skin from where his hand had started healing over.

“I take it you fell?” Tony grabbed the first aid kit from under the sink and grabbed Steve’s hand. He started tweezing the stones free, wincing sympathetically every time Steve flinched and grunted.
Maybe jogging was a bad idea,” Steve sighed, leaning his hip against the counter as Tony worked. “I felt fine when I woke up, but the minute I stepped out into the sun it felt like someone had driven an ice pick through my eye.”

Tony froze, tweezers hovering above Steve’s now empty-but-bleeding hand. “The sun gave you a headache?”

“Not at first,” Steve muttered, wiping sweat from his brow with his uninjured hand. “But, boy did it end up bad. I think I’m going to go upstairs and lie down.”

“Do you feel strong enough for uh... a snack for the both of us?” Tony said, setting the first aid kit aside. He felt bad asking, but there wasn’t much he could do otherwise. It wasn’t like he could stop off at the supermarket for a bottle of blood.

“Let’s go sit down on the couch or something. I still feel a little floaty,” Steve said.

Tony helped Steve into the living room and then hovered over him, looking him over to make sure he hadn’t missed any stones or scrapes. He ran his thumb over the side of Steve’s jaw, noticing a long bleeding puncture mark on Steve’s neck – it looked the same as the one from that morning. “It didn’t heal at all, did it?”

Steve touched his neck, seeming startled by the appearance of blood. “I don’t remember.”

“Jarvis,” Tony said, dread coiling coldly in his gut, “Walter’s still in his freezer, right? He’s not wandering around without us knowing, is he?”

“My sensors indicate no changes,” Jarvis confirmed.

“It was just a dream Tony,” Steve said with a yawn, closing his eyes. “I’m just overtired. Can we turn the lights off in here or something? My head’s killing me.”

“You sure it’s alright if I eat?” Tony said, eyeing the bite marks on Steve’s neck with trepidation. “I don’t want you passing out on me.”

“I’ll be fine, really,” Steve insisted, waving Tony towards him. “Go ahead.”

Tony helped Steve upstairs to his bed after drinking his fill. He lurked in the doorway until Steve ordered him to go find something more productive to do and then retreated to his workshop, falling into the easy work of adapting his armor to suit his new body. He finished the latest iteration and set it to build, keeping an eye on the clock and on Steve using Extremis.

The fresh bite marks on Steve’s neck nagged at him, a constant presence in his mind. He pulled up security footage hoping to find something of use but found a whole lot of nothing instead; what was there was a whole lot of video of Steve tossing and turning in bed, and because he had been keeping the blankets up over his head the entire night, there wasn’t a whole lot to see. Tony couldn’t even see where he was on the bed without thermal imaging overlaid on top of the video, and even then it was hard to tell just what was going on.

He shut the footage off, disappointed by the lack of information. “He had a nightmare about Walter,” he muttered to himself, tapping his finger on his chin. “Bite marks on his neck – inconclusive as to whether they’re from me or not. Sensitivity to the sun? Hm. Inconclusive.”
“Sir?”

“Yeah Jarvis?”

“May I suggest visiting Captain Roger’s room and remaining awake while he rests? If there is indeed something trying to feed off of him, it may be dissuaded by your presence,” Jarvis said. “You may also be able to catch it in the act.”

“That’s a good idea.” Tony snapped his fingers. “How’s he doing anyway? Is he asleep?”

“Captain Rogers appears to be sleeping soundly, although he has thrown up twice since you left and complained that the water tastes funny.”

“I’m not liking what I’m hearing;” Tony muttered, starting up the stairs.

“I’m afraid I have to agree with you sir. Something appears to be going on, although I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of another entity aside from yourself and Captain Rogers on the mansion grounds.”

Tony perched on the corner of Steve’s bed, trying not to fall asleep. So far Steve hadn’t done anything out of the ordinary, although his sleep had been fitful; it was likely that nothing was going to happen, but Tony didn’t feel comfortable leaving Steve alone. He opened up a new project using Extremis and started designing a security camera that would allow him to see himself on screen.

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was hoarse.

Tony looked up from his hand which he had been using as a faux tablet. “Yeah?”

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“Oh,” Steve said. He started coughing, hacking so hard he bounced in place, thumping his head pitifully against his pillow.

Tony moved closer, resting his palm on Steve’s forehead. “Jesus,” he said, feeling Steve’s sweaty skin. “You’re freezing.”

“I don’t feel so good,” Steve said, his teeth chattering loudly. He pulled the blankets up around his neck as Goosebumps sprang up all over his skin. “I feel really cold.”

Tony brought Steve a glass of water and watched him try to choke it down; when he couldn’t even manage a tiny sip, Tony knew things were bad.

“Steve?” Tony took the glass back, still full, and set it down on the dresser. He tried to keep from panicking, burying the fear deep inside. He needed to say the words in case there was any doubt. He couldn’t leave Steve here not knowing. “I think you’re being turned into a vampire.”

Steve turned away, coughing into his pillow.
“I’m going to go check on Walter, alright? I need to know if he’s doing this to you.”

Steve didn’t answer or if he did, his words were lost amongst his coughs.

The freezer room was dark when Tony stepped inside; he could feel a cold breeze and knew at once that something had gone terribly wrong. The security footage wouldn’t show up properly when he tried to pull it up. There was nothing but static on the feeds with something blurry and black appearing amongst the dots. He tried to find a working camera, but could only find one that worked and it was busy flickering on and off. He caught sight of something blonde and big moving down the stairs and then the feed died.

“Shit.”

He threw the lights on.

The freezer was closed, but it had a gaping hole in the middle of it; claw marks were everywhere, and what wasn’t torn up was bent and crushed. Tony approached guardedly, wishing he had brought one of his gauntlets with him or maybe a crow bar. He peered into the freezer through the hole, noting the shredded remains of the blue tarp amidst the darkness.

The freezer was empty.

Smears of brownish-red were painted across the floor and all along the splintered metal bulging out around the gaping hole in the freezer door. Somewhere inside, something was dripping.

“Jarvis – where’s Steve?”

Jarvis didn’t respond; the lights flickered twice and shut off.

Tony ran for the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, let me know if anything sounds bad/weird. Thanks for reading! : )
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

One of them was going to leave in a box, and it wasn't going to be Tony - or Steve. Not if Tony had anything to say about it.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for gore and violence :) See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve was standing in the living room staring through the back door; he swayed, catching himself on the arm of the couch. His eyes were watery and red, his skin pale and glossy from the heavy sheen of sweat covering his body. Tony approached cautiously, making sure Steve could hear him, telegraphing every move.

“Steve?”

Steve didn’t respond. He took a tentative step forward and then seemed to sense that Tony was in the room and turned slightly. The side of his neck was slick with blood, the flesh there ragged and torn from where something had bitten him. He blinked at Tony but couldn’t seem to focus on him, his body heavy with fever.

“Steve? Honey? Can you hear me?” Tony stepped over the blanket Steve had dragged down the stairs with him. He untangled it before taking Steve by the shoulders, guiding him towards the couch, helping him sit. Once seated, Steve seemed to recover a little of his awareness. He locked eyes with Tony, a wrinkle forming on his brow.

“Steve?” Tony grabbed the nearest pillow and shredded the coverlet, tearing it into strips. He wrapped the makeshift bandage around Steve’s throat, tying it firmly to stop the bleeding. He could smell Walter all over Steve; there were dirty fingerprints and reddish bruises all over Steve’s shoulders leading to his throat. He hated the sight of them. Tony had never felt so angry before in his life; the anger he had felt while waiting to feed had felt nothing like this – it hadn’t even been half as urgent and insistent as this was. He scrubbed the dirty fingerprints off of Steve’s skin with a spare scrap of fabric, fuming. “Baby? I need to go outside and kill him, alright? You need to stay here.”

Steve gave him a blank look, swaying in place. He opened and closed his mouth as if he needed to say something and then turned to stare at the back door, as if hearing something outside.

Tony knew what it was that had drawn Steve’s attention. He stood up jerkily, approaching the back door. The sun had gone down but he could still see Walter’s eyes; they were reflective like a cat’s eyes, glimmering yellowish-green in the dying light. He should have been afraid, but the anger refused to let him feel anything other than pure, unbridled rage. Tony threw the door open and then shut it firmly behind him, knowing that Jarvis would protect Steve without him having to ask. “You’re not coming in,” he said to Walter. “You’re not touching him again. He’s mine.”
Walter chuckled from the shadows. “What makes you think that? He willingly gave me his blood.”

“He did not.” Tony snapped, fists clenching. “You came and took again. That’s all you are – a goddamned thief.”

“Goddamned is as good a word as any,” Walter said with a shrug. He lurched forwards, reaching up to press the broken halves of his head together. “It’s a pity,” he lamented as he mashed his jaw back in place, “you never got to see me at my prime.”

“Oh?” Tony snorted. “I doubt it would have mattered much. A monster is a monster.”

“That’s very true Anthony,” Walter laughed. “But if I’m such a monster, what does that make you, sweetling?”

“That makes me the man who kills you,” Tony snarled. He leapt forward, smashing his fist into Walter’s face as hard as possible. Walter’s skull was still as weak as ever; it splintered like dry wood, caving in on one side.

Walter shrieked, clutching at his face. “How dare you!”

“Fuck you!” Tony roared smashing Walter in the chest with another well-aimed blow; Steve had taught him how to fight after the Avengers had moved into the tower. Every lesson came back quickly, every strike and parry flowing from memory. Walter’s ribcage bowed in the middle, bones breaking on impact as Tony punched him again and again. “Why the hell are you even back here?” Tony roared. “Why couldn’t you just leave us alone?”

Walter staggered under the blows and then spun away, snatching Tony by the arm and hurling him across the yard. He laughed as Tony flew through the air, hitting the ground with enough force to split grass from soil. “I’m your maker, you silly little nit. Did you think me some kind of weakling?”

Tony spat out a mouthful of dirt, clambering to his feet, his hands scraped and raw. “You’re not so strong.” He charged at Walter, hitting him full force in the chest with his shoulder. They rolled together through the damp grass, struggling for dominance; Walter laughed the entire time, his voice turning shrill.

Tony banged his head on a stone buried in the grass as they tumbled; he blinked back tears of pain and clawed at Walter’s throat, trying to get a better grip, his fingers ripping into dry muscle. Walter gurgled as Tony’s hands found their mark. He kneed Tony in the gut, his boney kneecap making the blow much sharper and painful. He managed to knock Tony away again and staggered upright, glaring down at Tony with his one good eye. “You should be worshiping me.”

“You’re not worthy of worship,” Tony spat, scrambling to get to his feet.

“I am a god amongst men! I was the first my master made and I will remain the best of his children. You will learn to serve, or you will die,” Walter howled.

“I’ve got some news for you buddy. I’m already dead.” Tony snarled, throwing himself at Walter again. They fought, kicking and punching until Tony was bloody and bruised; Walter was crumbling, his flesh oozing blackish blood where he had been scratched and scraped at. They were too evenly matched, and they both knew it.

Endurance, however, was a different matter; they may have been equal in strength, but there was nothing strength could do if the body couldn’t keep up.

Walter was the first to tire.
He scowled as his left arm fell off, having taken one too many blows to the shoulder to stay attached; the limb hit the ground with a dry crackle, rolling away. He scooped it up with his free hand.

“You’re falling apart old man,” Tony sneered, wiping his bloody nose on his sleeve. “Why did you come here anyways? Looking for a reason to go see a plastic surgeon?”

“I didn’t come here to make you, if that’s what you’re asking. I was left here,” Walter growled, trying to reattach his lost limb. His flesh refused to accept the old tissue so he threw it away, glaring at it in displeasure. “I was brought, sent across the ocean from my home like a common garden plant, bound to the soil in that disgusting little patch of earth over yonder. Had I the choice, I would not have picked you or your pathetic home. There are far better younglings than you to be had in this world, far more interesting creatures than Tony Stark.”

“Like Steve Rogers?”

“Bah,” Walter spat, pushing his jaw back in place. It was lopsided and broken, but somehow managed to stay where he put it. “Your precious pet was delicious, but not worth my time. I hunger for royalty – for those of more worthy blood. Who would want to devour a commoner like him? He rose too far above his station – he does not deserve the dark gift! He is merely a trifle – a trinket to be played with and broken.”

“He’s Captain America,” Tony said, bristling on Steve’s behalf.

“It does not matter,” Walter snorted, looking down at his clawed hand. “This is foolishness. You all stink of chemicals and solvents – this place is nothing like the old world. Do me a favor, brat. Dismember me and burn my body so I may have some peace. Send my ashes to the Stones. I wish to return to my home – it is the least you can do, sweetling, all things considered.” There was a loud crack and then Walter hit the ground, his knees splintering apart. He lay on his back glowering up at the night sky, his good arm hanging uselessly at his side. “To think – this is how Walter Stone ends his days, beaten by an uppity little child.”

“Stone? So that’s your name huh?” Tony panted, struggling upright. The only person he had known with that particular last name was Tiberius Stone, but that couldn’t be right; he looked at Walter’s face but couldn’t see the resemblance. There had to be thousands of people with Stone for a last name. He was probably wrong. He hadn’t thought about Tiberius in years, but he knew for a fact that Ty had never talked about having a great uncle Walter. They had been close; he knew all of Tiberius’ relatives – hell, he had met most of them, just like how Ty had met his family. If Walter had been a part of them, he would have known it.

“You are not worth my time,” Walter said with a snort. “Come, boy. End me. I grow weary of your pathetic chatter.”

“Gladly,” Tony said. He picked up the biggest brick he could find, fishing it out from the walkway, and smashed it into Walter’s head until there was nothing but dust and shards of rotten bone left behind.

Tony collapsed, letting the brick drop to the ground. Sweat dripped down his chin; he stared at Walter’s body, trembling as adrenaline died out.

Was it done?

He stared at the shattered remains, looking for movement, but there was nothing. Walter was blessedly still. He crawled a few feet away and dropped onto the grass on his back, grinning up at the stars.
“Tony?”

Tony turned his head, watching Steve step cautiously through the dewy grass towards him; he was glad to see that Steve had managed to find a pair of shoes somewhere on the patio and that he hadn’t wandered outside without something to protect his feet. There was too much bone lying around, hidden in the grass, and it would have been a very unpleasant surprise for someone to find with their bare feet. Tony was just glad he had put his work boots on when he had gone down to the freezer room, or else he would have been picking things out of the soles of his feet; he had had enough of bones and tweezers for one week, thank-you-very-much.

He blinked dreamily up at Steve, who stood above him gawking at Walter’s pulverized body. He couldn’t bring himself to feel guilty about the mess he had made of Walter’s head; that smug bastard had deserved everything he had gotten and more. No one was going to hurt Steve like that again, not if he had anything to say about it. He knew he was being irrational; it wasn’t like Steve needed to be defended by anyone, let alone him, but it was nice to know that he could be there when Steve needed him. That thought alone made him grin again.

It was lucky that Walter hadn’t taken too much of Steve’s blood, Tony mused to himself as he watched Steve’s expression change from surprise to revulsion; the mess was bad enough on its own without involving fluids. The blackish ooze that had seeped from Walter’s body had vanished already, turning to dust as it dried in the cool night air.

“Was that Walter?” Steve asked, kicking a chunk of unidentifiable bone away from Tony’s feet.

Tony shrugged lazily. “Assuming that was his real name, yeah. That was Walter.”

Steve smiled crookedly, feeling along the new bandage wrapped around his neck. “I’m assuming you’re the one who bandaged me up. I’m kind of hazy on the details…”

“Yep,” Tony said, sitting up with a groan; his muscles protested at the sudden movement, clearly displeased by his decision to get up. He let Steve pull him upright, refusing to let his full weight lean against Steve’s shoulder in case he knocked them both over. “Whoa….”

“Dizzy?” Steve said, wrapping an arm around Tony’s middle to keep him from going face-first into the grass. His hands slipped over Tony’s middle where his shirt had ridden up; it was good to feel Steve warm again.

“I don’t know what you call it, but if it does it again I’m going to throw up all over you and I refuse to be held accountable for my actions.”

“Lovely,” Steve said with a chuckle. He gave Walter’s corpse another serious look and then turned away, leading them towards the house at a slow trot. “We can sweep him up later. I’m sure he’ll keep till morning.”

“Probably,” Tony agreed, grimacing when his boot caught on the stone walkway. The resulting sprain almost took him to his knees. He hobbled along, glad when Steve slowed down to let him catch up. “He said something about having his body burned and his ashes taken back to the Stone family.”

“Stone? Do you even know somebody called Stone?”
“I don’t think so. I mean, I know a Tiberius Stone, but I doubt they’re related,” Tony said. “Ty’s a really good guy. We were in boarding school together.” He had known Tiberius for years, and they had been together all the way through school up until graduation. They had become friends shortly after meeting on their first day at boarding school. Tony had struck up a conversation with him as they stood watching their fathers vanish into limousines, the both of them too busy to stick around for their son’s first day of school; neither he nor Ty had appreciated being dropped off at boarding school, but there was nothing they had been able to do about it aside from complaining to their respective mothers, who had been sympathetic but unwilling to bring them home.

“Well, whoever he’s related to, they probably aren’t very nice,” Steve said with a snort, walking them through the back door and over to the couch. He sat down, pulling Tony onto the soft cushions with him, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulders.

Tony’s stomach rumbled so loudly it made him jump.

Steve laughed, looping a finger underneath the pillow-case-bandage wrapped around his throat, tugging it down; the bite marks Walter had given him were almost completely healed, although they were still reddish pink.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” Tony slurred, watching the world around him slowly blur. He squashed his cheek against Steve’s meaty shoulder, trying to keep awake. It felt like he had been up for a few days without rest, an altogether familiar feeling. “M’not hungry. M’just really, really tired.”

“You need to eat,” Steve insisted, tilting Tony’s head up so that he could look him in the eye. “Just a little bit, alright? Just enough to keep you going.” Steve pulled his shirt up over his head, frowning at the fingerprints, dirt and blood stains on it.

Tony nodded along, not quite sure what he was doing anymore. He felt like he might float clean off the couch when he turned his head towards Steve’s neck; he bumped into Steve when he tried to sit up straighter, having to take a laborious moment to figure out just how close he actually was to Steve’s body. He sank his teeth into Steve’s chest by accident, unable to lift his head high enough to get at Steve’s neck. The change in location didn’t matter. Steve still tasted just as sweet as he always did. Tony suckled there for what felt like hours, greedily lapping up the blood that tried to trickle its way down Steve’s broad, bare chest. He was fairly certain he heard Steve moan at some point, but by the time he caught on to what the sound meant, he had fallen into a pleasant sleep.

“First order of business is getting every last bit of him in the box,” Steve said as he pulled on a pair of thick rubber gloves that went up to his elbows.

“Agreed,” Tony said with a grunt, raising his shovel over his head. “I’m not putting his ass in the freezer again. He got the nice way the first time. This time he gets the box.”

“I’m sorry about that. I guess I should have found someplace more secure,” Steve said with a weary sigh.

“It’s not your fault,” Tony said, patting Steve on the shoulder. “It’s not like we knew the bastard was going to claw his way out. We all thought he was dead as a doornail.”

“Well he was dead,” Steve grumbled, lifting up the plastic box they had bought for corpse-carrying-duty. Tony had ordered it in special for this task, not trusting the standard store-bought ones as they
seemed too flimsy to get the job done; the inside of this box was divided into sections, something a normal person might make use of if they were transporting treasures that wouldn’t fit in a normal box – not that Walter’s bits and pieces were treasures, of course. The box was also eco-friendly and could be thrown right into a cremation furnace without any problems, or so the advertisements on their site had said.

“Duly noted. He was dead.” Tony stalked over to Walter’s shriveled and smoking corpse, lips pursed in displeasure. “So how do you want to do this? You want to scoop or catch?”

“Doesn’t really matter to me,”

They got to work, scouring every last inch of exposed grass and flowerbed for bits of Walter that might have gone unnoticed. It was messy work, mostly because some of the separated parts kept moving around on their own, trying to find somewhere to hide from the sunlight.

They were both covered in grass and soil by the time they were done; Tony was sweating profusely, feeling uncomfortable as hell about the whole thing. The idea that Walter’s little bits were still mostly alive left him wanting to dive into a vat of bleach head-first.

With Jarvis still on the fritz and the electronics in the house non-functional, they worked with what they had, hoping that they wouldn’t miss anything. It would have been easier with Jarvis pointing things out, but they got the job done regardless. When they finished with their grim task they locked the box, after giving Walter’s remaining bits a few good wacks with the shovel to keep them apart, and made arrangements to take him in to SHIELD’s personal incinerator. Steve was going to have to go in on his own to get the job done, but he didn’t seem too unhappy about it.

They let out sighs of relief, sinking down onto the edge of the fountain. The grass, once beautiful, elegant and emerald green, was mangled to hell, slashed apart by a hundred different shovel marks. Every time they had spied a piece of errant bone or would-be chunk of decayed flesh trying to work its way to cover, they had pounced on it, smacking it into submission with a shovel. Tony was pretty sure the landscapers were going to start weeping at the sight of the backyard, assuming of course that they were ever called back in to repair the place. It wasn’t like he was going to be throwing any fancy garden parties any time soon, after all; it could wait.

“Alright,” Steve said, dusting his hands off on his pants. “It’ll take me at least an hour to get to SHIELD and an hour to get back, not counting the time it’ll take to burn him. I guess you should eat now.”

Tony shrugged, blinking slowly in the warm afternoon light. It was nice outside, the perfect day, all things considered.

“Tony?” Steve grasped Tony by the shoulder, giving him a bit of a shake to draw his attention. “You alright?”

“I’m a bit tired,” Tony said after a minute of pensive thought. “Jarvis and I are running a search on the Stone family name using the Tower’s databases, trying to stir up potential suspects. I guess it’s a little bit more draining than I realized. Never thought I’d be using my own brain as a relay tower.”

“Find anything interesting?”

“Well, first off, there are like eight thousand people with that surname, and they’re all over the world. I’ll look at the rest of the results when you come back. Right now I think I want to go mess around with the power, see if I can get things turned back on. The food in the fridge is going to kick the bucket if I don’t get my ass in gear,” Tony said. He moved to get up and found himself pulled into
Steve’s lap. “Oh.”

“Forgot about that already?” Steve said, almost smiling.

“Sort of,” Tony muttered. He curled himself against Steve’s chest before sinking his teeth into
Steve’s neck. “You know,” he said through a mouthful of blood, “you’re going to have to eat too, at
some point.”

“I know,” Steve said, carding his fingers through Tony’s hair where he found a dried out leaf. He
flicked it away. “I’ll phone something in and pick it up on the way back. I’d better get this done now
before he tries something else.”

“You should probably stand guard until he’s ash,” Tony said, cleaning the wound on Steve’s neck
with a few well-placed licks.

“You know, I don’t think I’m really going to mind guard duty all that much this time. I’d rather wait
around and watch than end up with that son-of-a-bitch going after someone else,” Steve grumbled.
“Behave yourself, alright?”

“I promise nothing.” Tony said with a smirk. He slipped off of Steve’s lap and padded softly into the
house. “Have fun! Give my love to Coulson.”

“Will do,” Steve chuckled, getting up and following Tony into the living room. “Did you need me to
pick anything up while I’m out?”

“Uh,” Tony tapped his chin, “you could get Dummy some new balls or something. His tennis ball is
a little… soggy. I’m sad to say it didn’t like being soaked in bleach.”

“Does he have a favourite colour?” Steve said, pulling on his jacket.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine with anything. Just don’t get anything fuzzy. I think I’m done with seeing
green fluff everywhere,” Tony chuckled.

“Alright,” Steve said, carefully picking up Walter’s box. “I’ll be back soon.”

Tony walked him to the door, giving him a wave as he got into a taxi; he couldn’t bring himself to
walk out onto the porch. He could smell too many people outside.

The freezer was a mess, and Tony wanted it gone. He hefted up a sledge hammer, spinning it around
in his hands to get a feel for it. He had bleached the shit out of the freezer already, wiping away
every last trace of Walter’s blood on the off chance that it could do something to bring him back to
life again.

Tony scowled at the metal freezer doors, furious that he couldn’t see his own reflection in them. He
had taken a quick shower earlier and discovered that unpleasant truth when he had tried to get his
razor out to fix his beard; he wasn’t sure how he had missed it to be honest, because he had been
around reflective surfaces for the past few days. Thankfully his beard didn’t appear to be growing
anymore, probably due to Extremis’ intervention, but he hadn’t known that to begin with and it had
taken quite a bit of blind fumbling to figure it out. It wouldn’t be such a big deal if there weren’t so
many mirrors and windows in the world; he didn’t like that he was going to have to shy away from
anything and everything shiny now that his reflection had buggered off. If he was going to go out in
Tony took a swing at the freezer, knocking the door off of it with one blow. It was almost too easy. He growled at the debris, anger spilling into his once calm thoughts. Yet another thing he couldn’t control – no reflection, no shadow, no life. He swung the sledgehammer again, smashing it into the freezer, denting the metal when it didn’t immediately splinter. He had never been able to hit something so hard that it splintered before; well, that wasn’t technically true. He had never managed it outside of the suit at least. He swung again and again until he could hear nothing but the sound of his own laboured breaths and the scream-scape of metal skidding across cement.

He smelled Steve before he saw him. He turned, dropping the hammer and headed towards the kitchen, following his nose.

Steve gave Tony a warm smile. He set a massive bag of take-out curry down on the butcher block, wrestling his keys and jacket out of the way; there was a bag sitting on the counter with a pack of purple balls and something square, but Tony didn’t bother to give it more than a cursory glance. His mouth watered; he looked from Steve to the food and then back again, licking his lips.

“I see you approve of my lunch,” Steve snickered. He got out two plates and then heaved a sigh, realizing that he had gotten out one too many. “Oh. I keep uh…”

“Forgetting?” Tony said, leaning his hip against the butcher block. He popped the lid off of the first container of butter chicken and gave it a long sniff, groaning when the smell hit him. “I keep forgetting too. Jesus, did it always smell this good, or am I slowly losing my mind here?”

“I’m afraid so,” Steve said. “I got samosas too.”

“Bastard!” Tony crowed, scowling at the containers. There was a smear of butter chicken sauce on his thumb. He opened his mouth and licked it off; the unpleasant gag that came afterward when he tried to swallow was totally worth it. “Man, this keeps getting worse and worse.”

Steve set the plate down, slowly circling the butcher block. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You’re not the one who made my stomach stupid,” Tony grumbled. He leaned in when Steve touched him, pleased by the way Steve’s hand was now squeezing his shoulder as if he wasn’t ever going to let go.

“I know,” Steve murmured. “But it’s not fair that you have to suffer through smelling all of this. I can go outside if you want? Do you want me to eat it somewhere else?”

“No,” Tony said quickly. “No. Stay. Eat your delicious butter chicken and samosas. If I’m lucky you’ll taste like them later.”

Steve went beet red. “Uh…”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Something wrong there, champ?”

“No – no! Nothing’s wrong,” Steve said, clearing his throat. He started loading up his plate with food, splashing himself with sauce as he tried to dump as much out as quickly as possible. “Oh shoot.” He licked the mess off of his finger one at a time.

Tony stared at him, open mouthed. “Oh, my, god.”
Steve’s jerked his head up; his ears weren’t as red as they had been before but they were still a rosy shade of pink. “What?”

“That’s what I look like when I’m drinking your blood, isn’t it?” Tony said, finally understanding.

Steve’s eyes widened. “What?”

“It is, isn’t it? Oh my god,” Tony said, aware that he was close to screeching hysterically. “I’ve been licking Captain America. Oh god.” He took a step backwards, stumbling to a halt when he collided with the countertop behind him. The edge cut into the meat of his ass; it hurt, but the understanding he had come to hurt more. He had been drinking Steve down, licking and sucking at his neck like some kind of wild, sex-crazed animal; the constant feedings had been visceral for him, and yet for Steve they had probably seemed like a mauling – like Tony was trying to do something filthy to him. Tony’s breath caught in his throat.

“I don’t mind,” Steve said, nearly whispering in Tony’s ear.

Tony swallowed hard and tried to slip away, slinking around the butcher block, fully intending to leave the room before he made even more of an ass of himself. Why hadn’t Steve said something? It had to have been embarrassing having an old, debauchery-obsessed vampire-billionaire hanging off his throat all the time.

Steve grabbed him by the arm before he could leave. “Tony – I said its fine.” Steve’s voice was stern. He led Tony towards the kitchen table and forced him to sit back down in the chair he had so recently vacated. He retreated to his own seat and set his plate down on the tabletop in front of him before he could drop it on the floor, sitting down.

Tony twiddled his thumbs for lack of anything better to do, waiting for the lecture he knew was coming.

“I don’t mind you licking me,” Steve said, clearing his throat. His ears were that lovely shade of pink again, but he looked serious this time, far less embarrassed than before.

“Oh?”

“I’m…. I’m not going to say that it’s not a little strange when you do it. It feels weird sometimes, but I’m used to it now, and I know you’re not going to start doing something to me if I don’t want you to.” Steve picked up his fork and began stirring his food, mixing the curry in with the rice before it could congeal. “You’re my friend. I trust you.”

“Friends don’t normally lick each other,” Tony said with a grumble, flicking a piece of flaky samosa crust across the table.

“That’s true,” Steve conceded though a mouthful of food, “but it’s not like it’s something you can stop doing. You’re eating – you don’t want to get blood all over the place. I kind of like that you don’t waste a drop.”

Tony raised his head. “That’s weird.”

“Sure,” Steve said, rolling his eyes, “this coming from the guy who regularly snacks on my blood.”

Tony snorted. “Alright, alright.” He leaned back in his chair, resting his head on the cushion there so that he could look Steve in the eye with minimal effort. “So how’s the food?” It wasn’t just a change in topic; he really did want to know how good everything was. Sure, he couldn’t eat people food anymore, but it wasn’t like he couldn’t enjoy watching someone else eat. After all, Steve did get an
adorable look on his face when he was eating something he really, really liked – Tony could look at that every day for the rest of his life and he would never get tired of it.

“It’s really good,” Steve said, swallowing down a mouthful of potato, peas and cheese. “I wish you could be eating some of it.”

“Me too buddy, me too,” Tony muttered, banging his head against the back of the chair. “I guess you’re going to have to eat for the both of us.”

“I guess so,” Steve said, flashing Tony a smile. “So, any luck with the search for the right Stone family?”

Tony cracked his neck. “Oh, I found some stuff, but none of it was very interesting. Most of the families around are pretty clean, aside from a few drug addicts and criminals. Most of them are small time – and so far nothing screams vampire.”

“That’s too bad,” Steve said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, well, it gets worse.”

“Too many to go through?”

“Bingo,” Tony grunted.

“What about that guy you knew – Tiberius Stone? Do you think he could have anything to do with Walter?” Steve asked, spooning up a piece of paneer, eating it slowly.

“Well, it’s hard to say, really. I mean, I know him, but it’s not like I’ve spent a lot of time with him since I took over SI. We were pretty close in boarding school,” Tony said. He sighed, scratching at his hair. “We shared a room, had all the same classes – you know how it goes. We were two poor little rich boys with bad parents, out looking for trouble. We did everything together, well, until he decided to end it. After we graduated, he went off to Europe to deal with some ‘family stuff’ as he put it.” Tony shrugged. “I don’t know what I was expecting. It’s not like we were out or anything. I think our parents would have killed us if we were.”

“Out?”

“Dating, Steve. We were dating.” Tony sighed. “Well, I don’t know if you could call it dating. It was really just sex and fumbling around. It wasn’t like we were going out to movies and holding hands.”

“Oh. Right.” Steve started in on another spoonful of curry, not quite meeting Tony’s gaze.

“It isn’t a problem,” Steve said, swallowing awkwardly as he tried to keep from accidentally inhaling a chunk of potato, “it’s fine. I’m alright with that sort of thing – it would never be a problem.”

Tony grinned, his face growing hot. “Ok.” He had never been easily embarrassed, but talking about knocking boots with Tiberius in front of Steve had felt a little like he was crossing some kind of line. “You had me worried there for a second.”
“Really,” Steve said, smiling, “if you started dating a guy right now, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Tony said carefully, praying to god Steve couldn’t read his mind. He probably wouldn’t have appreciated the imagery dancing around in Tony’s head, especially if he found out that it wasn’t Tiberius Tony had been thinking about while they had been fumbling their way through yet another drunken hookup. That information was probably best left to the imagination – Tony’s imagination. “Well, we both said that we would stay in touch and all that, but after my parents died, Ty pretty much vanished – I couldn’t find anything in the press about him until Viastone happened to pop up on the radar, and by then he was all over the place. Tiberius happens to be their CEO.”


“It should. It’s the newest media slash tech conglomeration to hit the US market. They have their own dev labs, news channel, and paper– it’s all prime-time stuff from what I’ve seen, although some people call it trashy. They did a big piece on my break up with Pepper,” Tony said, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. “I don’t know if he knew about what they were saying about me. From what I read, he sort of does his own thing behind the scenes and leaves everyone else to run the day-to-day stuff.”

“You want to talk to him, don’t you?” Steve cleaned off his plate and went back for seconds, returning with a fresh pile of samosas and curry.

“I guess,” Tony said with a shrug, trying not to feel jealous of the fork Steve was licking clean. “It’s not like he owes me any favors or anything.”

“He shouldn’t have said anything about your break up. That wasn’t fair of him – none of them had the right to talk about your private life like that.” Steve scowled. “I wanted to put out a press release to get them to back off, but Fury didn’t think it would be a good idea. He said I would be butting into your business and that you wouldn’t appreciate it.”

Tony stared at Steve, his mouth agape. “You… you wanted to…?”

Steve lowered his gaze to his plate, looking a little like he was a puppy who had made an unfortunate mess on the floor. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No – no. It’s sweet,” Tony said. He pushed his chair closer, scooting along the edge of the table so that he was bumping knees with Steve. “I wouldn’t have been mad.”

“Really?” Steve looked up, fork held aloft in mid-bite.

“Really,” Tony said solemnly. “Captain America standing up for my virtue? That would have been something to see. I mean, it would have been a crappy thing for your popularity, and all. Mothers would have covered their children’s eyes in horror.”

Steve swatted Tony in the shoulder, rolling his eyes. “Well, next time I’ll be sure to say something for the cameras then.”

Tony grinned. “Feel free.”

“So, when did you want to go visit him?” Steve asked, turning back to his food.

“Him?” Tony stared blankly at Steve. “Who him?”

“Tiberius-him,” Steve said with a laugh. “You know – the guy we were just talking about?”
“Oh,” Tony snorted. “Him. Yeah. I’ll get right on that.” He got up and stood half hanging over the nearest box of take-out, taking in a deeply depressing breath. “God that smells good.”

“Tony?”

“Just crushing my dreams, don’t worry. I sent a request in earlier to see if he’ll see me but his secretary hasn’t sent anything back yet.”

“And when has that ever stopped you before?”

“Well, before I wasn’t capable of eating my way through his security staff,” Tony grunted, shoving the curry away. “I don’t know Steve. I don’t think I’m ready to go out there.”

“You won’t be going alone. I’ll be right there with you the entire time.”

“I know, I know.” Tony scratched at the back of his neck. “What if I hurt someone?”

“You won’t. I’ll make sure of it. We’re a team, remember?” Steve flashed Tony a brilliant smile. “And if it gets bad, well, we’ll deal with it together. I’ve got my shield and we can always bring your briefcase armor along to throw on you if you get unruly.”

“That’s cute. Unruly,” Tony chuckled darkly. “You think it’ll be enough?”

“I’m Captain America,” Steve said. “Would I lie to you?”

Tony flashed Steve a grin. “Fair enough. Alright. Let’s go pay him an unscheduled visit.”

“After lunch, of course,” Steve said, taking another bite of crispy samosa.

“Fine, fine,” Tony grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. “After lunch.”

Tony strolled downstairs dressed in his favourite suit, ready to take on the world. He took one look at Happy standing in the doorway and sprinted back up the stairs. He could smell Happy’s blood from where he was, could taste him in the air and for the first time in his life he wanted to rip his friend’s throat out with his teeth. There was hint of Pepper around Happy, although it had mostly been swallowed up by his cologne, for which Tony was supremely grateful; he was never going to look down on the smell of sandalwood ever again.

“Tony? We’re ready to go whenever you are,” Steve called out, zipping up his jacket. He spotted Tony lurking on the landing and scooted up the stairs, getting in the way so that Tony’s line of sight was blocked completely. “Hey, are you alright? Should I have not called Happy?”

Tony gritted his teeth. “We weren’t exactly on speaking terms the last time I saw him,” he said, jamming his hands into his pockets. He pulled his sunglasses out and put them on, nearly bruising the bridge of his nose in the process.

“I can send him away if you want,” Steve murmured.

“No, it’s fine.” Tony pushed around Steve’s shoulder, stiffening as Happy’s scent got heavier. “Hey, Hap. How are things going?”

Happy shuffled in place, looking around awkwardly. “Things are alright Boss. How are you?”
“Oh, you know,” Tony said, shrugging as he threw open the front door. “I’m surviving.”

Steve hurried after Tony, making sure to take the time to lock up before Tony could vanish into the car waiting for them. Happy tootled along behind Steve, car keys clutched tightly in his hand, nervously smiling.

Tony yanked the car door open, scowling when he heard the metal groan in protest. He slipped inside, squashing himself against the immaculately polished leather seats; once he might have been at ease in here with Happy, cracking jokes about all the burgers they were going to eat. Now it felt like he was with a stranger – someone he didn’t trusted and who didn’t trusted him in return.

Steve slid into the seat beside Tony, closing the door carefully behind him. Tony tried not to be annoyed by how easy Steve made it look to just move around and do day-to-day things without accidentally crushing something; the thought that Steve was hiding so much power was almost obscene.

“So where too Boss?” Happy asked as he got in and started the car.

Tony flinched when the heaters turned on; he leaned closer to Steve, burying his nose in the collar of his coat. The smell had been bad before, but the introduction of heat made it so much worse.

“Hap, can you turn the heat down?” Steve said, giving Happy an apologetic smile. “Tony’s feeling a bit under the weather.”

“Alrighty,” Happy said, turning to back the car out of the driveway. He adjusted the heat, eyeballing Tony over the back of his seat. “So, where are we headed?”

“Viastone Corporation’s Headquarters,” Steve said, doing up his seat belt. When he noticed that Tony wasn’t bothering to do the same he reached over and did Tony’s up for him, frowning slightly when Tony refused to move even an inch to help him click the safety buckle in place.

“Oh – that’s the news-rag who did all those stories.” Happy scowled, shaking his head. “They did a real shitty thing to you, Boss. Wasn’t fair what they said.”

“Yeah,” Tony grunted, refusing to take his eyes off Steve’s broad shoulders. “It was a really shitty thing to do, but it wasn’t like they were lying. Can’t sue someone for slander if they aren’t actually telling lies.”

“I… I’m sorry. I know it’s not my place, but we all know you didn’t do anything wrong. It was us that did the wrong – not you.” Happy sighed. “I tried to talk with Pepper about it, to see if we could say something to them but she doesn’t want to get involved. Said she wasn’t interested in talking.”

“Same here, Hap,” Tony growled. “Put up the divider.”

Happy seemed startled. “Boss?”

“The divider, Happy. Put it up.”

“Alright, Boss. If that’s what you want.”

As the divider rose, Tony fought back the urge to scream. He squashed himself against Steve’s shoulder again, pressing his nose to the smooth leather of Steve’s jacket.

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmured. “I shouldn’t have called him.”
“It’s not that,” Tony whispered hoarsely. He gnawed on his lower lip, desperate to bite into something that wasn’t another human. “Shit, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Are you alright?” Steve wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulder, holding him close. “Do you need to feed?”

Tony shook his head. “No. It’s bad enough he can’t see me in the cameras or the mirrors. He doesn’t need to see me with blood all over my face too.”

“Tony, he’s been your friend for years. Do you really think he would hate you if he found out what happened?”

“I don’t want anyone to know – at least until Strange checks me out. Can we not talk about this now?”

“Ok,” Steve said. He moved in his seat and leaned against Tony. “If it gets bad, you can hang onto me, alright?”

“Alright,” Tony grumbled, closing his eyes. The sunglasses had been a wise decision, he realized after a few minutes of silence on Steve’s part. His eyes were probably going to creep the hell out of anyone who saw them. God, what had he been thinking? This was an awful idea! Why the hell was he out in public again? He wanted to order them to turn around but couldn’t bring the words out even though they were there, just waiting to be unleashed.

Steve rested his cheek against the top of Tony’s head. “If you want to go back, we can. I’m not going to force you to go out there if you’re not ready.”

Tony swallowed down the words ‘I’m not ready’. “We’re here?”

“We got here ten minutes ago,” Steve murmured. He squeezed Tony’s shoulder. “You with me?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, hoping that his voice didn’t sound as shaky as it did in his own ears. “I’m with you. Let’s do this.”

The moment they stepped out of the car, someone took a picture of them. Tony was used to it, but all the same he felt dread pooling in his belly; he turned to try and tell the photographer off but couldn’t locate them in the crowd. Either the cameraman was much faster than he had expected, or he was losing his grip. He felt Steve’s strong hand on the small of his back and relaxed marginally, allowing himself to be lead inside.

Viastone Corporation’s HQ was a bland looking building that seemed to revel in stainless steel interior decoration; the place looked like it spent a small fortune on Windex, keeping all those fingerprints away. The secretary who met them by the reception desk looked a little like she might have been pinched constantly as a child. Her dour expression could have chased away the most stubborn of visitors; unfortunately for her, Tony Stark wasn’t going to be run off by a surly-looking secretary. He had faced much, much worse over the years; she didn’t even seem appetizing.

“I’m Tony Stark,” he said, flashing her a grin. “Is Ty in?”

“Sir, I don’t know what made you think you were invited in, but you’re weren’t approved for a meeting. As I told you on the phone, Mr. Stone is not taking visitors, even famous ones. He’s a very busy man,” the secretary said, pursing her lips in distaste. “I’m going to have to ask you to vacate the premises before I call the police.”
“You’re kidding,” Tony said, lowering his sunglasses in order to glare over them, forgetting about how his eyes looked.

The secretary took three steps backward, nearly knocking over a potted plant in her haste to get away. “Dear god – what the hell are you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but Mr. Stark and I are here to ask Mr. Stone some very serious questions. This is official Avengers business ma’am, so we’re going to need to see him as soon as possible,” Steve said, stepping in front of Tony, blocking him from sight. “We can wait all day if we have to, but I’d rather be home in time for everyone to have dinner at a reasonable hour.”

The secretary still looked frightened, but Steve’s calm smile seemed to make her momentarily forget Tony’s terrifying eyes. She pressed her fingers to the Bluetooth headset she wore, turning it on. “Mr. Stone? There’s a Captain Rogers and a Mr. Stark here to see you.”

Steve smiled at her, as charming as always; Tony scowled, trying to keep out of the way.

“Mr. Stone says that he will see you in approximately twenty minutes, gentlemen. Please take the elevator to floor eighty seven and have a seat,” the secretary said, gesturing to the elevator directly behind her. She inched her way backwards, feeling along the side of the desk to keep from tripping on her heels, refusing to turn her back on them.

Tony bristled. “Hey!”

“Just go,” the secretary hissed, hiding behind her desk. “Mr. Stone will be ready in twenty minutes.”

Steve gave the woman a stern look, clearly unimpressed with her behavior and then wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist. “Thanks,” he said, drawing Tony towards the elevator. “And miss? Don’t look at him like that. He’s a good man, and he doesn’t deserve to have to put up with people like you.”

Tony wanted to stick his tongue out at her; he stood patiently beside Steve as the elevator doors closed, trying not to laugh. “You’re so sweet,” he said with a smirk, bumping his shoulder against Steve’s. “My knight in shining armor.”

Steve’s ears went pink. “Oh quit it.” He bumped Tony back, laughing when Tony rammed into him again.

Tiberius Stone greeted them forty minutes later; he was lucky his waiting room had such comfortable couches, because if they hadn’t been so soft and plush Tony would have knocked down the damned door. Tiberius was dressed impeccably, wearing a soft shale-coloured suit with crisp lines, one Tony recognized from his many visits to Saville Row. Off the top of his head Tony guessed that the suit had cost Tiberius at least fifty grand, assuming of course that it was the real deal and not a knockoff; he looked damned fine in it. His hair was still the same light sandy blonde it had been in his youth, and he was sporting a very familiar beard – one Tony knew well, considering he had the exact same one.

“I like your beard,” Tony said. He flashed Tiberius a smile and was rewarded with a grin in return.

Tiberius swept forward, embracing Tony affectionately, his fingers digging in to the meat of Tony’s hips. “You’d know. I think we have the same stylist these days. It’s all the rage.”

Steve grimaced.
“Looking good as always,” Tony said as they pulled apart.

Tiberius shrugged, leading them to a large ivory-coloured marble desk, gesturing for them to sit. Unsurprisingly, there was only one chair; Tony recognized the business tactic, and appreciate it in the least. Steve perched behind the chair as Tony sat down, standing guard directly behind him.

“I work out. It pays to have a personal trainer these days. You look pretty fine yourself, although I’ll admit, I don’t really know why you’re wearing sunglasses indoors. It’s a tad tacky, don’t you think?” Tiberius smirked.

Tony shrugged. “I was in the workshop. Forgot to sleep. You know how it is. Sunglasses keep me looking like a normal human.”

Tiberius flashed a toothy grin. “Ah, still living the good old days I see. Don’t you have people to do that sort of thing for you?”

“I’d rather do it myself. I hand work off to other people and things get screwed up,” Tony said. “It saves me time.”

“Ah, well,” Tiberius said with a shrug, “I suppose there’s that.” He clasped his hands in front of him on his desk, looking Steve up and down like he was some kind of potential investment. “You’re here about the articles and reports, I assume? I confess I was quite shocked by what they put out. I wasn’t in the office, you see – I was dealing with an absolute disaster in the labs, and my PA was signing off on it all in my stead. Believe me, I was horrified when I heard about it on my way home. Nasty story. I assure you, I’ve reprimanded all of the staff involved.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Tony said.

“I’m ashamed to say that I can’t particularly control the media world as well as I can my lab. The investors want money, and the only way the media makes said money is by selling information to the greater public. It’s a shame, really. No one missed the chance to jump on Tony Stark’s love life,” Tiberius sighed, shaking his head sadly. “I’d get out of the business, but as they say, it pays the bills.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Tony muttered. “Not much you can do about that.”

“He could have given you a heads up,” Steve said, eyeing Tiberius over the top of Tony’s head. “A decent friend would have let you know about it before he let his company toss you to the wolves.”

Tiberius had the decency to look chagrinned. “You’re right, Captain Rogers. I should have had a better grasp on what they were putting out. I assure you, I’ll make certain things are reviewed before they hit the newsstands from now on. You have my word on that.”

“Its fine, Ty, really.” Tony said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’ll blow over sooner or later. Anyway, I was hoping to talk to you about –”

“A moment,” Tiberius said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He jabbed at it and frowned. “I’m afraid my PA thinks I should see something.” He pressed a button on his desk, tapping his foot until the massive flat screen television across the room powered up. He rose, striding around the desk to stand in front of the television.

The Viastone News program that came on was already in progress; the reporters were yammering excitedly, their words almost unintelligible. The picture in the right hand corner of the screen, enlarging as the reporters spoke, caught Tony’s eye first. It was a picture of him, grinning at the camera, wearing a speedo and holding a martini glass up as if he was the Statue of Liberty; he
remembered that picture. Someone had taken it during his thirtieth birthday party and sold it to the Daily Bugle for sixty grand. At the time he had found it amusing as hell that someone would care enough to buy a picture of him that was so goofy, but now he wondered if it had been intentional, if they had been stockpiling embarrassing pictures. The caption underneath the picture read: Tony Stark, Billionaire Industrialist dead at 43.

“Can you turn that up?” Steve said. Tiberius obliged, standing back to watch as the report continued.

“Billionaire Industrialist Tony Stark has been declared dead. According to official reports, Mr. Stark was photographed earlier getting out of his car, yet the picture refused to develop. Viastone reporters called in the strange phenomenon and spoke with our company’s certified occultist. According to their reports, Mr. Stark appears to be a vampire, a bloodthirsty creature of the night,” the male reporter said. He sounded far too chipper.

“Funny,” Tiberius said, turning to stare at Tony, “you don’t look dead to me.”

“What can I say?” Tony murmured, “I don’t always photograph well.”

“Stark’s vampirism lead us here at Viastone to thoroughly research his change, as well as the legal ramifications brought about by his condition. According to New York State law, only the living can hold property, and as Mr. Stark is not currently classified as ‘living’ due to his undead status, his property and company cannot be legally tended to except by someone acting as an Executor of his will. In other news, Stark Industries took a seventy point hit today at the release of Mr. Stark’s vampirism. Stockholders and private citizens alike were horrified by the revelation, and protesters have already started to assemble in front of the Avengers Tower to protest his illegal status,” the female reporter said, tapping her notes on the edge of her desk to even them out. “I’m not sure about you Jack, but that makes me just plain uncomfortable.”

“I agree. It’s just awful that Tony Stark thinks he should be wandering around town,” the male reporter said, shaking his head. “Personally, I think Mr. Stark should turn himself in to authorities before this gets out of hand.”

Tiberius turned the television off. “That’s just plain foolish reporting. You’re not a vampire.”

“Uh,” Tony cleared his throat, fiddling with his sleeves.

“You’re kidding.” Tiberius took a step back, his eyes wide. “Tony – this is serious! You shouldn’t be sitting here chatting with me about old times – you should be out there, dealing with this awful mess.”

“We didn’t know about any mess,” Steve said, searching his pockets for his phone.

Tony pulled out his own phone. He stared at it for a second before reluctantly dialing Pepper. Time felt like it was going by at a glacial pace; he stared down at his lap while he waited for Pepper to pick up, aware dimly that Steve was on the phone behind him, talking with someone.

“Pepper?”

“Yeah, Pep, it’s me.”

“Oh thank god. You’re not dead!”

Tony winced. “Well, technically…”

“Oh god! Tony – what the hell were you thinking? What did you do? They’re running video of you on every channel I have access to. I don’t know where they got it from, but it shows you attacking Steve Rogers in your workshop. Tell me it isn’t real,” Pepper rambled. “Tony? It’s not real, is it?”

“They got footage from my workshop?” Tony asked. It felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over his head, leaving him numb all over. He pulled up the workshop’s security code in his head with Extremis, but with the power out he couldn’t get anything of use. “That’s impossible, I had the security tightened up the minute I set foot in the building. No one should have seen that. Nothing should have gone in or out without Jarvis knowing about it.”

Pepper’s phone gave an odd clank. Confused, Tony pulled his phone away from his ear and settled it back. “Pepper?”

“You really did it?”

“Accidentally! I didn’t mean to,” he said, trying to keep from throwing the phone away in order to avoid the question entirely, “we didn’t know what I was capable of, and I locked myself up to try and see if I could –”

“Can it, Tony,” Pepper said, her voice dark with rage. “You attacked Steve. You attacked Steve!”

“It was an accident!” Tony almost shouted. “I wouldn’t have done it on purpose!”

“You’re uncontrollable, Tony. They have footage proving it. No one in the company is going to let you be a member of the board if they’re afraid you’re going to attack and eat them – frankly, I’m not so sure I want to be around you either,” Pepper said quietly. “Oh god. You took Happy with you today, didn’t you?”

“What’s Happy got to do with it?” Tony snapped, standing up and stalking towards the door. “He’s my driver– I needed a ride to talk with –

“You took my boyfriend – my fiancé – with you, in a small enclosed car?” Pepper shrieked. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Tony wilted, hunching over. “I wouldn’t hurt Happy. You know that. He’s my friend.”

“Well you said Steve was your friend too – and look what you did to him!”

Tony wanted to throw up. He stumbled, almost dropping his phone and grasped at Tiberius’ plastic potted palm to keep from falling to his knees.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice was shrill and tinny in his ear.

“I… I wouldn’t…”

“You need to turn yourself in to SHIELD. You need to be locked up so you can’t kill someone,” Pepper said. Something rustled as she talked, and Tony realized dumbly that she was probably searching for Fury’s private phone number.
Steve reached around Tony, gently taking the phone and putting it to his ear. He settled a hand on Tony’s shoulder, pinning him in place with that one, simple, touch. “Ms. Potts? Hi, it’s Steve Rogers here.” He guided Tony towards the door, mindful of Tony’s weak legs. “I think it would be better if we talked in person. Tony’s fine – he’s completely safe to be around. Yes, I understand that you’re frightened, but he would never hurt you or Mr. Hogan.”

Tony’s shoulder collided with the inside of the elevator; he barely felt the pain.

“Ms. Potts, you’ll be perfectly fine. Tony’s under control. What happened in the workshop was an accident – one that’s not going to be repeated,” Steve said, pressing the ground floor button. He eased Tony away from the closing doors, steering him toward the safety rail so he could hold onto something solid. “Yes, I understand that ma’am. I understand that the Board of Directors are concerned, yes – and Tony understands that too – but there’s nothing we can do until Doctor Strange gets back to this dimension. We’ve already made arrangements to speak with professionals – no. I understand that you’re concerned, but we’re not going to SHIELD. He’s not a wild animal who needs to be locked up. He doesn’t deserve to sit through that kind of thing that after what he’s been through. He’s stable and safe.”

“She thinks I’m going to eat Happy,” Tony mumbled, leaning heavily against the safety railing. “She thinks – she thinks I’d hurt her.”

Steve draped an arm around Tony’s shoulder, pulling him close. “It’s ok. We’ll get through this,” he murmured, moving the phone away from his mouth for privacy’s sake. He flinched when Pepper said something loudly in his ear. “Ms. Potts – Pepper. Please. Calm down. I’m going to be with him the entire time – you’ll be perfectly safe. Please, just meet us in the mansion – I… Alright. If you don’t feel safe there, we’ll meet somewhere else. What would work best for you?”

Tony started to cry. He buried his face in Steve’s shoulder.

“Mr. Hogan is completely safe. We’ve already been in the car with him and no one ended up hurt. I’m here to keep things in control. Yes,” Steve sighed, pulling them out of the elevator and towards the side entrance where Happy stood waiting. “Everyone is going to be fine, I promise. Please, just wait until you talk to Tony before you decide anything, alright? We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you find anything strange! Thanks for reading! It's a shorter chapter this time, but the next two make up for it : )
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Meetings, meetings meetings. Tony hated the press.

Chapter Notes

Nothing major to tag here - at least I don't think it's too bad. Still blood drinking and violence :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pepper told them to drive to one of Tony’s older worksites, a secure building Stark International owned where only handful of people could enter or exit; the staff here was minimal, and on a normal day only three or four people other than security ever really visited except to dust.

She didn’t greet them at the door when they arrived; they beeped themselves through security and trudged into the building, waved on by the man at the front desk. Happy hadn’t been so keen on driving them; he had gotten his own phone call while waiting for Steve and Tony to finish up their meeting with Tiberius and was clearly just as confused and hurt as Pepper. Tony felt bad about not telling him what had happened, but if given the choice to turn back time, he wasn’t sure he would have broached the subject then either. A small part of him was hurt by the fact that Happy hadn’t even realized that something was wrong with him until it had been pointed out. Happy used to know everything about him.

Tony walked beside Steve feeling like his legs were trapped inside the Mark I prototype’s rush-welded leg braces. The building was sterile, brightly lit and disgustingly empty; the staff must have gone home already, whether it be from Pepper’s influence or because their shifts had ended, he didn’t know. All he knew was that Steve’s hand was clutched tightly in his and that Pepper was afraid of him.

Steve rubbed self-consciously at his neck; Tony had drunk from him while they were in the parking lot, afraid to meet Pepper on a somewhat empty stomach, and the bite marks were still itchy little red bumps on Steve’s neck. Happy hadn’t been as freaked out by the whole thing as Tony had expected, but he had been somewhat cranky when no one could give him any concrete details about what might happen in the future. He kept a few steps ahead of them, flashing his security badge at the electronic checkpoints so that they could walk through without stopping every twenty feet, keeping an eye out for security guards.

They found Pepper sitting in a steel chair amidst Tony’s prototypes, the ones that had long since been patented and sold through Stark Industries. She had picked a room with a lot of sharp tools, Tony noted glumly, and she was sitting with a Taser in her lap, not even bothering to hide it.

He swallowed down the bitterness at the sight of her angry face and sat down, letting Steve settle
beside him in a matching metal chair.

“So,” Pepper said, clearing her throat. “You’re alright?” she said, looking Happy over from head to toe.

Happy nodded, hovering behind Tony’s chair. “I’m fine, honey,” he said, moving his security badge from hand to hand. “Where do you want me to be?”

“Beside me,” Pepper said, turning to stare at Tony. “I’d rather if you were standing with me than near him.”

Tony winced. He had known it was going to be bad, but it still stung far more than he had expected. He lowered his gaze, content to stare a hole in the floor; Happy put a hand on Tony’s shoulder as he passed, giving it a squeeze.

“It’s ok, Boss. I trust you,” he said, settling behind Pepper’s chair.

Tony forced himself to look up, trying to keep his emotions in check. He wished he could be more detached about Pepper’s distrust. She had always stuck by him before, but apparently there were some things even she couldn’t handle. He couldn’t blame her, really; if he had been in her position he wasn’t sure what he would have done. She had changed since Extremis. Maybe she didn’t want to put up with his bullshit anymore.

“So, he’s safe?” Pepper said, tapping her Taser against her thigh. “Your neck is bleeding, Captain. I don’t think I’d call him very safe if that’s happening.” She shot Steve a look, one that she normally used when someone did something completely unexpected during a meeting, and waited for a response. She didn’t have to wait long.

Steve reached out and took Tony’s hand again. “He needs to eat,” he said, rubbing his thumb over Tony’s knuckles. “I’m able to regenerate much faster than a normal person, so it’s not a problem. The amount he needs to drink isn’t dangerous for me.”

“So he’s alright?” Pepper watched Steve’s face, still wary. “He’s safe?”

“He’s not hungry. He’s only dangerous when he’s hungry,” Steve said, picking his words carefully. “The only reason he attacked me in his workshop was because he was starving himself to try and make himself controllable. He didn’t know what was going to happen, and if he had known he would never have done it.”

“He tried to hurt himself?” Pepper’s lower lip trembled; she shot forward out of her seat, throwing the Taser onto the ground and wrapped her arms around Tony’s neck, hugging him tightly against her, trapping Steve’s hand between the three of them. “Oh Tony,” she sniffled, bursting into tears. She smacked him in the side of the head and then pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You idiot! How many times do I have to tell you to be careful before you’ll listen to me, huh?”

Tony wrapped his arms around Pepper’s waist, leaning into the embrace as much as possible; he had missed this. This was the Pepper he knew so well; she hadn’t gone anywhere at all. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“But you did,” she grumbled, smacking him in the side of the head again; the blow was gentler this time. “You scared me half to death! I thought you’d been kidnapped again, or – I don’t know – been taken over by mind controlling monsters! How the hell did this happen?”

“A vampire was dumped in my backyard,” Tony grumbled, rubbing at the side of his head where she had hit him. He explained to her about the nightmares and sickness and then, grudgingly,
explained about his work with Extremis. By the time he had finished speaking Pepper’s eyes were so wide and tear-filled he was afraid he had given her an aneurism.

“You perfected Extremis,” she said, sitting unsteadily in her chair after Happy practically forced her into it. “You used it on yourself?”

“Yeah,” Tony admitted, looking sheepish. “But to be fair, I was going to use it anyway. It wasn’t like I was driven to it.”

“Oh, I understand that,” Pepper said with a grim look, “I just don’t understand why you needed to use it in the first place.” She cradled her head in her hands. “God, Tony, you’re already one of the most capable men on the planet. Why the hell did you think turning your brain into a computer was a good idea? People can break into computers.”

Tony sighed. “I have safeguards in place. I coded in security – it’s covered. No one’s getting into my noggin unless I let them in.”

“They’d better not,” Steve growled, flicking Tony in the ear.

“Why are you two ganging up on me?” Tony groused, rubbing at his ear. “You guys are mean – did you know that?”

“We know,” Pepper said with a laugh, wiping her eyes. “I just wish you would talk to someone before you did something like this. Extremis isn’t a toy.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Tony snapped, stiffening in his chair. “You think I didn’t understand the risks?”

“Tony,” Pepper sighed. “I know you knew the risks.”

“I don’t think you do. I was in more danger when I had the shrapnel taken out – Extremis was a cakewalk.” Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “And let me tell you, it wasn’t fun sitting around with bandages and stitches for a month.”

“I know that,” Pepper snapped, glaring at him. “You think I didn’t know what you went through? I saw you fighting with the pain every goddamned day! Why the hell do you think I couldn’t stay? All I could see was you hurting, and I’m the one who convinced you to get rid of the reactor.”

Tony gritted his teeth. “Oh. I guess I thought you didn’t want to stay because you were busy shacking up with Happy.”

“Hey!” Happy protested, still hovering behind Pepper’s chair.

“No offense, Happy, but you kind of swooped in and stole my girl,” Tony growled.

“Well it wasn’t like either of us meant for it to happen,” Pepper shouted. She clasped a hand over her mouth, close to tears again. “This is why I didn’t want to be around you – why I wanted time apart. I can’t do this Tony. I can’t sit by and watch you tear yourself apart because you think you need to prove something to somebody. I have the right to want my own life and I don’t want to wait by the phone every night worrying that I’m going to hear from the hospital or the morgue that you’re dead.”

“Well, I am dead, so I guess you don’t have to do any more waiting,” Tony said, standing up.

Pepper stared at him, shock written in every line on her face. “That’s cruel.”
“Yeah, well – what that bastard did to me wasn’t very nice either. It’s not like I chose for this to happen. You always act like I go out there looking for ways to get myself killed.”

“That’s because you do!” Pepper shouted, standing up. She looked like she wanted to grab Tony by the shoulders and shake him. “You always do things like that! You’ve almost gotten killed thirty times since you became Iron Man – and that’s just the times I know about! God knows what you don’t tell me – I hope Steve knows what he’s getting into, because goddamn it Tony, he doesn’t deserve to wake up one day and find you dead in a dumpster!”

“I’m already dead Pepper! I can’t end up dead in a dumpster unless I physically sit in one!”

“Well that’s all fine and good, but you’ve still got a company to run and you’re still walking around, so you’re damn well going to run it!”

“I didn’t say I wanted to quit!” Tony said, sitting down so forcefully the chair legs bowed. He swore, wanting to throw the damned thing across the room. “I never said I wanted to drop everything. You’re the one who quit on me.”

“Tony,” Pepper said with a sigh, sinking into her chair, “It wasn’t about who quit on whom. It was about you and me not fitting together.”

“Fitting? What does this have to do with fitting? Was our relationship a pair of pants to you?”

“You weren’t what I wanted Tony.” Pepper looked down at her hands clasped loosely in her lap. “I’m sorry. I know it hurts, but it’s the truth.”

“Oh, I see. So all those years you spent hanging around – all those months we spent dating and fucking and talking – those weren’t what you wanted?” Tony snorted. “I find it hard to believe you would ever do something you didn’t want to do.”

“I didn’t want to admit that I couldn’t see a future with you,” Pepper said quietly.

Tony fell silent.

“I could see past the money and the work, but frankly, Tony, I couldn’t see past the Avengers.” Pepper stood, picking up the Taser. She dropped it into her purse before approaching, kneeling down in front of Tony. “I wasn’t what you wanted either. You thought I was, but I wasn’t it.”

“You were it,” Tony insisted bitterly. “You were always it.”

“But I’m not it now, am I?” Pepper smiled softly. She rested a hand on Tony’s knee. “I’m not what you want now. It’s better this way.”

“So what do you want me to do?” Tony sighed, looking down at Pepper’s hand. He could feel her warmth, smell her in ways he had never experienced before, but there was something new to her, something he couldn’t place; she stood up, dusting off her bare knees, smiling sadly.

“Well, for one thing we have to discuss the ramifications of what it means to be the living dead. Legal seems to think that the government has a case for stripping Stark Industries of all their assets unless your will can be found and executed. You have one on file already,” Pepper said. “I know you do.”

“Yes,” Tony said. “I sent a copy to you and the board a few days ago.”

“Good,” Pepper said. “The date stamp on the will doesn’t really matter at this point. You’ve had a
binding will ever since you made Iron Man, and the main points of order are in that one. Even if the new one’s not electronically stamped, they don’t know the exact day you became a vampire and ‘ceased to be living’, so we’re in the clear. As long as your signature is on the new one and a witness has signed it, it’s in. I’ll put my signature on this one as well, just in case they try to say someone tricked you into signing it against your will.”

“They’re still going to push that’s its false,” Tony said. “I can just see it now – SHIELD is going to want their piece of the pie too. They’re going to flock to this like vultures to road kill.”

“Let them. Your files have been in order for years. SHIELD can’t touch anything, even if they think they have the rights to it. The government can’t touch it either. If we’re lucky, the judge that sees us will only want proof of life, which means we might be able to fight our way through by providing proof that you’re up and about,” Pepper said. “Do you think you could handle a crowd?”

“Probably not,” Tony said with a grimace. He didn’t think he was up to walking down the block without Steve at his side; standing in a crowded courtroom with a few hundred people milling around would be a nightmare. “I mean, if they let me take Steve in with me it would probably be fine.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see then. There’s nothing we can do to push this along any faster.”

“What about brain scans?” Steve snapped his fingers. “We have plenty of those! Tony still shows up on the equipment, he just doesn’t physically appear. Couldn’t they just hook him up to a heart monitor?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Pepper said. “Worse comes to worse, we’ll have him hooked up and have the feed transmitted directly to the judge. We can always get Doctor Banner to take the readings for the court if they’re too afraid to send their own specialist. They trust his judgement, even if they don’t exactly trust him.” She eyed Steve curiously. “You’re going to stick with him no matter what, aren’t you?”

Steve nodded, gripping the back of Tony’s chair. “Of course I am.”

Pepper smiled at him, her lips quirking up at the corners as if she wasn’t sure whether she should be happy about his answer or not. “Alright. Good. I’m glad he’ll have someone to watch out for him.”

She turned, stooping to pick up her purse and then started towards the door.

Tony jerked his head up, startled. “Where are you going?”

Pepper sighed, spinning gracefully around to face Tony, her purse clutched under her arm. “You know what you need to do, Tony. You need to set things right and for god’s sake, follow the rules. Talk with the lawyer, find out what they want you to do and do it. It’s your choice– take the company or leave it. Either way, I’ll be here when you need me.”

“No,” Pepper said. “I’ve got my own driver waiting for me in the parking lot. You boys be careful, alright?” She gave Happy a smooch on the lips and then ruffled Tony’s hair. She held out a hand to Steve, wiggling her finger when he didn’t immediately move. “Captain?”

Steve took her hand gently in his, a confused look on his face. “Please. Call me Steve.”

“Alright. Steve,” Pepper hummed softly, giving Steve’s hand a firm shake, “Stick around, alright? If this doesn’t blow over and he can’t become human again… well, he needs good people in his life,
Steve.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve said, nodding curtly. “You can count on me.”

“Oh, I know I can. You know,” Pepper said with a chuckle, letting Steve’s hand drop, “I always used to wonder just what Tony saw in Captain America. I mean, he had all the posters and he had all the video reels – I guess I thought it was just a hobby.” She gave Happy another kiss and then walked towards the door. “I think I know exactly what he was looking for.”

“We can wait until tomorrow if you want,” Steve said, fidgeting as he tried to finish eating a cheeseburger while Tony gazed mournfully at him from the other side of the car. “It’s not a big deal to let the lawyers wait another day.”

Tony shook his head, eyeing the string of cheese hanging from Steve’s lower lip. He could see a dollop of ketchup working its way towards the edge of the bun, and it looked heavenly. He wished he could reach out and lick that ketchup off those luscious lips. God that would have tasted so good.

He cleared his throat when he caught himself close to leering, looking away from the burger clutched in Steve’s hands. “It’s probably better to get the work done now than to let them wait and put in more ridiculous stipulations. If they think we’re stalling then they’ll take us for everything they can. Believe me, Steve, I’ve seen them do it before and that was when I wasn’t a walking corpse.”

Steve frowned at Tony’s choice of words. “I don’t think that’s very fair of them.”

“Oh, please.” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “That’s business. They don’t give a shit what they do so long as someone makes some dough off of it in the end – preferably them. Why do you think I hate going to board meetings? Those guys are such dirt-bags sometimes.”

“Still, isn’t it bad form to go after someone so soon after death? I mean, it’s not like you’re actually dead,” Steve said hurriedly, nearly dropping his burger in his haste to wave away the apparent rudeness he saw in his own words, “it’s just, don’t they usually have a waiting period before they go after someone’s estate?”

Tony nodded. “You’re right. They usually wait, but I think my face being plastered all over the news is making them cautious.”

“This is cautious? They’re called you out on national television saying that you are a menace and monstrosity!”

“To be fair, vampires are actually pretty damned terrifying; I thought they were just a joke, but this is the real deal here. Hell, if I was on the opposite side, I might be doing the same thing.”

“You would not,” Steve grumbled, taking a vicious bite of his burger. “You’re not that kind of person.”


“That’s because I know you,” Steve said, crumpling up his burger wrapper. He stuffed it into one of the bags and pulled out a new burger, looking a little sheepish when he caught the hungry look in Tony’s eye. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for eating,” Tony said, licking his dry lips. “I mean it. Eat away. It’s
Steve’s face went brick red. “What?” He said, nearly choking on his mouthful of burger.

“What? You’ve never heard of food porn before?” Tony chuckled when Steve sputtered indignantly, leaning back so that he could take in the full effect of Steve’s dishevelled appearance. With the way Steve’s collar was popped open, his neck still flushed and red from where Tony had drunken from him, he looked like he had been doing a lot more than just eating burgers. Tony found it hard to believe that Steve didn’t know what he was talking about; he had to have seen himself in the rear view mirror by now.

“I’m not food porn!” Steve said with a sniff, taking a bite of the burger held tightly in his hand. Unfortunately for him the action lead to cheese and ketchup dribbling down the side of his thumb. When he put said thumb in his mouth to take care of the mess, not wanting to waste another napkin, Tony had a hard time keeping himself from wolf-whistling.

Steve seemed to notice and he wasn’t impressed. He turned away and ate the rest of his burger facing the window.

Happy chuckled from the passenger seat.

“What?” Tony asked, faking innocence.

“Oh, nothing,” Happy said, crumpling up his own burger wrapper. “I’m not sayin’ nothing.”

Tony laughed as he watched Steve’s ears turn red all over again.

“You know,” Steve grumbled, still refusing to turn around, “I can go stand outside if you two want to have a private conversation.”

“No, no,” Tony said, slipping off his shoes so he could prod Steve in the small of his back with the tip of his big toe. “I like having you here.”

“I’m sure,” Steve snorted.

“Aw, you know I love you the most,” Tony teased, rubbing his big toe along Steve’s spine. He pulled his foot away when he felt Steve tense up. “Sorry. I know, I know. I’m pushing boundaries and all that,” he sighed. He leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. “I’ll be good.”

Happy chuckled again. “So, are we going to head to see a lawyer or what?”

“I was thinking more of going to the office, actually. I’ve got all the files ready, I just need to be there when the notary arrives. He’ll take care of the rest of it.” Tony yawned, fanning his mouth. “It’s all boring as hell, but I can’t miss it this time around.”

“There’s probably going to be a shit-ton of press hanging around out front,” Happy warned them, draining the last of his pop. He dumped the empty cup in the bag beside his knee. “You sure you’re going to be ok with visitors?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Tony muttered.

Tony had been screamed at a lot in his life; most of it had been about how he was a debauched,
obsessive drunken warmonger who should be launched into the sun. He had been fifteen when he had first been publically denounced, and he had never really gotten used to it; he had merely learned how to put on a fake smile and pretend that nothing was wrong.

For the first time in a long time his smile was close to shattering. It wasn’t just a handful of people gathered outside Stark International’s Headquarters; it was more like a few thousand. They were organized, tireless and vicious, screaming for him to be thrown in jail, dragged off in chains and outright killed. The protesters were waving signs, lunging at the barricades someone had thoughtfully decided to put up. Some of them screamed and gestured when they saw Happy driving up. They recognized the car almost immediately; when Happy tried to circle the block and sneak in through a back entrance, the protestors moved in a swarm, following them the entire way. There was no way to get out of the car, or to even open the door for that matter, so Happy had to circle them back around to the front entrance where there was one and only one space available. By the time the police and Stark Security finally managed to make some space on the sidewalk, Tony was ready to order Happy to just take them home.

Steve got out of the car first, putting himself in between Tony and the protesters as only Captain America could. He shouted for people to back off, raising his hands as he ordered people to respect one another. For a while the protesters calmed down, falling silent while they waited to see who else was going to get out of the car.

The calm didn’t last long; the moment Tony stepped out onto the sidewalk, curses and jeers erupted from the crowd, followed by a barrage of flying garbage. He was brained with a moldy container of what had once been coleslaw and had to spin out of the way in order to avoid getting a face full of rotten food. His sunglasses fell to the ground, knocked free.

Steve smacked the next offending item out of the air with a quick chop, glaring at the crowd. “Behave yourselves! People are tried in the court, not in the media!” Steve shouted, trying to draw attention away from Tony, who was hastily putting his sunglasses back on. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much he could do to avoid the damage that little mishap caused. As with most crowds, someone always had a camera when something embarrassing happened, and they had already started taking pictures. A murmur of ‘oh my god, he’s invisible’ broke out, bubbling amongst the boos and shouts for him to burn in hell.

Steve led Tony towards the front door, trying to get him out of range.

The protesters smell got worse; the proximity was too much to handle. Tony had to bite his lip and dig his fingernails deep into the meat of his palms to keep himself under control. They smelled of anger, fear and sour sweat; he walked faster to try and keep himself from lunging at them and ended up colliding with a stray reporter who had gotten a little too close while trying to get a perfect shot of the crowd. Tony stumbled, trying to regain his balance without touching the other man and went down on one knee, tearing his pants; pain flared through his knee as the skin tore.

The scent of blood, even his own, was too much. He reared up, turning to face the crowd.

Steve hefted Tony up over his shoulder and sprinted for the door.

The crowd barely had time to react.

“Put me down!” Tony hissed through his teeth.

“Nope,” Steve said, making his way to the elevator. “I’m not putting you down until you’re calm.”
“I am calm!”

“You look like you’re going to rip someone in half with your bare hands. That is not the definition of calm.” Steve hammered the up button. “What floor are we going to?”

“Six,” Tony growled, glaring down at Steve’s feet. He didn’t bother struggling, although he did briefly consider smacking Steve’s ass in revenge. At least, he thought with a huff, no one would be able to take a useable photo of this particular incident.

Steve walked them into the elevator and then gently set Tony down as the steel doors closed. He dusted his hands off. “There. That wasn’t so bad.”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Tony repeated mockingly, still glaring at Steve. “You weren’t the guy flung over Captain America’s shoulder like a toddler having a temper tantrum!”

“Would you rather have taken a run for the crowd?”

Tony stiffened. “I wouldn’t have!”

“Tony, I’ve seen you when you get out of control. I know what it looks like,” Steve sighed, adjusting his jacket. “You told me that you trusted me.”

“I do trust you.”

“Then trust me when I tell you that you were dangerously close to being out of control.”

Tony scowled. “I know.” He wanted to punch someone, but settled for slamming his fist into the side of the elevator instead; the resulting dent made him even angrier. He raised his fist, ready to strike again when he caught sight of Steve’s disapproving frown in his reflection in the steel walls. He slumped against the wall in frustration. “Stupid wall. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“It’s not my elevator,” Steve said, his hands on his hips, “and it’s not my fist.”

“It doesn’t even hurt,” Tony muttered, glaring down at his knuckles.

“Do you at least feel better?”

“No,” Tony said sullenly, stooping down to pick at the hole in his pant leg. “Just great. These pants were custom made. No one’s going to get within twenty feet of me now.”

“Better the pants then something else,” Steve grumbled.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the guy who’s been banned from pretty much every single store on the planet,” Tony snapped, storming out of the elevator when the doors opened. He made it to the secretary’s desk before skidding to a halt when he saw the look on Pepper’s PA’s face; the man looked like he was going to start girlishly screaming.

“You’ve got the papers for me, right?” Tony said, a little gruffer than necessary.

The PA, a guy named David something-or-other, nodded so quickly he could have giving himself whiplash. “Yes sir Mr. Stark sir – they’re in the folder,” he said, shoving them across the table towards Tony. He wheeled himself backwards in his rolling chair, very obviously doing busy work that didn’t require him to take his eyes off Tony.

Tony snatched the folder up from the table, wanting to tear the thing to bits. He took his sunglasses off, ready to glare head on into the PA’s eyes and then realized that the man was outright shaking in
his seat; he looked close to crying. Tony froze, mouth hanging open. “I uh…”

The show of teeth didn’t make the PA any more relaxed; in fact, it probably made things worse. The man scooted further away, moving so far he actually hit the filing cabinet behind him with a resounding clang.

Tony lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry. It’s just a little hairy outside right now,” he said, trying to focus on the papers in front of him rather than on the trembling man a few feet away. What the hell was he supposed to say to the guy? Sorry, I’ve had a horrible week and I nearly got hit in the head with a bucket of raunchy coleslaw a few minutes ago? My best friend had to keep me from ripping someone’s throat open because I scraped my knee?

“D…don’t worry about it sir,” the PA said, his voice cracking. “We trust you.”

No, Tony thought with a snort, no one trusts me except for Steve and Pepper – and maybe Happy.

Tony waited in the corner of the room while the paperwork was approved and stamped by the notary Pepper had hired for their case; he couldn’t help shying away from everyone who walked past, even though he knew it was making him stand out more. Steve stood guard nearby, leafing through a magazine that had seen better days, but even his presence couldn’t calm Tony down.

“Mr. Stark?” The notary called out, tapping the papers in front of him with the tip of his pen.

“Yeah?” Tony said, slinking closer, but not so close as to actually be anywhere near the PA or the reception desk. He had had enough to watching the poor guy cower for one day, thank-you-very-much.

“The lawyer has told me to send you up to the eighth floor for a heart rate recording. They are going to tape the event and send it off with a copy of your will so that things get cleared up faster.” The Notary, a tall balding black man with flawless fingernails gave the paperwork one last look and then filing it away in his briefcase. “They tell me that it should take a few hours for processing, after which you will be phoned on your private line and informed of the results. If you would please head to the elevator and go up to floor eight, we can get this over and done with. I’m sure you’ll want to be getting home sometime soon. That crowd outside is looking mighty feisty.”

“Yeah, you can say that again.” Tony was at the elevator in an instant, prodding the button a half-dozen times before Steve delicately pulled his finger away.

“It’s fine. We’re doing just fine, Tony,” Steve said, his tone calm and soothing.

“I know we’re fine,” Tony grumbled, swatting Steve’s hand away.

The Notary let out a soft chuckle. “Don’t worry about it, Mr. Stark. This may be new for us, but we’re not going to let you down.” He waited for the elevator to arrive and then got in with them, pressing floor seven and eight before slipping to the side of the elevator to get out of Steve’s way. “It’s such a shame people are so narrow minded these days. You’d think you were out terrorizing villagers and destroying crops or something.”

Steve chuckled. “You can say that again.”

“I’d wish you luck,” the Notary said, offering Tony his hand. “But I don’t think you need it. You’re a good man Mr. Stark. I don’t care if you’re a vampire, a human or a giant blob monster. You helped me put my kids through law school by paying me a decent wage. Those jerks out there can kiss my
Tony shook the Notary’s hand, genuinely smiling. “Thanks. I didn’t catch your name,” he said.

“It’s Nicholas Blint, sir,” the Notary said. He had a firm handshake. “It’s an honor to work for you.”

“It’s an honor to have someone like you working for me,” Tony said.

The elevator arrived at Nicholas’ stop and he got off, giving them a wave goodbye.

“Well that was nice,” Steve murmured as the doors shut again.

“Yeah,” Tony said, nudging Steve in the side with his elbow. “I guess people aren’t all assholes.”

“I guess not.”

They got off on the eighth floor and found the hallway deserted. The lights were on, but there was no one around to greet them or to lead them to the right room.

“Hello?” Steve called out, poking his head into an empty room. “Anyone here?”

A breathless intern came running around the corner, nearly crashing into Steve’s shoulder. He apologized profusely, bending over as he tried to catch his breath, sweat dripping down his face.

“Uh, are you alright, son?” Steve asked.

“I’m good,” the intern gasped, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Sorry about the running. I’ve been cooped up here for the past six hours. Bastard lawyers are too chicken shit for their own good. They’re all hiding except for Paul, and he’s only here because he drew the short straw.” He straightened up and spotted Tony, instantly looking nervous. “Oh… shit.”

“I’m assuming everyone is waiting,” Tony said with a weary sigh.

The intern nodded. “Yeah, we’ve been waiting for – oh hell. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I just thought it was kind of lame those guys didn’t want to show up. It’s not like you’re some crazy axe murdering psycho or something.” The man grinned. “We’re in room 14A. Follow me!”

The hallways were still empty as they moved on, but it seemed less like the floor was abandoned once they rounded the corner and exited a row of cubicles. The garbage cans here were overflowing with old coffee cups and sandwich wrappers; there were bits of plastic wrapping and cardboard littering the floor, likely having escaped the massive pile up above. When they walked into room 14A they found out why there was so much garbage around. Medical equipment littered nearly every table in the room; all of it was new, likely set up by a team of specialists. Everything here was clean, shiny and new – three things Tony loved – ready to be used if it was needed.

The Intern bobbed and weaved his way through a pile of cords, hopping over a table to get to a pile of papers he needed. “We had everything shipped in and set up after Ms. Potts called us this morning. It took a while, but it’s all running the way it should. I’ll call Paul in,” the intern said. He cleared his throat and then shouted so loudly Tony jumped. “HEY PAUL! GET YOUR ASS OUT OF THE BATHROOM! STARK’S HERE!” The intern gave them a sheepish smile when he noticed their reactions. “He has a nervous bladder.”

Paul stumbled in a few seconds later looking like he had taken a shower with his clothes still on; his
beige suit was soaked clean through with sweat, and his hair was plastered to his head in a way that was far from attractive. He looked around the room, wiping his sweat-sticky hands on the sides of his coat. “Mr. Stark? Paul Jenkins – I’m here to act as witness for your heart beat test.” When Tony took a step forward to shake his hand, Paul took a step back. “Don’t worry sir. You’re in good hands. If you’d just step towards Frank we can get things sorted out.” He gestured to the intern, who shrugged and pointed towards a simple heart rate monitor, the kind used in hospitals worldwide. It was shaped to fit around someone’s finger, sitting on the digit like a clothes peg might if it were put in the same position.

“Seriously?” Tony said, sitting down on the edge of the table. “This is what will keep me out of hot water? All the machines in here and it’s this one?”

“Sadly, yes,” Frank, the intern, said. “I’d have gone with something more flashy, but I think they’d assume there was tampering because of the pretty pictures. This way, they get their heart rate no fuss, no muss. We’ve tested this one out already. It works perfectly, and there’s no way anything can mess with the readings – it’s got no connections to a computer, for example, so no one’s going to think you’re messing with the machines.” He turned the monitor on and held it out, snapping it over the front half of Tony’s pointer finger; it was a tight fit and pinched a little, but it was better than being jabbed with needles or squeezed by a blood pressure cuff.

“Can you see from all the way over there, Paul?” Frank asked, rolling his eyes in Paul’s direction.

“I can see just fine,” Paul said primly, standing on the tips of his toes in order to see the monitor. “When it’s done calculating, hand it over.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Frank said, flapping a hand at him. “It’ll get there when it gets there.”

Tony watched the monitor, aware of every beat his heart was making; if he hadn’t had Extremis, he might have been concerned right about now. Technically he was cheating, letting Extremis do the work his heart would have done when he was human, but what the judges didn’t know wouldn’t lose him his company. He smiled sweetly when Frank took the monitor off and handed it over to Paul, who stared at it in disbelief.

“You’re kidding,” Paul muttered, giving the monitor a shake as if that might set it back to zero and nullify the results.

“Hey,” Tony said with a shrug, “my hearts still beating. Sounds like I’m legally still alive.”

“Indeed it does,” Frank said, rolling his eyes at Paul again. “Sign the damn papers Paul. I want to go home so I can inhale that last, blessed, piece of pot-roast in my fridge before my louse of a roommate gets his grubby paws on it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Paul said, taking a picture of the monitor with his phone. “Alright. Papers – where are the papers?”

“There right here,” Frank said, giving a folder a wave. “Sign on the dotted line. You know the drill.”

Paul snatched the folder from Frank’s hands and flipped it open, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he searched for his pen; he signed, shaking his head as if unable to believe what he had just done and then handed the file off to Frank again, letting it go so fast he almost dropped it. “Alright. Take it to the office on your way home. The security footage is already streaming to the judge, but we may as well give them a hard copy.”

“Right,” Frank said with a yawn. “Well, that’s that. You can head on home now, Mr. Stark. They’ll
be in touch.”

“Right,” Tony said, rubbing his sore finger. “Enjoy the pot-roast.”

“That, I will.” Frank grinned.

Steve led Tony towards the elevator, walking stiffly; he had a gloomy look on his face, one that didn’t belong there considering they had just passed the medical test with flying colours.

Tony sidled up to him, bumping against Steve’s shoulder. “What’s up?”

“It’s probably nothing,” Steve sighed, rubbing at his chin.

“Let’s hear it,” Tony said. “You’re the tactician after all.”

“It’s just,” Steve said, leading them into the elevator when it arrived, “this feels like a set up to me. All those reporters outside – all the protestors. It’s like they knew when to be here.”

“I’ll give you that much,” Tony said. “They popped up pretty damn fast considering the reports only showed up on the news a few hours ago.”

“Right,” Steve said, nodding along. “I don’t know about you, but to me this feels like an inside job. Someone must have known about the vampire – they knew enough to have a camera on hand outside Viastone’s front doors. Whoever it was must have broken their way through your security system to get that video from your workshop. That would take skill, conviction….”

“And money,” Tony said, frowning. There were a lot of people who wanted to break into his systems, but there wasn’t a whole lot of people who could do the actual beak in. It would take serious wads of cash to get someone interested enough to risk getting nailed by Tony’s system. The real question wasn’t who had done the hacking, but who had been there with the wallet. Was it Hammer? Some fringe group lead by Killian’s old followers and backers? He had most of the big names under surveillance already and had been monitoring them for months; Jarvis would have said something if they tried to set up a trade or met with someone shady. Then who else could it be?

“This has to be tied in with Walter’s sudden appearance,” Steve said. “Someone was watching him the same way they were watching you. He didn’t just spring up there in that flower bed – someone had to have put him there.”

“You think Ty had something to do with this, don’t you?” Tony wanted to believe that it couldn’t be Tiberius, but anything was possible. It had been Viastone that had sent out the first report, after all; it had been their exclusive. How had they realized what was happening? Someone had to have tipped them off, and who better to arrange things than Ty? But would Ty be stupid enough to use a blood relative as an attacker? It was kind of hard to pretend you weren’t involved if the vampire you used was running around telling everyone his full name.

“I wouldn’t rule him out. He could be Walter’s great-great-great-something-grand kid for all we know,” Steve said. “I took the liberty of asking SHIELD about him.”

“Really,” Tony drawled, looping his arm around the railing in the elevator. “And what did that net you?”

“I can’t prove he’s involved, but I’m pretty sure he has the resources,” Steve said. He pursed his lips, pressing the button for the underground parking. “Frankly, I called them because I needed to know if
they were keeping tabs on you too.”

“Oh they’re keeping tabs,” Tony laughed, “although they’re not getting the right information.”

“You bugged their system?”

“Their entire system is a bug to me,” Tony snorted, following Steve out into the parking lot. “They think they’re spying on me – I’m spying on them. It’s a win-win situation.”

“Sure – for you.”

“Hey, don’t look at me like that,” Tony grumbled, giving Steve a playful shove. “You know I’d never do it for evil.”

“I know,” Steve said with a soft smile.

Happy stood by their car, waiting a few feet away. He was playing with his phone.

“Hey, Hap,” Tony called out, practically skipping his way towards his chauffeur. “I think we’re good to go.” He was glad to be done with people; it had been exhausting chatting people up before, but he was pretty sure it had drained some of his soul today. It would be nice to be sitting alone in bed again – well, alone with Steve, at least.

“You’re done?” Happy asked, stowing his phone. He shot Steve a look. “It’s a mess up there. We might need to wait around a bit.”

“They’re still up there?” Steve groaned. “I thought they’d have gotten tired of standing around by now.”

“Oh no,” Happy said. “They’re busy working on a shit-storm up there, like I told you. Half of ‘em look like they’re considering storming the place to get at you.”

“Are the staff alright?” Tony asked. The thought of crazy people storming his lobby didn’t sit well with him; they might not be the ones the mob was looking for, but it didn’t make things any safer. “I don’t want anybody getting hurt because of me.”

“The staff are mostly out of the building, and security’s got the rest of them guarded. They’re not getting in, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good.” Tony threw open the back car door, perching on the edge of the seat. “So what now? Do you want to wait it out, or try and drive past?”

“We could always call in a favor or two,” Steve said. “I’ve heard there is this group of superheroes living in this tower – it has a funny name. I think you know it.”

Tony chuckled. “You think they’ll come?”

“Tony,” Steve said, flicking Tony in the forehead, “they’d come if you had the black plague. They’re your friends.”

“Tasha’s going to be pissed,” Tony muttered, flinging himself backwards across the back seat.

“Somehow I don’t think she’s going to give you too much grief,” Steve said, nudging Tony’s foot with his knee. “I’m pretty sure they’ve seen the news by now.”

“Yeah,” Tony grumbled into his arm. “That’s the problem. I don’t think I can handle having them
around right now. I love em’ but somehow I don’t think they’ll get the whole ‘needing personal space’ thing.”

“It’s ok to not feel ready,” Steve said softly. “I’ll explain it to them, alright? It’ll be fine. They’ll understand.”

“Alright,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes. “If you think so.”

“I know so,” Steve said. He pulled his phone out, leaning against the side of the car as he dialed. “Hello? Natasha? Hi, this is Steve. Yeah, I know – I haven’t called. I know. Yes. I know. He’s fine – a little unhappy, but he’s up and about. He wants to do things on his own for now. Yes, I’ll tell him, hold on.” Steve held the phone away from his ear. “Natasha says to tell you that you’re an idiot.”

“Tell her I already know that,” Tony grunted.

“He says he already knows,” Steve said, moving the phone back to his ear. “Uh huh. Yeah, we’re alright, but to tell you the truth we could use a favor. We’re kind of trapped in the parking lot of Stark International HQ. There are protesters outside – yes. They’re homicidal looking up close, too. Could you bring the rest of the team? Maybe distract them a bit so we can sneak out? It’s been a long day, and I don’t think we want to spend the rest of it scraping protesters off the undercarriage of the car.”

“Is that an option?” Happy asked.

“No,” Steve said with a snort, rolling his eyes. “Running over idiots is not an option.”

“Killjoy,” Tony muttered.

Steve grabbed Tony by the foot and squeezed his toes gently. “Yes, Nat, that applies to you too. No murdering idiots. I know – they deserve it, but it’s against the law and no one wants you to end up in a jail cell tonight, even if you could break out of it. So how long do you think it’ll take?” Steve drummed his fingers on the top of Tony’s foot. “Uh, huh. Ok. He’s not really up for guests just yet. He still needs some time to get the hang of things. Ok, I’ll let him know. Thanks Nat. Say hi to the guys for us, ok? Thanks. Bye.”

“I take it she said yes?” Tony said, heaving himself upright.

“She said they’ll be here in five minutes. Apparently Clint and Thor saw the news earlier and filled everyone in. Bruce hulked out and destroyed his lab by the way.” Steve said, tucking his phone back into his pocket. “He says he’s sorry about that. Natasha said it hit him pretty hard when he found out about the way you were turned.”

Tony winced. “I’ll bet. No one knows what being a monster is like better than Bruce. I’ll have someone come in and fix his lab up for him.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate the sentiment,” Steve sighed. “Anyway, Nat says Fury’s had SHIELD on lockdown all day today. They claim they’re trying to keep the press from getting something else about your transformation – she says they tried to get a hold of Doctor Strange too, but they couldn’t even get Wong to open the door.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Yeah. SHIELD has been fielding all the questions SI hasn’t been touching. She says Fury’s willing to help if we need it.”
“Like that’s ever been an option,” Tony snorted. “I’d rather do this on my own.”

“Yeah, that’s what Nat told him. She says they’re already downtown. Apparently Fury dispatched them to mingle with the crowd and catch snapshots of would-be offenders. Someone called in a bomb threat, but they’re pretty sure there’s nothing actually out there to be worried about. No one can say who it was from or what they wanted to get out of it, but the agents are assuming it has to do with you being out in public. Fury wasn’t very amused.”

“I’ll bet. Is there anything we can do? I can scan the video cameras if they need the help.” The thought of someone sending in bomb threats made Tony’s blood boil. The nerve of some people – it made him want to start punching something all over again. Maybe this was why Steve hit the gym all the time. Tony was starting to want a punching bag of his own.

“The best thing we can do right now is leave. They’ve got everything covered. Natasha said she’ll phone us again when they’re in position,” Steve said, giving Tony’s hand a pat. “Come on, let’s get ready to go. I’m pretty sure they’re not going to take too long.”

The Avengers had no problems distracting the crowd despite their refusal to disperse; on Steve’s advice, they stayed away from the car, but Tony still saw them as they drove away. It was weird to not be out there with them, working the crowd; he missed not being around to give someone a lift. He reached for his phone but couldn’t bring himself to call anyone, too lost in his thoughts.

Even with the air conditioning on and the windows rolled all the way up Tony could smell the crowd outside; their stink was powerful and all encompassing. He had to stick his nose in Steve’s neck and breathe deeply until they were out of range because he was afraid he was going to try and pry the door open if he didn’t. He vowed right then and there to never step a foot into a crowd again without the suit on. The last thing the Avengers needed was a psychotic vampire ripping through the crowd while they tried to steer civilians away from the super villain of the week.

By the time they had arrived home, it was already dark. A lone reporter was sitting across the street from the mansion, waiting for them to arrive; she at least had the decency to leave them alone as they drove through the gates. Tony trudged up the front steps, just about ready to pass out. His stomach let out an angry rumble and he glared at it, wishing he could ignore it like old times. Not so long ago he had been able to survive on cold coffee and stale doughnuts; now he couldn’t even lick the glazing or powdered sugar without gagging.

Steve rested a hand the back of Tony’s neck as Tony unlocked the door. “You alright?”

Tony shrugged, leaning into the touch. “I’m alright. Just hungry – that’s all.”

“Let’s get some sleep after you eat. I don’t think anyone’s going to call tonight,” Steve said with a yawn. He looped his arm lazily around Tony’s shoulder. “I think we’ve had enough excitement for one day, don’t you?”

“You can say that again,” Tony muttered. “Maybe if we’re lucky we’ll wake up tomorrow and find out that this whole thing was just a horrible dream.”

Steve asked Tony to keep the television off for the rest of the night after they accidentally changed channels and got an eyeful of Fox News spitefully declaring Tony Stark to be a democratic blood-
eating warmonger. It had been smart request, one that Tony would have followed if he hadn’t been so damned antsy about the reporters now piling up in the street outside the mansion. So in the dead of night, once Steve was safely asleep, Tony couldn’t help turning the news on in his head; picture in picture had nothing on Extremis, and it was as easy as blinking a little slower than normal to get things running. He lounged about on the bed while Steve slept beside him, trying not to rip his fingernails out as he listened to the announcers and reporters grate on about how awful he was now that he had become a member of the undead. So far they hadn’t said anything in their reports about his heart monitor results, but he suspected that it was only a matter of time before someone in the judge’s office leaked it for the ‘greater good’.

Tony drifted in and out, lulled into semi-consciousness by the droning voices streaming through his head from seven different television feeds; he sat upright, leaning against the headboard with the blanket tucked around his knees. He woke with a start when one of them started talking about Steve.

“Steve Rogers, known to most of our viewers as Captain America appears to be living as a hostage in Tony Stark’s New York mansion. Witnesses say they have seen bite marks all over his person, with many believing that they have been brought about by Stark viciously claiming ownership of his fellow Avenger. With the video of Stark brutally assaulting Rogers still circulating, politicians are worried that the Captain might represent a newfound threat,” a female reporter said. “Sources also state that Captain Rogers has not re-emerged from the mansion since he and Mr. Stark returned from Stark International Headquarter last night. Whether there is any truth to the rumors is still to be determined.”

“Tony?” Steve rolled over with a groan. “Your eyes are glowing.” He sat up when Tony didn’t respond, shrugging off the blankets, blinking sleepily. “Tony?” He gave Tony’s sleeve a tug, trying to draw his attention. “Tony? You alright?”

“They think I’m holding you hostage – that you’re my slave,” Tony said hoarsely, digging his fingers into the sheet beneath him. He dug so deeply his nails gouged tracks in the mattress; he hit wire and winced, sticking his now bleeding fingers into his mouth. “Shit, Steve – they think I’m going to kill you.”

“They what?” Steve stared blankly at Tony; he took a moment to process what was being said and then vaulted off the bed and started for the stairs. Tony hung his head, still listening to the program despite the fact that every last word made him want to shoot himself in the head.

“Authorities are consulting with SHIELD’s Tactical division on whether they should storm Stark’s mansion in order to retrieve Captain America, who they feel is being held hostage. Sources say the American Hero and Icon has been trapped with Stark for the past week and half, and that he had rarely seen the light of day until yesterday evening when he accompanied Stark to Stark International Headquarters.”

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was soft and floaty, off in the distance.
Tony shook his head, shutting off the feed he had been looking at. He turned to the next, biting his lower lip. This was bad – this was really bad.

“Is Tony Stark turning his Avengers teammate Captain America into his personal slave? Sources report the Captain’s public appearances have drastically decreased. The Captain’s strange behavior seems to have started around the same time Stark’s supposed vampirism developed. We here at Supranews are sending our thoughts and prayers to Captain Rogers – if you’re watching Captain, please let someone know where you are so you can be saved. You don’t need to stay in Stark’s grasp – there is hope.”

“Dave Wallace, reporting live from directly outside Tony Stark’s New York mansion. There has been no sign of Captain Steve Rogers yet today, but those of us watching don’t expect to see him again until Tony Stark’s court case is dealt with. Stark is required to prove that he has a heartbeat if he wishes to remain CEO of Stark International, and many believe he will attempt to rig the results somehow. Most of the people I’ve talked to are certain he isn’t going to be able to pass the test any other way.”

“That’s too bad, Dave. Have there been any sightings of either men?” An anchor woman asked.

“Well Deborah, witness claim that Stark was seen manhandling Captain Rogers on the porch of his New York mansion just last night, although there’s no way the video they took can prove whether this is true or not. An unnamed whistleblower told us earlier this morning that Stark arranged for his Avengers co-workers to distract the honest citizens standing guard outside Stark International’s Headquarters as they were vocally protesting his treatment of Captain Rogers, using the distraction so that he could escape notice and flee to his home. We here at Viastone are unsure whether Captain Rogers will emerge from this home alive or not – I for one suspect that Captain Rogers made his final appearance last night. We will be standing by as this story progresses. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Tony? Are you watching this?” Steve’s voice was in Tony’s ear now. He had the news streaming on his phone, the volume cranked. “They’re going crazy out there! What’s wrong with these people?”

Tony cringed, curling in on himself. He wrapped his arms around his knees, shutting off the feed in his head. “I don’t know.”

“Tony?” Steve grasped Tony’s shoulders. He gave Tony a gentle shake, trying to get his attention; when Tony refused to move or look at him, he turned and left the room, stomping down the stairs.

Tony bit his thumb, gnawing on it.

This wasn’t something he could fix – it didn’t matter to the vultures outside that he had a heartbeat; they didn’t care that he hadn’t killed anyone or that he had been hiding to keep other people safe. He could walk outside, strip naked and demand to be publically flogged in penance for his perceived wrongdoing, and they still wouldn’t listen. This was a lynch mob – they didn’t listen, they reacted.

He turned to state at Steve’s phone, to the news program he had just been watching, attracted to the coverage by the sudden change in volume.
“Hold on! Dave Wallace here, still reporting from outside Tony Stark’s mansion– we have just seen Captain Rogers, known to most as Captain America, emerge from the front door – hey!” The reporter was shoved out of the way by a furious looking Steve, who ripped the mic clean out of the man’s hands.

“You people are disgusting! How dare you stand around talking about Tony like he’s some kind of monster! He’s been protecting this city – and you people – for years and this is how you repay him? With unkind words and outright lies about him holding me hostage in his house?” Steve roared, glaring into the cameras. “Now listen here – I am Tony Stark’s friend and I am here willingly. I will never leave a friend in need – never – and you lot need to understand that you don’t have any say in what I do in my daily life. If I choose to stay with someone I love and care for, then I will damn well be with that person!”

“Captain – listen to what you’re saying!” the reporter yelped, looking shocked. “Tony Stark is a menace – He may have detested the phrase my fellow reporters coined all those years ago, but it’s become the best way to describe him these days! He is the Merchant of Death, if there ever was one, and he needs to be locked up! The public deserve peace of mind!”

“And Tony Stark deserves the same peace of mind as everyone else! He’s going through a tough time, and here you louts are camping outside his house – taking pictures and stirring up ridiculous rumors – while he’s inside trying to fight to keep his life’s work safe. I respect him and his choices – and he’s choosing to do what’s right for the country and his life,” Steve snapped. “Don’t stand there talking about something you don’t know or understand.”

“Oh we understand what Stark is doing, Captain. He’s turning the market in his favor so he can laugh in the government’s face.”

“Since when?”

“He stopped giving the government defence contracts, Captain. Or didn’t you know about that? He’s taken away their best chance at stopping something like him.”

“He’s protecting people from weapons they don’t understand and can’t control. You’re insane if you think everyone should have their hands on Tony’s suit. You’ve seen what happened with Justin Hammer and his suit knock-offs. People could have died,” Steve growled.

“And they could still die – all because Tony Stark can’t control himself. Think about it Captain – he was already dangerous in his suit, and now he can’t control himself when he’s outside of it. The government, and the people, aren’t going to stand for that kind of behavior!”

“He knows what he’s doing, and I trust him,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well that might be enough for you, Captain, but America isn’t going to stand for this. If you can’t see that, then I don’t think you stand for the right things anymore – No one wants a Captain America who can’t stick up for American rights,” the reporter said, straightening his tie. “You should be locked up with him if you’re this brainwashed – you can’t even see what he’s done to this world.”

“Listen buddy,” Steve said, jabbing the reporter in the chest, “Tony has been helping the world one invention at a time. He’s patented clean energy technology that will protect the environment for future generations – he’s created jobs for thousands of individuals who wouldn’t have ever had the chance at getting paid a decent wage. Now they only have to work one job instead of five to cover the costs of health care – and you’re saying he’s done nothing for this country? I think the people
he’s helped would beg to differ.”

“You’re blind, Captain. You’re seeing things through Stark’s eyes. There are millions of people who have died because Stark Technology got into the wrong hands. Tony Stark personally designed every bomb that killed those men women and children – he built every weapon in his arsenal, and he’s sold them off to whoever had the biggest bag of cash in the past! You can’t deny it.”

“He put an end to that kind of thing in his company when he found out about it, and you damn well know it! He’s supplied SHIELD with technology to protect the entire planet from invading forces too – or is that something you didn’t know about? Because I think that’s a pretty big deal!”

“He’s a monster showing his true face!”

“He’s a man who deserves to be treated with respect!” Steve shouted, nearly throwing the microphone at the reporter’s head. “Look, if this is what you think America is – if this is a place where a man can’t even live his life without being called names for being different, where a man – a good man – can be singled out and attacked for doing the right thing and being himself, then I don’t want to be a part of it. I formally resign from the Avengers as of now. I will not be Captain America when America is willing to treat one of its own with such indignity and cruelty. You can find someone else to defend your America, pal. I didn’t fight in the second world war for a place that could do something like this to one of its own.” Steve dropped the microphone and turned, stomping up the stairs, vanishing inside Stark Mansion.

Tony stared at the television, just as shocked as the reporters crowded around in the frame. Had Steve really just done that? Had he thrown away being Captain America? He shut the television off and got up, nearly falling off the side of the bed in his haste to get to Steve.

“Tony?” Steve stomped up the stairs.

Tony met him on the landing. “Are you crazy?” he said, his voice so high and shrill it didn’t even feel like his voice anymore.

“No,” Steve said, “I’m not crazy. I love you.” He took Tony by the chin and kissed him, soft and sweet like Tony was something he had been waiting on for years.

Tony floundered. “Steve?” It felt like his brain had suddenly turned off. What was Steve doing? Was this real? He was dreaming – obviously, he was dreaming.

Steve paled, pulling away. “I’m – I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” He took a step back, smiling weakly when Tony didn’t do anything more than stare at him with wide eyes. “I stand by what I said outside. I’m not going to –”

If this was a dream, he was going to take advantage of it while it lasted. Tony grabbed Steve by the front of his shirt and pulled him down; even then he had to go up on the tips of his toes to reach Steve’s face so he could plant a messy, probably pathetically sloppy kiss there on his lips. Steve didn’t seem to mind. He wrapped his arms around Tony’s middle, tugging Tony closer, burying his fingers in Tony’s sleep-tangled hair.

Tony couldn’t help smiling into the kiss. “You know, you are the only guy who could make resigning from their job the sexiest thing on Earth.”

Steve laughed, his breath warm on Tony’s cheeks. “Well… I didn’t mean to do it. It just sort of came out…”
“So… does that apply to everything you said?” Tony tried to play it cool. “I mean you sort of said you love me,” he murmured. He hadn’t asked a question like this since high school; he had never been brave enough to ask it once he had grown older and wiser. He had never thought that someone would make a declaration like that – not to him. He wrapped an arm tentatively around Steve’s hip, leaving it there. No, he thought, this was definitely reality. If this was a dream it would have ended by now.

“Of course I love you,” Steve said, leaning forwards for another kiss. He hovered instead of doing what he wanted, suddenly seeming serious, as if he wasn’t sure his kiss would be wanted. “I’ve loved you for months now. It’s not like it sprung up overnight, you know.” He seemed to realize what he had said and panicked, his eyes widening.

“Months?” Tony squawked indignantly, pulling back a little so that he could get a better look at Steve’s face. “How did I not know this?” And he hadn’t known. He hadn’t even suspected that Steve could feel like this for him. He had been nursing a crush on Steve for months, but this… he hadn’t thought that this could ever happen. Steve was straight – Steve wanted a family – Steve wanted kids.

Steve shuffled his feet as if he was trying to learn the steps to a slow dance at Prom. “I wasn’t going to say anything. You were in a relationship, and I just… I wanted you to be happy. You and Pepper… I thought you guys…”

Tony sighed softly in understanding. “Yeah. I… I know what you mean. I thought we were going to stay together too. I even had a ring and everything.” He closed his eyes, seeing the ring in his mind’s eye. He had left it in its box in the Tower, buried under a shirt in Pepper’s dresser. He hadn’t been able to look at it after she had left; maybe one day he would get rid of it, but for now it would stay there, lost in time. “I guess we both got it wrong.”

“We don’t have to do anything about it,” Steve said quickly, letting his hands drop. “I mean, this is all kind of sudden and I didn’t – I didn’t plan to… I didn’t mean to say it on television.” He swallowed hard, the colour draining from his face. “I didn’t… I really didn’t mean to say it. Please – I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything. These are my feelings – you don’t have to return them. I mean, obviously it would be nice,” Steve stuttered, shifting from foot to foot again. “But I don’t expect it.”

“I know,” Tony said. Watching Steve shuffle about nervously made his stomach all fluttery, just like the old days when Pepper had come into his workshop late at night to tempt him up to bed; she had always been sweet about it, as if she had just been passing by and had spied him through the window or some damn thing. Steve was so sweet and Tony knew at once that he wasn’t ready to take a step forwards and be anything more than close friends – not yet. He knew that he and Pepper would never get back together, but the hurt was still there, lurking beneath the surface, and that wouldn’t go away any time soon. He couldn’t lose anyone else to that dark void, especially not Steve. He wouldn’t be able to recover if he lost Steve out of anger and grief.

“I’m not ready to date,” Tony murmured, wrapping his fingers around Steve’s wrist to keep him from fleeing. “Not yet, I mean, but one day – one day I will be, but right now, I’m not.”

“Alright,” Steve said, smiling shyly, ducking his head. “Well, I’ll be here. When I said I was here forever, I meant it. Even if you don’t ever want to be…”

“Together?”

“Yes,” Steve murmured. He turned Tony’s hand over, his touch so gentle it made Tony want to drag him down for another kiss. “I don’t want to lose you.”
“You won’t,” Tony said, going up on his tip toes again. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck, planting a firm kiss on Steve’s lips so that there would be no mistaking his meaning. “You won’t lose me. I just need time, that’s all. When it feels right again, then I’ll ask you out – or you can ask me out. I mean… I don’t want to stop kissing you, but I’m just not… not going to go any further than that.”

“Alright,” Steve said, “I can wait. I’m good at waiting.”

“Yeah?” Tony said, kissing Steve on the lips again, savoring the way Steve seemed to melt against him. If he never got to do this again, he wanted to keep it with him for rest of his days. “You know, I never thought I’d say this, but I want to take things slow. Slow seems like a really good idea.”

“Oh?” Steve said, wrapping his arms around Tony’s middle. “Is that so?”

“Yep,” Tony said, stealing another kiss. “Slow is perfect.” He could feel Steve’s heartbeat through his chest; it was oddly comforting to know that Steve wasn’t panicking. The beats continued, nice and slow, strong and steady and perfect. There was no nervousness here, only certainty, as if Steve knew exactly what Tony was going to do next. He took in a deep breath, inhaling Steve’s scent, pleased to find that his own was slowly bleeding into Steve’s. His hunger reared its head and then seemed to yawn at him, lazily waiting for him to decide to feed on his own, patient in a way it had never been before.

“Mhm,” Steve murmured against Tony’s lips, stealing a kiss of his own. “I’ll bet your hungry.” He rubbed a soft circle on Tony’s lower back, baring his neck.

“I’m always hungry,” Tony said, kissing Steve on the chin.

“Then feel free,” Steve chuckled, “drink away. I’m yours.”

“They’re going to crucify you for what you said,” Tony murmured, smoothing out the wrinkles on Steve’s shirt. He felt like he had to say it, even though he knew Steve already understood what he had put in motion with the reporters. It wouldn’t be long now until the rest of the heathens started camped outside their door waiting for their own special sound bites. “Hell, they’re going to string me up. They’ll probably try to legalize burning people at the stake again.”

“I know,” Steve said. “But if you go down, I’m going with you. We’re doing this together.”

“You’re an idiot,” Tony said, smiling fondly. “I can’t believe you threw away Captain America like that.”

“I’m your idiot,” Steve murmured. “Besides, I couldn’t stand by and let them bully you like that. Captain America stands for doing the right thing, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to let them pervert that for their cause.”

“Fury’s going to be pissed off,” Tony said, taking Steve by the hand. He tugged Steve down the stairs, pushing him down onto the couch; he felt like he was floating as he moved, as if his feet weren’t quite touching the ground. He straddled Steve’s lap, settling there with his hands resting gently on Steve’s chest. “Is this alright?”

“Yes,” Steve said, his hand settling on Tony’s hips. “It’s just fine.”

Steve’s heartbeat picked up speed; his breathing hitched.

Well that was different.
Tony leaned forward, brushing his lips against Steve’s throat. “You know this doesn’t have to be the end of your superhero career,” he mumbled, enjoying the way Steve quivered beneath him, “I can always build you a new costume. Mind you, it probably won’t be as tasteful as your Cap gear.”

“Oh?” Steve grunted, relaxing into the couch a little more than he normally did. Tony could smell something on him now, something that had always been there but not quite as prominent. Was that… arousal? He was smelling arousal? Tony bit down on Steve’s neck, drawing out a mouthful of blood, praying he wasn’t going to make a fool of himself by rubbing his very poorly timed boner against Steve’s washboard abs; that thought alone made the scent, practically leaking out of Steve’s every pore, even more irresistible.

“Yeah,” Tony rasped when he finally came up for air again. He licked his lips clean, his skin hot all over. “How do you feel about ass-less chaps? I hear those are in style.”

Steve laughed. “No.” His eyes wrinkled at the corners, his pupils more black than blue. “I am not wearing ass-less chaps in public.”

“So in the house they’re fine?” Tony teased, leaning in to lick his way up Steve’s bloody neck before the trickle of blood could touch the collar of his shirt. “I just want to clarify, because that would make things much more interesting around here. I mean, I could instigate casual Friday, and who knows where that would lead us.” He sank his teeth into Steve’s neck again, biting a little lower this time, raking his teeth a little over Steve’s skin before he started sucking in fresh blood. Steve groaned louder with each suck, thrusting his hips upwards against Tony’s; suddenly Tony wasn’t the only one with an inopportune boner. Tony groaned into the bite, slurping up as much blood as possible to stifle his own needy sounds.

“I don’t know,” Steve said, weakly. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Tony nearly swallowed his own tongue. “You’re awful,” he said, thudding his head against Steve’s chest, trying to catch his breath.

Steve pressed a kiss to Tony’s forehead. “I know.”

Tony sighed. As much as he would love to drag Steve off to bed, he had meant it when he had said he wasn’t ready. Steve wasn’t someone he wanted for a quick fuck; Steve deserved to be taken out on dates, and shown more than just a mattress and a good time. When he had been younger, Tony might have rushed them off to bed and torn Steve’s clothing off with his teeth. Now he couldn’t bring himself to even think about rushing, even though his cock was hard enough to drill through Vibranium. Besides, he reasoned with himself as he slid off of Steve’s perfectly sculpted thighs, he had things to do in order to keep them and his tech safe. The electrical systems needed to be repaired, and Jarvis needed to be rebooted and defragged for errors; he wasn’t going to sleep in this house again until Jarvis was back at the helm. He wouldn’t put Steve in danger like that, not with the paparazzi camped outside waiting for a slip up. One of those bastards might try to get into the compound if they saw an opening, and he wasn’t going to give them one. It was lucky that they didn’t know about the security problems, or the bastards would probably be climbing the gate already, cameras in hand.

“Tony?” Steve sounded disappointed. He reached out, slipping a finger casually through Tony’s belt loop, reeling him in when he tried to stand up. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Tony murmured, stroking along the line of Steve’s jaw. “I just need to go fix the electricity. Jarvis needs to be up and running before nightfall, and I’d like to get on it now while I’m full.”

“Oh.” Steve let his hand drop back into his lap. “Did you need me to do anything?”
“Actually, you can do me a massive favor,” Tony said, trying casually adjust the front of his uncomfortably tight pants without making a big deal about it.

“Anything,” Steve said, smiling up at Tony. “What do you need?”

“I need you to check in with Fury.”

“Tony,” Steve said with a scowl, “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea right now.”

“You publicly stepped down from being Captain America, Steve. I think he’s going to want to talk to you. He’s already tried to phone me seven times in the last five minutes,” Tony grumbled, giving his head a shake. Extremis was good, but it made it damn hard to ignore his phone. He planted a kiss on Steve’s lips, dispelling the frown starting to form there. “Natasha and the guys are going to worry. Hell, if you’re not leading the pack, they might put someone else in command. I know for a fact that they took me off the roster an hour ago. They need to talk to you. You’re their leader.”

“I know,” Steve muttered, looking down at his hands. “I guess I really fouled things up, huh.”

“You got angry and called some dumbass reporters out on their shit. I don’t exactly blame you, and I’m sure the team doesn’t either, so talk to them,” Tony said, giving Steve another kiss. “They need you.”

“They need you too,” Steve said, stroking the side of Tony’s face.

“I know,” Tony said, sighing. “I’ll make it up to them somehow. I promise.”

“They’d probably be happy with a phone call you know,”

“And they’ll get one – once the electricity is back on,” Tony said with a smile. “You’d better go talk to Fury – we’re at ten missed calls now, by the way. He’s going to send Coulson over with his Taser if you’re not careful.”

“Alright, alright,” Steve grumbled.

“And eat something for breakfast while you’re at it,” Tony said, running his fingers through Steve’s hair. He lingered, thrilled that this was alright – that he could touch Steve like this without being batted away. He grinned the entire way down the stairs to the generator room.

Tony worked on the fried electrical and security systems, easily putting everything back in working order; he always made sure he double ordered parts when putting in wiring, and since there was still plenty left after the initial overhaul of the mansion, he didn’t even need to order anything in or wait on anything other than Jarvis’ boot-up time. The work was mind-numbingly boring. He could have done it with his eyes closed. There was just something lovely about tearing apart a broken system and repairing it. He even had a few upgrades installed by the time Steve wandered down into the workshop for lunch.

Steve had not, however, had as great a morning. He looked haggard and impossibly old sitting there in Tony’s rolling chair devouring a roast beef sandwich off his ridiculously small blue and white checkered plate.

“What’s up?” Tony said, wheeling another chair over, spinning idly in place. He had hammered the
dents out of this chair and was pleased to see that while it didn’t look fabulous, it was functional again.

“I talked with Natasha,” Steve said, stuffing a finger-thick slice of pickle into his mouth. He ate it in three bites, although he didn’t seem to have enjoyed it.

“Oh? And how did that go?”

“Badly. Well, it wasn’t like she was angry with me or anything,” Steve sighed, shaking his head. “It was more the news that was bad.”

“What news?” Tony said, already dreading the answer.

“SHIELD has permanently disbanded the Avengers.”

Tony froze. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was.” Steve viciously bit into a chunk of tomato when it peeked over the edge of the bread. “Natasha says they were contacted by the government and told that they were no longer necessary due to budgetary restrictions. She says that Fury destroyed three chairs and a trash can before Coulson finally managed to calm him down.”

“That must have been fun to watch.”

Steve snorted. “It gets better.”

“Oh god,”

“They’re thinking about reassigning Clint and Natasha. They want to throw them back into the field – to utilize them to get ‘maximum potential’ from their ‘wasted assets’.”

“Ouch. I bet they’re not happy about that.”

“They’re furious. They’ve been ordered by SHIELD and Fury to vacate Stark Tower immediately, no questions asked.” Steve finished his sandwich, perching the plate delicately on his knee. “I don’t know what to do now. I tried getting through to Fury to ask if there was anything I could do, but he said that even if I apologize publicly, they’ll still shut the Avengers down. He says it’s not about my fight with that reporter. He seems to think they don’t want the Avengers – any of us – anywhere near you.”

Tony scowled. “So are they fired now?”

“I think they’re still on SHIELD payroll,” Steve said. “What are you getting at?”

“I’ve always wanted to own my own team,” Tony mused, spinning around in another slow circle. “You think they’d accept? I mean, I was thinking about offering to fund the team before, but this just makes it that much sweeter. They can’t order Natasha and Clint around if they don’t belong to SHIELD.” Tony grinned. “I could call them my bodyguards or something. We could get them matching uniforms. What do you think about the colours red and gold?”

Steve chuckled. “I’m sure they’d agree if it means staying in the city. Neither of them were very fond of long term missions the last I checked. Natasha told me that she would prefer working for a boss she could actually meet, so you might be a step up from her usual employers. I’m not so sure about the uniforms though.”
“You think red and gold is too much?”

“That’s putting it mildly,”

“Red and gold are beautiful colours – and you call yourself an artist.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“I think I’ll need a giant green rage monster too. And a Thunder God too. Can’t start the collection without all the best pieces.”

“Thor’s still off-world, so I think you’ll have to catch him later. You think they’ll let Bruce go? They seemed pretty adamant about keeping him locked up if he decided to go rogue.”

“Who said anything about him going rogue? He’s a free agent too – SHIELD can ask for reports or whatever and I’ll send them in. It won’t be like he’s vanishing entirely. If he decides to come and work for me, he’ll be an employee – not a lab experiment.” Tony threw open a word document in his head, enjoying the freedom that came with working without lifting a finger as he wrote out his proposals. “And I guess I can keep the name Avengers, considering they didn’t follow my suggestion and trademark it when they had the chance. The real question is who should lead my super-bodyguard team.” Tony gave Steve a serious look, still slouched in the chair. “Do you have a resume?”

“I don’t, actually. Never did get around to writing one out,”

“Well, don’t worry about it. Team leader just opened up, and you’ve got stunning references,” Tony said with a wink. “Although we’re going to need to get you a new name. How does Captain Spangles sound?”

“It sounds unlikely,” Steve chuckled. “I’ll think about it and get back to you.”

“Alright. You got any preference in colour?”

“I don’t know. I like my uniform now – can’t you just do something with it? It seems like such a waste to stop using it.”

“The government owns the Cap uniform design. I think we’re going to have to do a full rebuild. I’ll put together something – send you a few colour swatches when I’m done.”

“You’ve really thought this out,” Steve said, sounding amused. He lifted his plate up. “I’m going to grab another sandwich. I’ll be right back.”

Tony nodded, barely hearing Steve’s words. He went back to documenting everything, scrounging up every last bit of information he had from SHIELD’s private databases to make sure he had all of his clauses neatly tied up. He blinked and pulled up his messages, streaming the recordings from his answering machine. The system was working well; Jarvis was watching in the background, and while he was still showing up as code in Tony’s mind, he was more human than he had ever been. Tony felt a surge of pride as Jarvis watched him work, pleased by the fact that his AI was busy checking up on him.

The first message in his voicemail was from his lawyer, the oh-so-terrified Paul Jenkins, informing him that he had passed the ‘test of life’ with flying colours. He had included a list of suggestions with the results, all of which were rational and acceptable considering who they had come from. Tony opened a new document and began drafting a new section of his will, running the tip of his tongue over his teeth as he worked.
“Tony?”

Tony jerked upright, his bare feet slapping against the cold cement; the chair rolled leisurely backwards, caught by Steve’s quick reflexes. Tony chuckled. “Sorry. I was working,” he explained, saving his files before he could accidentally shut them with his mind. “You know me. Work, work, work…”

“You’ve been sitting there for the past forty minutes. I thought I was having a conversation with you,” Steve said, sounding mildly irritated. “It’s a little creepy that you’re able to hold a conversation while being completely oblivious to it.”

Tony shrugged. “I have lots of practice. What do you think I do at board meetings?”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Did you actually hear what I was saying to you?”

Tony blinked slowly. He pulled up the security feeds and listened to the conversation he had missed; it was a little confusing, considering the video made it seem like Steve was busy having a very emotional conversation with himself, but it wasn’t too bad.

“I’m going to assume here that you’re busy watching the footage,” Steve said dryly, pushing the rolling chair back towards Tony. He was kind enough to hold the chair in place while Tony sat so it didn’t fly off into the distance.

“Sorry,” Tony said. He closed the feed down once he had gotten the gist of their conversation. “I think I’m going to need to learn how to tell people I’m working when I’m just sitting around.”

“Like putting a little sign on your forehead?” Steve teased, wheeling Tony towards his workshop desk.

“Maybe,” Tony snorted, looking down at the pile of papers sitting on the desk in front of him; Steve had brought in the mail. He hadn’t seen a hardcopy of his will before. Someone had gone through the trouble of having the thing bound in red leather, as if that would somehow make it less morbid. The pages were even gilded with gold. He had a feeling Pepper was going to laugh herself sick when she got a good look at it; he knew Rhodey would. “They know I wasn’t finished with the will, right?”

“They know,” Steve said, perching on the corner of the desk. “I think they wanted to bind it in two volumes so that you could put it in your library. This one is the formal stuff that won’t change.”

“Ah, I see, I see. Well, at least they’ve been busy while I was away. I was half expecting to find them sleeping at the wheel when I came in. They had it couriered out to me?”

Steve looked like he was trying not to grimace; his lips twitched minutely, his eyes moving to the side. “Uh, yeah. Couriered in. That sounds about right.”

“They were too afraid to come here and drop it off, weren’t they?” Tony flipped through the pages of his will, pausing every once in a while to make sure they had gotten everything right. The last thing he wanted was mistakes; if it came to him dying for real, he needed to be able to count on things going smoothly after he was gone. He flipped back to the beginning, speed reading his way through the legal jargon. It didn’t take long. He had always been good at reading fast, especially when it came to textbook-like documents. That skill had probably gotten him through university all on its own, considering how infrequently he had actually gone in to class.

“What do you have left to add?” Steve asked, watching Tony read.
“Well,” Tony said, marking the line he had finished with his finger, “I’ve got a bunch of stuff regarding guardianship to put in still. I mean, yeah, you usually have an executor or executrix work on everything so that things get distributed the way you wanted, but this is more of an ‘in case of emergency and I can’t control myself and do it’ sort of thing.”

“Ah, I’m sure Rhodey will do a good job,” Steve said, nodding sagely.

“Uh,” Tony said, giving Steve a lopsided smile, “I didn’t name Rhodey as my guardian.”

“You didn’t?” Steve looked puzzled. “Oh!” He snapped his fingers. “I’m sure Pepper will be just as good.”

“I didn’t name Pepper either,” Tony said, wheeling himself closer to Steve’s knees. “I named you my guardian.”

Steve stared down at Tony from his perch, confused. “What? Why would you do that?”

“Steve, honey,” Tony said, patting Steve on the knee, “sometimes you can be so weird.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve grumbled, crossing his arms. “I’m not weird.”

“You’re one of my best friends – and before you ask, yes, Rhodey and Pepper are both listed as Executor and Executrix for certain areas – but you’re the only one I trust to keep my life’s work safe from SHIELD’s greedy hands.” Tony smoothed his palms over Steve’s slacks. “You know way more about me than Rhodey and Pepper do nowadays. And you said you’re mine, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, nodding slowly. “I did say that.”

“I know that you’ll never let something dangerous get into the enemy’s hands, even,” Tony said, squeezing Steve’s knee, “even if it means destroying something I love and care for – like my suit. I know you’ll always be able to do the right thing.”

“Tony,”

“Just hear me out, alight? You’d never let the super serum get into enemy hands, right?”

“Right…”

“Well, my suits are like that for me. Most of my tech is, actually. I mean, yeah – I don’t really think anyone’s life depends on my vending machine technology, or on my garage door openers,” Tony said with a dark chuckle, “but I do know that the arc reactor technology could do wonderful or very, very terrible things if left in the wrong hands.” Tony slouched forward, resting his elbows on Steve’s thigh. “Believe me. I’ve thought long and hard about this and I know that you’re the man for the job. I know that you’ll do what’s right – even if it doesn’t feel right at the time. You don’t compromise, and that’s a quality I need in the person who is going to handle my tech.”

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Steve murmured.

“You don’t have to say anything. You’ll only have to make that kind of decision if I can’t make it myself,” Tony said, scooting the chair forwards so he could rest his forehead against Steve’s thigh.

“So you don’t want to die anymore?”

Tony winced. “No. I don’t. Even if I’m stuck like this forever, I’m going to keep kicking. I want to help,” he said. “I don’t want to let this – or any of them – be the reason I leave this world. I’ve still
got plenty of stuff I can do. I mean, it’s not like someone cut both my arms off. I’ve can keep working from here – and if it gets too bad, I know I’ll be able to keep myself away from people. I’m going to build a new containment tank – like the one SHIELD built for the Hulk, only better – and I’ll give you the codes to lock me in if it gets worse. We’ll put in slots for blood deposits or something. I mean, it would be nice to have a list of specs to go off of,” he muttered, “but I guess I’m going to have to work off of what we already know.”

“Maybe Doctor Strange will have more information,” Steve said, petting Tony’s hair. He wrinkled his nose when his hand came back covered in grease. “What were you even doing down here? How could you possibly have gotten grease in your hair?”

“Hey,” Tony protested, refusing to lift his head as Steve continued to stroke his hair, “I was doing important genius work.”

“I’m sure. What were you doing? Taking a shower in oil?”

“I may have gotten a little too close to the supply shelf. To be fair,” he said, closing his eyes, “I should have moved it before I started in on the internal wiring.”

“How did it go by the way? I know Jarvis is back on line, but how is the rest of the security?”

“Security is good. I’ve got it all up and running – even managed to upgrade a few parts here and there. The freezer’s still a goner though.”

“That’s a shame,” Steve said with a snort.

Yep. I guess we’re going to have go out and get a new one.”

“Tony Stark is going to go pick out a freezer?” Steve laughed. “That’s going to be funny to watch.”

“Hey,” Tony grumbled, opening his eyes so that when he poked Steve in the meat of his upper thigh he didn’t accidentally jab him in the groin instead, “don’t laugh. You’re the one who’s going to be eating the stuff that goes into it. It’s not like I’m going to be needing the space to begin with. You can’t exactly freeze blood.”

Steve fell silent; his fingers in Tony’s hair stilled.

“Don’t be sad,” Tony murmured, giving Steve’s thigh a squeeze, “Don’t. I mean, I’m sad because I don’t get to eat all that awesome ice cream cake – and there’s one sitting upstairs in the fridge-freezer calling my name as we speak – but I’m still able to sit here and watch you eat it, so I’m not sad.”

“Tony,”

“I know.” Tony sighed. “But it’ll get better someday. Hell, maybe I’ll even get used to it. Until then, I guess I’m going to have to get my food jollies by watching you eat.”

“I guess I’ll just have to put up with the staring then,” Steve said with a fake sigh. He started petting Tony’s hair again, smiling down at Tony.

Tony closed his eyes, taking comfort in the way Steve’s touch was so steady and firm. There was just something about Steve that made troubled thoughts slip away; Pepper had never been like this, even when they had curled up together on the couch for date night. It had always been awkward getting started, like neither of them had quite known what to do with each other. Maybe it was different because Steve hadn’t been around to pick up his shit every five minutes like Pepper had. Maybe she had grown to hate him and that was why she hadn’t been willing to stick around; maybe
Steve would get that way someday.

“Are you ok?” Steve asked, as if reading Tony’s mind.

“I’m fine,” Tony murmured. “It’s fine. I’m just thinking.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if anything weird pops up :) Thanks for reading!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Dinner didn't used to be so complicated....

Chapter Notes

As usual - blood drinking. Angst, and discussions of harassment (of both the sexual and physical nature). Heads up for inappropriate behavior on Tiberius' part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony woke to the sound of the phone ringing in his head; he looked up, groggy and found that he was lying on Steve’s lap sprawled across the couch in the living room. Steve must have carried him upstairs when he fell asleep. It was strange that he hadn’t noticed that he was being moved; usually he woke at the slightest sound, the habit an irritating gift from his months in captivity in Afghanistan.

The phone rang again, angry and loud like a swarm of bees heading towards a threat to the hive. Tony groaned and rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Someone get the phone,” he moaned, burying his cheek in Steve’s belly to try and drown out the god-awful noise.

“What?” Steve said, coming awake with a start. He looked around the room wildly and then slumped back against the couch.

The phone rang again. “Answer the phoooooone,” Tony whined, snuggling closer.

“Tony – there is no phone ringing,” Steve said, sounding amused and annoyed all at the same time.

The phone rang again; Tony blinked, trying wake up enough to use Extremis to figure out where the ringing was coming from. He dug through code and algorithms. There the information was, nestled beside his latest email still lying half composed after being left for better work; it was his cellphone that was ringing, undisturbed, lying on the floor underneath his bed.

“Jarvis? Connect my cell signal to the house channel please,” Tony grunted, squeezing his eyes shut again.

“Done, sir,” Jarvis said. “Would you like me to connect the call, or would you like me to let it go to voicemail?”

“Nah, don’t worry about voice mail. Connect it.”

There was a short beep and then the sound of breathing.

“Hello?” Tony said.

“Tony? Hey! Great to hear from you! I left you two messages last night,” Tiberius said, his voice pouring out of the house’s internal speakers. “Frankly I wasn’t sure you would be taking calls...
considering what’s been going on.”

“Oh you know me,” Tony said, rolling over to stare up at Steve’s so that he wasn’t having a
conversation while squashed into Steve’s stomach like a slothful cat, “expect the unexpected and all
that jazz, right?”

“I guess so,” Tiberius laughed. “So, how are you doing, darling? Having a good time hiding away
with your super-hunk? I heard you got him for keeps earlier. Should I be worried?”

Tony snorted. “Worried about what?”

“Another handsome blond occupying all your time? Are you seriously making me say it out loud?”
Tiberius said.

“Very funny Ty,” Tony grumbled. “What’s going on? Looking for the latest scoop so Viastone can
lead with it?”

“That’s awfully cruel of you,” Tiberius grumbled, sounding hurt. “You know as well as I do that I
can’t be around to babysit everyone when I’m working in the lab.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, I know. Would have been nice if you kept them away from the mansion
though.”

“And have us called out for collusion? People have been talking, Tony, and I’m fairly certain you
won’t appreciate what they were going on about. Some of it has been downright nasty,” Tiberius
said, “I’ve ordered the news crews to stay the hell away from your private property and the reporter
who badgered your dear Captain has been demoted down to mail room clerk. Honestly, I can’t
believe the man did what he did! He had such a good reputation from his previous employer too –
it’s a miracle the man can walk around the city all day without getting punched in the face.”

“You can say that again,” Tony growled. He felt Steve shift underneath him; he wiggled until he was
resting comfortably on Steve’s lap with the back of his head pillowed on Steve’s thighs. “So what’s
going on Ty?”

“Well, I thought it might be nice to offer an olive branch, so to speak. You’ve been wronged by my
company, and I want to set things right,” Tiberius murmured. “I wanted to invite you to my place for
dinner.”

“Dinner?” Tony frowned. “You do realize I can’t eat anything other than blood these days, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Tiberius said. If Tony could have seen him, he would have bet that Tiberius was rolling
his eyes as if to dismiss the idea that he didn’t know every last thing about Tony’s existence still; he
had always been like that in school. Most the time they had been in the same classes, so it had been
hard to remember where they had differed. He had once shown up to Ty’s classes by mistake; Ty
had done the same thing a few days after and they had had a good laugh about it. Now he wondered
why he had been so happy about that.

“Where were you thinking of eating?” Tony asked instead of dwelling on the past.

“Oh, I was thinking about ordering in. I didn’t think you’d appreciate being dragged out to a fancy
restaurant. Besides, I’ve got some of the best chefs on my staff these days – why not utilize them?
And of course you’ll be bringing your lovely bodyguard, correct?”

“Of course,”
“So he’ll get the benefit of all the fancy food you can’t eat. I’m sure he’d appreciate a change from all those greasy hamburgers you Americans like to eat so much.”

“Very funny,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “You’re as American as I am, Ty.”

Tiberius laughed. “So is that a yes to dinner?”

Tony drummed his fingers on Steve’s hand. It would be nice to see Ty again; sure, he wasn’t exactly happy with the stuff Ty had done, but it wasn’t as if he had done any of it on purpose. Besides, they could always ask a few questions – poke around Viastone if need be. “What do you think Steve? Dinner sound alright?”

“I guess,” Steve said with a shrug, his eyes still closed.

“Excellent! I’ll see you two tomorrow night at six – swing by Viastone’s Headquarters. Report to security and they’ll send you right up. I live in the penthouse these days,” Tiberius murmured. “Ciao, Tony.”

“See you tomorrow night.”

The line went dead.

Tony sighed aloud. “You know, it would be nice to get a few days of privacy.”

“You could have said no,” Steve grumbled, sitting up straighter. He shifted Tony’s weight and slipped free, letting Tony slide sideways down cushions.

“Hey!” Tony groused from behind a pillow. He wiggled his legs indignantly as he tried to right himself, crouching with his knees squashing the cushions flat. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Steve said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I just have to make a phone call.”

“You do realize Jarvis can make that call for you,” Tony said dryly, struggling his way upright.

“I know. This is just… it’s private.” Steve said, patting his pockets to find his phone. He pulled it out and then stared guiltily down at it, as if he had done something to disappoint it. The look was absolutely awful to see; Tony wanted the snatch the phone clean out of Steve’s hand and hurl it away before it could make Steve look any worse.

Instead of lunging for Steve’s phone like a crazed madman, Tony cleared his throat and stood up, rearranging the cushions beside him so that they weren’t completely crooked; god knows it would have driven him nuts if he had left them that way. “That’s cool,” he said, stacking the pillows neatly in the corners of the couch where they belonged. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

“I didn’t mean – you don’t have to leave,” Steve said quietly, glaring at his phone.

“You’re making a private phone call, Steve. I don’t think you need me sitting here listening in,” Tony said with a shrug. “It’s fine. Come find me when you’re done, alright?”

“Alright,” Steve said with a sigh. He dialed, holding the phone up to his ear as he left the room, “Hello? This is Steve Rogers. I was wondering if I could talk to the nurse on-call?” The rest of his conversation faded away as Tony walked upstairs to go take a shower.
“So,” Steve said, peeking around the bathroom door. “Are you decent?”

“Do you mean, ‘am I naked’?” Tony sang, scrubbing his hands through his shampoo-drenched hair. The shower had been a good idea; he had taken one good sniff of his armpits and had been surprised Steve hadn’t run screaming from the room.

“Yes,” Steve chuckled, “I’m asking if you’re naked. I’m assuming that you’re in the shower still.”

“Indeed I am,” Tony agreed, enjoying the warmth of the water as it trickled down his back. He still had the showerhead turned to the mist setting; he hadn’t been able to turn it up any higher, even though he had tried. It irked him that Extremis hadn’t been able to get rid of his anxiety. It hadn’t even been able to tone it down a little. This was as good as it was going to get, he reflected sourly; he was probably never going to be able to shower like a normal human being. To be fair though, he wasn’t exactly human anymore, now was he? He wondered if other vampires worried about showering as much as he did. He chuckled darkly to himself.

“Did you want me to come back later?” Steve asked, hovering in the doorway, just barely visible.

“Stay. Entertain me,”

“Really?”

“Really,” Tony said as he drizzled peach scented body-wash all over the now sopping-wet loofa. The weight of it felt right in his hand and the smell was just distracting enough to keep him from panicking when the showerhead sputtered and sprayed him in the face with hot water. He took in a sharp breath through his nose, stepping to the side of the shower stall to get away from the water as it started all-out pouring down onto him. He dropped the loofa; it landed with a wet splat under the spray, forgotten. “Shit,” he croaked as his back hit the tiled wall behind him. He looked around, but there was nowhere to go.

“Tony?” Steve padded his way into the room, his eyes averted. He wandered up to the toilet and sat down on the closed lid, setting his phone down on the counter.

“I’m fine,” Tony said a little too quickly, trying to feel his way along the side of the wall to make a grab for the tap.

“You don’t sound fine,” Steve said, getting up. He rapped his knuckles on the wall, as if he didn’t already know Tony was in the shower to begin with. “You alright in there?”

“I’m fine,” Tony gritted out, praying that Steve would stay where he was. He turned his head to try and get a better look at the tap, because for some stupid reason he had never bothered to put cameras in any of his bathrooms, and got yet another face-full of water; this time, it was more than just toasty warm – it was boiling hot. He wasn’t sure if he screamed, or shouted or really if he said anything at all, but before he could even figure out what was going on Steve was holding him, standing directly underneath the showerhead completely clothed, shielding him from the water. It was awkward. The shower wasn’t quite big enough for two people, but Tony could have cared less that he was mashed against Steve’s chest. The water was trickling down Steve’s shoulders, and it was obviously hurting him judging by the grimace on his face, yet he ignored the pain and grabbed for the tap, turning it off without even looking at it, his eyes locked on Tony’s.

“Tony?” Steve took Tony by the shoulder, gently peeling him away from the cold wall.

Tony was trembling all over; it was bad enough that Steve had finally found out about his fear of water but now he was busy having a panic attack too – it wasn’t fair. He tried to grin and pretend
that it was something completely harmless, that the hot water had just startled him, but Steve saw through it before Tony could even open his mouth to try and laugh it off.

“Tony? Does this happen a lot?” Steve asked quietly. He took a step backwards to give Tony some air but left his hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“It happens,” Tony let out a wheezy breath, trying to swallow down his fear, “sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Steve sounded skeptical but he didn’t comment further. He helped ease Tony out of the shower stall, and then set about wrapping the biggest towel he could find around Tony’s shoulder like a fluffy cape. Tony laughed weakly at the absurdity of it all, allowing himself to be steered towards his bed.

“It got worse after the wormhole,” Tony muttered, sitting down on the edge of his mattress. The towel bunched up under his thighs, damp and heavy; it was uncomfortable, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Alright,” Steve said, sitting down beside Tony. “We don’t have to talk about it if you’re not comfortable.”

Tony fiddled with the towel where it was wrapped around his waist. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s fine, Tony.”

“I mean it. I really, really don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s fine.”

“It got worse after the wormhole.”

“I see.”

“I mean, it was bad before,” Tony muttered, putting his head in his hands, “but it got worse.”

Steve moved closer until his thigh was bumping against Tony’s towel-covered one; he didn’t speak, simply sitting and listening the entire time.

Tony scowled at his bare feet. Why was he talking about this again? He was losing his mind – right. That was probably it. He was losing his mind and telling Steve everything he didn’t want to tell anyone. Why was this a good idea again? Steve was going to look at him like he was crazy – hell, he probably wasn’t going to be able to look Steve in the eye after this. Yet he continued to talk, the words refusing to be locked away again. “You know what happened with Extremis, right? I mean, with the stuff that happened before Pepper and I broke up?”

“Fury mentioned something about it, but I never asked for specifics aside for whether you were alright or not,” Steve said, “I figured you would talk about it when you were ready.”

“You’re probably the only person who doesn’t know then,” Tony sighed, brushing his damp bangs out of his face. “Pepper took the liberty of filing reports with SHIELD when we came back. She was afraid someone else was going to try and use Extremis to make another group of super soldiers. I mean, I wasn’t mad at her for doing it,” he muttered, “but I would have appreciated getting a heads up in advance, you know?”

Tony rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand, weary by the admission. He hadn’t talked with Pepper about this. At the time he had thought she had done it to keep Coulson filled in; they had only
just learned about his apparent survival when they had gotten back, and she had been ecstatic to see Phil back in the land of the living. They had gone to the funeral SHIELD had arranged for him; neither had enjoyed the experience, and when Tony had found out about Coulson being alive he had damn near throttled him.

Tony explained everything that had happened to Steve, trying to make it more of a clinical and professional explanation than an emotional one, as if he had been watching instead of participating; the words were ugly, the memories uglier still, but it felt good to get them out at long last. When he was done, he looked up, surprised that Steve still hadn’t said anything.

Steve’s expression was solemn, his gaze soft and understanding. “I’m glad you told me,” he said, his hand twitching in his lap as if he had stopped himself from moving. He looked down at his hands, smiling sadly.

Tony swallowed hard. So this was it then. Steve wasn’t even going to touch him anymore; he supposed it had been good while it had lasted. He reached out and took Steve’s hand in his, holding on tightly, preparing to hear the worst. “Hey,” he said, giving Steve’s wrist a tug to get his attention. When Steve looked up, meeting his gaze, he continued, “Look, I know it’s a lot to think about. I’m sorry you’re the guy who has to come in here and pick everything up after it’s already fucked up.”

“I wish I could have helped,” Steve said with a sigh.

“Helped?” Tony frowned in confusion. Realization hit him with like a jolt of electricity. “Oh. You’re mad that I didn’t call anyone in for help?” He tried to keep his growing annoyance in check. He loosened his grasp, ready to drop Steve’s hand so that he wouldn’t be the one who let go first.

Steve squeezed Tony’s hand tight. “Not like that,” he murmured, “I wish I could have been there to help you out. I know you can do that sort of thing by yourself – that you do things like that alone all the time – I just wish I could have been there to help you. I don’t seem to ever be around when people need me.”

“What are you talking about,” Tony snorted, his anger and fear draining away. “You’re here now. That’s what counts.”

“Yeah?” Steve looked up. He looked skeptical, so Tony pulled him closer.

“Steve, I didn’t want anyone to help me. I was hell-bent on doing things on my own. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt – and that’s what would have happened if I had brought anyone else in other than Rhodey. I mean, sure, it would have been nice to have your star-spangled-buns with me, but you had your own things going on, and we weren’t on the best of terms, remember? I mean we were friendly and everything but we weren’t I-want-to-hug-you friendly.”

“I remember,” Steve said with a grimace. “I just wish I’d visited earlier.”

“You were on a mission. What happened – all of it – wasn’t your fault or mine. I know how shitty it feels to be taken advantage of, but we have to remember that we didn’t have control and we probably wouldn’t ever have had control in the first place. What’s important,” Tony said, holding Steve’s hand in his lap, “is that we’re here together now doing whatever we can to make things suck a little bit less.”

Steve sighed. “I’m sorry. I guess I messed that up, didn’t I?”

Tony snorted, pinching Steve’s cheek with his free hand. “You pulled me out of the shower. I think you deserve to be let off the hook, don’t you? I needed you, and you were definitely there.”
“I don’t know,” Steve said. He winced when he tried to turn, the front of his shirt rubbing against his tender, water-burned skin.

“Jesus, Steve,” Tony said, sitting up straighter; the burns had to have been bad if Steve was still feeling it. He peeled the middle section Steve’s wet shirt up, revealing reddened, blotchy patches all over Steve’s torso. Steve made as if to push Tony’s hands away, but Tony refused to be dislodged. “Stop fidgeting,” Tony muttered, turning his attention to the sticky shirt as he rolled it up higher, barely keeping himself from ripping the damned thing off to avoid aggravating the burns further.

“It’ll go away,” Steve insisted, still trying to squirm his way out of Tony’s grasp.

“And I’m sure it will,” Tony said, getting Steve’s shirt stuck around his armpits. “But right now I’m helping you. So lift your arms. This needs to come off.” Steve complied, grimacing when Tony managed to get the shirt off. He shivered as the cool air of the room hit his skin and frowned in displeasure when Tony threw the wet shirt across the room.

“You should hang that up,”

“I should,” Tony agreed, carefully inspecting Steve’s torso. The burns looked lighter in colour than when he had first gotten a look at them, but they weren’t perfectly healed yet; it was lucky they hadn’t blistered, judging by the raised skin. Tony’s face burned in sympathy, thankfully having been spared the worst of the burn by Steve’s quick action. He wondered what the hell had happened to his hot water tank if it had decided to try and scald them to death like this. It was bad enough that the showerhead had failed so catastrophically; he was going to have to take the pipes apart to make sure nothing was wrong with the rest of the system. He had called in top contractors and scanned everything for faults when he had first been upgrading the mansion, but apparently they hadn’t quite gotten everything. He wondered what else they had missed.

“Tony,”

“What?” Tony said, peering at the small of Steve’s back. He ran his hand down along Steve’s spine, moving low enough to touch the waistband of Steve’s slacks; they were wet all down the back, and had become skin tight, hugging every last curve on Steve’s lower body. Tony felt along the waistline, fingers dipping down between fabric and skin. He bit his lower lip; this was dangerous territory here – unexplored territory. “Is this ok?”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, sounding amused. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I guess it’s fine then,” Tony smiled coyly, slipping his fingers further down the back of Steve’s slacks.

Steve gasped; the back of his neck turned a lovely shade of beet red. “Tony!”

“Hey,” Tony protested, laughing when Steve rolled him over, pinning him to the bed, “you said it was alright.”

“I didn’t mean you could start groping me,” Steve grumbled, his weight pressing against Tony’s still-slick body.

Tony grinned up at him. “What can I say? I’m a keeper.”

Steve chuckled. “Sure. Whatever you say pal.”

“It’s true,” Tony insisted, licking his lips, leaning forward to give Steve a kiss. His stomach rumbled so loudly he was sure people walking outside on the street had heard it; he was getting really tired of
it killing the mood. “Uh… rain check?”

Steve sighed softly, his breath hot on Tony’s cheek. He leaned closer, his knees bracketing Tony’s hips, resting his palms on the soft comforter beside Tony’s face. “Go ahead,” he said, glancing down through his eyelashes. His cheeks went a soft pink; he turned his head to the side, offering Tony his throat.

Tony wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders and dragging him down. He gave Steve a sniff, rubbing his nose against the soft skin in front of him before sinking his teeth in gently; the rush of blood into his mouth made him groan. He ground his hips up, wanting Steve closer, sucking in another mouthful of delicious blood. Steve moaned, dropping lower. He froze, going rigid over top of Tony.

Tony pulled his mouth away from Steve’s throat, startled. “Steve?”

“You… uh… you….” Steve swallowed, his gaze on the pillow tucked under Tony’s head, “your towel…”

“What about my towel?”

“It’s uh… no longer on.”

“Oh.” Tony grinned. “Don’t worry about it. Your virtue will remain intact, I promise.” He sank his teeth back into Steve’s neck, sucking greedily as he fed. He was pretty sure Steve said something at some point, but he couldn’t hear the words over the sound of blood pounding in his ears. After a while Steve relaxed again, his entire weight pressed against Tony, pinning him to the mattress. Tony found that he didn’t really mind the extra weight – in fact, he thought as he licked Steve’s neck clean, he kind of liked it.

“I’m not so sure about this,” Steve said, adjusting his tie for the fifth time.

Happy had picked them up for their dinner with Tiberius in the plainest Mercedes Tony owned, slipping them through the crowd of reporters still camped outside with ease.

“I know what you mean,” Tony grumbled, trying to ignore the way the sound of the motor was trying to drill its way into his brain. After drinking his fill, everything was louder, his every sense heightened; it hadn’t been so bad before, and he suspected it was going to get worse as time went on judging by the data he had been collecting. Extremis was at least good at blocking out the electrical sounds, but it was hard to ignore motorized sounds and still listen to people talking at the same time. Sure, he could have used it to mute everything, but then Steve would have given him that hurt look again, and Tony wasn’t planning on catching sight of that particular look again anytime soon.

“I’m sure he’s a great guy,” Steve continued, still fiddling with his tie, “but this just seems weird. He could be related to Walter.”

“Assuming Walter was telling the truth about his last name,” Tony said, leaning forward to fix Steve’s crooked tie. “I’ve got Jarvis poking around, but frankly I don’t think we’re going to find anything really damning tonight. Guys as old as Walter are the ones who end up with their family names inscribed in old bibles, not in electronic databases. It might take years to find out who he really was.”
“I know, I know,” Steve sighed, reaching for his tie again.

Tony batted Steve’s hand away. “Leave the tie alone. What did it ever do to you?”

“I can’t help it,” Steve grumbled, “it itches.”

“Sorry about that,” Tony said, trying not to feel guilty. There was a patch of gauze taped over the bite mark he had left on Steve’s neck; it was there just in case the media decided to try and get more candid shots, and it had been driving Steve up the wall.

“It’s just itchy,” Steve grumbled, reaching for his tie again. He scowled when he realized what he was doing. “I think I know what the Hulk feels like when he sits through briefings.”

Tony chuckled.

“But seriously,” Steve said, “I think we need to be careful about what we say to Tiberius. I don’t trust the guy.”

“You think he’s going to try and snooker us into something somehow?” Tony said, raising an eyebrow. “He’s a businessman, not a used car salesman.”

“I know you don’t think he’s dangerous, but please,” Steve said, unbuckling his seatbelt as Happy rolled up the windows, “just trust me on this, ok?”

“Alright,” Tony said, stepping out of the car. He adjusted his sunglasses, grumbling when the cameras started flashing. “Oh look honey,” he said as he sauntered around the side of the car, taking Steve by the arm, “company.”

“Lovely,” Steve said drily, making an aborted move for his tie. He grabbed his cufflinks instead, adjusting them with his free hand as Tony towed him inside.

The secretary they had met before was waiting for them at the door; she didn’t look happy about seeing them again. She was dressed in a sleek looking green business suit with matching skirt and jacket. Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes; she led them to the elevator and used her card to tap them through security, before sending them up to the penthouse alone.

Tony had expected Ty to have a fancy apartment; when they had been young and dumb they had talked about all the things they would have when their parents weren’t in charge of picking everything out for them. Ty had talked a lot about wanting sleek couches, about leather and steel and precise artwork that was so strange no one could understand it but him. He had wanted rooms completely different from his bourgeois parents and their old European style. Tony had agreed with him about everything; they had made plans to move in together one day, once they figured out where they were going to university and where they were going to work. The plans had never come to pass, but the decorations, Tony noted as he stepped out of the elevator, seemed to have followed him through time.

Tiberius was waiting for them, sitting in a brown leather and steel-frame chair; he held a glass of red wine in his hand, and swirled it casually before taking a sip.

“Ty,” Tony said, as he took off his sunglasses, putting them in his pocket.

“Fashionably late as always Anthony,” Tiberius chuckled, standing up. He set his empty wine glass down on a squared stone table beside him and swept Tony into a bone crushing hug, pressing a kiss
to Tony’s cheeks. Tony could smell wine on his breath and something else – something earthy and spicy, like you would find in curry.

He pulled back when hunger growled warningly in his gut, giving Ty a sheepish grin. “Sorry about that,” he said.

Tiberius shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. We both know how delectable I am,” he laughed, turning his attention to Steve, who was still standing stiffly in front of the elevator. “I see your Captain is enjoying himself.”

“I didn’t appreciate the paparazzi lurking in the alleyway,” Steve said, his voice gruff. He looked the place over, seemingly unimpressed with the décor; Tony had a hard time not laughing aloud when he saw just how grumpy that one glance had made Tiberius.

Tiberius cracked his neck, flashing Steve a blindingly white smile as if that might win him over. “Unfortunately they’ve been lurking outside for days. They heard about you showing up at my office, I’m afraid,” Tiberius said, leading them away from the elevator. “You’re not the only one who’s been visited by the bad-news fairy.” He gestured to the walls as they left the living room and entered the dining room, although he didn’t point anything out in particular. There were paintings here that looked like they had been done by dogs walking through paint; everything else was gleaming silver and chrome.

“You had a visitor?” Tony slowed his pace to match Steve’s, settling himself at Steve’s side when it came to picking chairs around the enormous steel dining room table.

Tiberius tried and failed to hide his disappointment, clearly having hoped that Tony would decide to sit beside him. He shrugged again, slipping out of his jacket in order to throw it to a maid as she stepped into the room with a tray of wine and cheese; she caught it, but just barely, and hung it over her arm as she moved towards Steve, holding the tray out.

“I’m assuming you drink,” Tiberius said, seating himself with a yawn. “This evening is going to be very dull if you don’t.” He gave the maid a once-over, staring at her with a predatory smirk on his face. When she flushed in surprise he flashed her a toothy grin. “My room, tonight, darling?”

“Yes, Mr. Stone,” she said, setting the tray down in front of Steve. She gasped when Tiberius slapped her across the ass as she passed him to head back into the kitchen but didn’t say another word.

“I see you’re trying to keep yourself up to your ears in lawsuits,” Tony muttered, glancing at the maid as she vanished from sight. When they had been young they had thought it was funny to do stuff like that to the school staff; he was ashamed to admit that he had done more than his fair share of it. Thankfully he had grown up and learned how to keep his hands to himself. Apparently Ty hadn’t quite learned that bit yet.

“Oh, she’s a real sweetheart,” Tiberius chuckled, snapping his fingers. Another maid scurried out of the kitchen, bringing him a full glass of wine before quickly getting out of the way as yet another maid arrived with several bottles of wine that had yet to be opened.

“Molly, my dear, would you please pour a glass of red for our dear Captain Rogers? Don’t worry about serving Tony anything. He doesn’t drink this kind of red anymore,” Tiberius drawled, picking up his glass. “I’d toast you, but I don’t think your Captain would appreciate you draining some of his blood into a glass.”

Tony plastered a smile on his face; he caught sight of Steve out of the corner of his eye and saw that
he wasn’t the only one putting on a mask. Steve looked a little like someone had stuck him in the
face with a needle full of Botox.

“Very funny,” Tony said. He tried to wave Molly away when she practically leaned in front of him
to arrange the cutlery and had to keep himself from nipping at her. She smelled delicious; not as
delicious as Steve, but delightfully sweet in her own way. He clenched his teeth, rolling the heel of
his left foot in his shoe in order to distract himself while her throat was mere inches away, ready for
the taking.

Molly seemed oblivious to the danger of being so close to a vampire, for which Tony was extremely
grateful. She went about arranging Tony’s cutlery and plates and then stepped lightly around Tony to
lean in front of Steve as she arranged his table setting so that it matched.

“Dear,” Tiberius chuckled, rolling his eyes, “Tony doesn’t need that. Oh never mind,” he said as she
moved to gather up Tony’s plates, her cheeks pink with embarrassment. “Just leave them. At least
this way he’s got something to stare at when the food arrives.”

Molly carried the rest of her dishes towards Tiberius, setting everything out with careful, deliberate
motions; Tiberius took her delicately by the hand and led her into his lap, wrapping his arms around
her slender waist. She didn’t protest, but there wasn’t a smile on her face either. She looked from
Steve to Tony, biting her lower lip.

Steve cleared his throat. “It’s not polite to grab a lady like that,” he said, standing up.

Tiberius looked surprised. “I beg your pardon?”

“The lady’s working, isn’t she? She doesn’t need to be felt up like that.”

“Fair enough,” Tiberius said, loosening his grasp. He held his hands up in defeat as Molly hurried
away, letting out a low whistle. “My, my. You’re certainly hanging out with a different crowd
nowadays, Tony. I hardly recognize you.”

“I stopped groping the servers when I was fifteen Ty,” Tony said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Did you now? I didn’t know that,” Tiberius said with an amused laugh. “I guess it was just me you
were groping.”

“I guess so,” Tony said.

“Please,” Tiberius said, his gaze fixed back on Steve. “Sit. Enjoy dinner. I promise – no more funny
business. The ladies are safe from my busy hands.”

Steve sat down stiffly. He gave Tony a look that clearly read ‘can we leave?’ Tony shook his head
minutely, trusting that Steve would catch his meaning. He would have taken Steve and walked out
on dinner right then and there but he knew exactly what would happen if they left; the serving staff
would be fired instantaneously, their reputations ruined for years to come, their names blacklisted. Ty
had always had a mean streak, and it always came out when someone made him lose face, even if it
was something little – harmless, even. That had been one of the reasons they had drifted apart during
their last year of school; they had moved from talking intimately, evenings spent in bed, to quick
fucks and conversation only when Ty felt like it.

“I’m assuming there’s a real reason for inviting us over for dinner,” Tony said, playing with a fork as
three new maids passed by carrying dinner. It was steak and potatoes, he noticed bitterly. Why was it
that he always had to watch people eating his favourite foods? He groaned internally, keeping an eye
on Steve’s plate as Steve started cutting up his steak. He was pretty sure he was going to start
drooling at some point in the evening. He looked away, trying to alternate between looking at Tiberius and the cutlery in front of him, neither of which were very appetizing looking.

Tiberius took a slow and drawn out bite of his steak. “God, this is delicious.”

Tony swallowed a mouthful of saliva and continued to fiddle with his fork.

“And yes,” Tiberius said, setting his fork down. “I’ve been given a contract by the government. We’re working with a team to recreate the Extremis virus. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

Tony clenched the fork he was holding a little too hard; he felt the metal give and awkwardly pushed the now warped piece of cutlery underneath his plate to try and hide it from sight. “Yeah, I know all about Extremis.”

“It’s absolutely fascinating stuff,” Tiberius chuckled, stabbing a chunk of potato smothered in butter and sour cream. Tony wanted to cry.

“Fascinating is one way of putting it,” Steve muttered.

Tiberius continued on as if not having heard Steve, his gaze never leaving Tony’s lips. “As you know, Viastone has been working within the biotechnical-engineering field for years now. We’re the only ones they trusted to hand the contract to,” Tiberius said, taking a sip of wine, “unfortunately we’ve been running into a few road blocks, so to speak. Most of the data they recovered from that unfortunate disaster of a lab was damaged in transit, so we’ve had to play it a little fast and loose to try and get things right. Results have been… mixed, to say the least.”

“Extremis isn’t a game, Ty,” Tony said, horrified by what he was hearing. How could the government have authorized something like this? He had been assured by Fury that the government wouldn’t get a whiff of Extremis; hell, he had broken into their secure networks and deleted every last file that even hinted at the name for that very reason. What the hell was going on?

“Oh, I know it’s not a game,” Tiberius said, smiling sadly, “and as I’ve said, we’re having real problems with it. Fundamentally we want to build something to save the sick – to repair disease centre in the brain and remove damage in the body. Surely you can see the good it would do? With something like Extremis in our hands, no one would suffer through cancer or Ebola. We could wipe tuberculosis off the map – extinguish Aids – you see what I’m getting at.”

“Yeah, that’s all very true – it could be used for great things, but what you’ll be building is weapons,” Tony grunted. “Weapons that the government can lead around and point at whichever country irritates them the most.”

“Are you forgetting about the obscenely adorable super soldier sitting beside you?” Tiberius said with a snort. “Project: Rebirth wasn’t all that noble. They built their serum to create a soldier who could kill anyone who stood against them.”

“Project: Rebirth was created because we were at war,” Steve growled, pushing his empty plate away. “It wasn’t meant to create monsters – and we aren’t at war now.”

“That’s very true,” Tiberius said, saluting Steve with his wine glass. He swallowed down the last of the contents and snapped his fingers smartly for a refill. “But you have to admit that the government is around to well, govern, isn’t it? They’re the ones with the power after all – they’re the ones who should be making the decision, not you.”

“They don’t know what they’re doing,” Tony said with a grimace, “they’re trying to build up an army they only think they can control. What’s going to happen when someone turns your research
“You think that’s possible?”

“Ty, it’s not just possible. If you’ve got access to those files – even broken ones – someone else does too. Imagine if someone builds Extremis prototypes like the ones I fought and decides to march them into the stock exchange or Times Square. Would you want to go up against a soldier who could breathe fire hot enough to melt metal?”

Tiberius looked shocked. “You’re kidding. The files they sent me were from Maya Hansen’s personal computer. They didn’t have anything in them about subjects being able to breathe fire.”

“If you didn’t hear about it, then someone’s been pulling the wool over your eyes, Ty,” Tony growled, “because they were doing a lot more than just that when Killian was in charge. Their test subjects exploded if they weren’t handled properly.”

“I knew about that part,” Tiberius admitted, giving his wine a grim look before he downed the rest of it. “Maya’s notes were just... hopeful.”

Tony wondered just what else Tiberius knew about the project. Could it be that Ty was stringing him along? Looking for sympathy perhaps? He used Extremis to break in to Viastone’s network, and was pleased to see that Jarvis had little trouble wriggling his way past Viastone’s security system. Code flashed in front of his eyes; he watched as folders downloaded and opened. He was startled to find that most of what he was looking at was the unsavory test results from Aldrich Killian’s original Extremis project. Maya’s notes were here too, but there weren’t nearly enough of them. No one should have had these files – not even SHIELD. He had been sure he had purged these results from the government network as soon as he had found them. He had saved everything else to a private server – one so protected it would have taken years to get in to if someone were trying to crack it – so where had these files come from?

Something wasn’t right here.

“Nothing good came out of the research,” Tony said slowly, sweat trickling down his back. It was as good as lie as any; Ty didn’t need to know about the things he could do with Extremis. No one needed to know. It was dangerous enough being a vampire in this world; if people had been scared before, they would be even more frightened to find out that he could control technology with his mind. “Maya started with good intentions, sure, but in the end those intentions didn’t matter – not with someone like Aldrich Killian at the wheel. He could have destroyed the country – he would have, if it meant getting what he wanted.”

“And that’s exactly why I’m not heading in that direction with my research,” Tiberius said calmly, swirling his wine. “I want medical miracles, not hospitals full of burn victims.”

“Look,” Tony sighed, “I know you’re not going to do something like that with your research. I know you Ty – you’re not that kind of man. It’s Extremis that’s the problem. No one should have given you access to it in the first place. It’s dangerous. It was classified and sealed away for a reason. You should destroy it before someone steals it from you.”

“SHIELD didn’t seem to think I was in any danger,” Tiberius snorted, setting his glass down. He picked up his knife and fork, quickly cutting up the rest of his steak. “I got the files directly from them – they handed them over willingly when I was put in charge of the project. I haven’t heard any complaints, either.” He took a bite of steak, seeming to savor the taste of it, locking eyes with Tony. “They’ve been extremely pleased with the work they’ve seen so far. Fury has been ecstatic, Tony, I don’t know why you’re so concerned.”
“Fury’s involved in this?” Tony couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He sifted through the files in Viastone’s network but couldn’t find anything that pointed at SHIELD. There weren’t even any private memos lying around, and what was around in Tiberius’ email was deadlines and shipping orders for newspapers. Obviously, the work was being saved somewhere outside the network – somewhere no one could access it unless they knew where to look. Normally he would have been impressed by the forethought, but today it seemed just as dangerous to have those files in something that was quite possibly portable. He wondered if he could convince Ty to take him on a tour – show him around to a computer he could conveniently plug into. He could deal with SHIELD when he got home.

“Fury is involved at the Council’s request,” Tiberius said, “although I’m fairly certain he’s no more pleased by the fact that he needs to cooperate with a businessman like me than I am with having to work with a military troglodyte like him. We both have our fair share of military contracts – well,” Tiberius took another bite, “You’re out of the business now, but you know how it is.”

“Yeah,” Tony grumbled, “I know how it is alright.”

“Then you can understand my need to do quality work. Any help you could give me would be wonderful. I’m only asking because I’m afraid we might do something wrong.”

Tony blinked back tears of pain as Jarvis’ connection was severed; his search crashed.

That shouldn’t have happened – ever.

He struggled and pulled up SHIELD’s network, gritting his teeth when pain flared up bright and hot in his head. There was a message tagged in the main cluster of folders, hidden from security. He recognized Jarvis’ work; after all he had been the one to build the protocols the AI used in the first place. The message was short, and cut off at the end. He stood up, pushing his chair back so fast he nearly knocked it over.

Tiberius twitched, his eyes widening. “What?”

Tony held up his phone, grateful for the prop. “I have to go. Someone’s busy breaking into my mansion.” Steve jumped up, heading towards the door as Tony dashed ahead of him.

Tiberius looked horrified. “You’re kidding!”

“Sadly, no,” Tony growled. “God damn it!”

Tiberius stood up, swaying slightly in place. “Get me a phone – call security.” He snatched the phone from a startled maid’s hands the moment the phone started dialing, looking grim. “Hello? Yes – please check in with the lab. I want security footage sent directly to my private server – now! And make sure Mr. Stark can get out of the building without hassle. Don’t just say yes – do it!”

Happy got them home in record time; he had been waiting around the corner in one of the coffee shops while they ate and had brought around the car mere minutes after Tony and Steve had gotten to the lobby.

The mansion had not fared well. On the outside everything looked the same as it had when they had left for dinner; the protestors and reporters were still milling around, grousing about how cold it was with their cameras still pointed at the main gates in hopes of catching a sight of something interesting.
Inside was a different matter; Tony and Steve stepped out of the garage and found themselves in a disaster zone. Everything was strewn about, tossed this way and that as if a tornado had hit. The power was out, and they couldn’t see much, but what they could see made it clear that this was a systematic tear-through, no room left untouched. They made their way through the house, using the dim light of the moon through the windows as their flashlight. Doors were hanging off their hinges, still swaying. There were paintings and cutlery scattered across the floor, sprinkled with a fine mixture of broken wine glasses and crushed plates. The couches in the living room were upside down and torn apart, their cushions scattered about in shreds like the remains of confetti for a poorly planned surprise party. The kitchen table was standing on its side, chairs stacked on top of it like someone had attempted to build a pyramid out of them.

Every room they entered was the same; every stack of papers, every book and every pile of clothing had been violently riffled through. Even Steve’s sketchbooks had been ripped apart, pages left strewn around his room and hallway.

Together they gathered every last drawing they could find, tucking it away in a folder they scrounged out of what had once been Tony’s office desk. Tony put his hand around Steve’s shoulders, keenly aware that Steve was mourning the loss of things he had kept with him for years; some of it had been even older than Tony, the last remaining items salvaged from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s archives after Steve had gone down in the ice. “We’ll catch whoever did this,” Tony murmured, trying to contain his fury. The person who had done this would pay for ruining Steve’s things. He could have cared less about his own stuff, but touching Steve’s had crossed a line. They would burn for this.

Steve shook his head, sombrely tugging his leather jacket out from under a pile of books that were thankfully still properly bound together. “At least they didn’t light the place on fire.” He straightened up what he could, turning his attention to his bed. Whoever had ransacked the place had kicked the legs out from under it, breaking off all but the one; it listed to the side, threatening to fall over when Steve nudged it. “We can rebuild. There’s nothing here we can’t fix,” Steve said, kicking the final leg out so that the frame fell flat to the ground. He piled his salvaged drawings and clothing on the bed, setting everything down neatly despite the chaos around him. “If they went through my room, they’re going to have hit the workshop.”

“Oh,” Tony said with a growl. “And I bet I know what they were looking for, too.”

Tony knew even before he reached his workshop that he wasn’t going to be getting security footage out of the system unless he could reverse time; the emergency lights weren’t on down below, and from what he could see the wires had been ripped apart by something powerful. He had tried pulling the cameras up on the ride home, and had gotten nothing but looping footage that alternated between static and nothing when the servers bothered to connect at all; he didn’t expect any better from a direct uplink.

Jarvis was down again, and this time the infrastructure was much more damaged. The AI had been stripped so thoroughly from the mansion’s system it was like he had never been installed there in the first place. He was safely functioning in Stark Tower, keeping an eye on everything from a distance but couldn’t do anything to help with his system crippled in the mansion. Aside from contacting the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. to notify them of the attack, Jarvis could only search for cameras that had gone out in hopes of finding the flight path of whomever had attacked the mansion. He sent everything to Tony via Extremis, but sadly, it wasn’t much to work off of even though there had
been plenty of cameras around to tap into.

Tony stomped down the stairs to his workshop, already prepared for the worst; it was pitch black down here, impossible to navigate for a normal human but for him, it wasn’t much of a problem.

He would have started sobbing when he saw the state of his workshop, if he hadn’t been so angry.

The place was torn apart like a wild animal had got at it and panicked when it couldn’t find its way out. Consoles were twisted and mangled beyond repair, lying on their sides; thankfully the damage hadn’t caused a power surge or fire to break out, or else it would have been much, much worse. The light bulbs had exploded in their casings, peppering the ground with bits of broken glass and wire, but they weren’t as badly damaged as the rest of the equipment. Scraps of metal were wrapped around what was left of the hydraulic machinery; some of the piping that had once delivered coolant and water was hanging out of the ceiling where it had been ripped clean out of the foundation, dangling there like an unfinished mobile. There was a soupy mixture of safety foam, broken security glass and water carpeting the floor, and while the pipes had long since stopped leaking, it was likely Jarvis who had saved the day, turning everything off before he had been disconnected from the house’s systems; everything else was covered in a thick layer of broken concrete and wiring.

“Fantastic,” Tony muttered, lifting up a handful of shattered motherboards that had once been part of his holographic converter. He turned, trying to find the rest of it and instead spotted a scrap of red and gold metal amidst the rest of the debris. He dove for it, digging with his bare hands through the wreckage, tearing his clothing to shreds in his haste.

“No,” he said hoarsely, tossing wreckage out of his way. “No. Not my babies – oh god, it better not be the armor.” He pulled a mangled gauntlet free, staring mournfully at it. “Shit. It was brand new, too.”

Something creaked from nearby; Tony dropped the gauntlet and dove for the next pile, digging through scraps frantically. Oh god – the armor wasn’t the only thing down here. “Dummy? Can you hear me buddy?” Tony pulled a slab of broken concrete free, hurling it into a pile of security glass and foam. Dummy didn’t make a sound; he was lying on his side underneath a chunk of pipe, thankfully undamaged for the most part although he was still sticky with foam and grease. Tony set him upright, dusting him off, fingers sliding over bolts and seams, checking to see if the bot was alright.

“Tony?” Steve heaved a chunk of warped metal out of his way, glancing around at the destruction; he blinked in the darkness, staggering slightly when he tripped on a broken chair, getting his foot stuck in the goop on the floor. “What the hell is this stuff?” He paled when he saw Dummy, and waded closer. “Is he alright?” He dropped to his knees at Tony’s side, squinting in the darkness, ignoring the way his dress pants were soaking through with sludge.

“He’s probably fine,” Tony said with a shuddery sigh, feeling his way along Dummy’s arm and hand. “I don’t smell anything burnt so they didn’t fry his motherboard. I’ve got his brain backed up in the tower…”

Steve squeezed Tony’s shoulder. “Are you alright?”

Tony patted Dummy’s hand, barely controlling his breathing. “No. It was bad enough seeing him like this in Malibu.” He bit his lip to keep from crying. “At least he’s just asleep this time.”

“That’s good,” Steve murmured. “Where’s his…” He looked around, searching for something and came up with the gauntlet Tony had tossed away in his search for Dummy. “Oh jeeze. Did someone get the armor?” He picked it up and handed it to Tony, who took it carefully, feeling at it for damage.
“It’s not functional, so it’s not as big a deal,” Tony said, resting the gauntlet against his shoulder. “This was just a prototype for something I was working on. It didn’t have any code attached to it yet, so good luck to whoever made off with the helmet and boots. All the good stuff is in the Tower.” He looked around again, cataloguing what was missing, destroyed and misplaced. It was going to be a pain to get everything back in working order again. He was probably going to have to gut the place all over again, not to mention flushing the place out. The foam wasn’t toxic – he had made sure to keep his workshops as eco-friendly as he could over the years, considering the amount of times things had exploded or melted on him, so it could be washed away without doing any extra damage. “From what I can see they stole the database itself. They ripped it clean out of the framework.” He stood up, and whistled, prodding the broken equipment with his foot. “I don’t know what good it’s going to do them though, because it would take three of me to crack it in the amount of time they’ll have access to it before it cripples itself. They’d have to start the minute they hook it up assuming of course that they can figure out how to plug the fucking thing in. But when they do, we’ll know. Jarvis has a direct uplink to it.”

“We’re going to need to phone this in. SHIELD’s going to want to know about it.”

“Oh, we’re going to be talking with SHIELD alright,” Tony agreed, glaring sternly at the mess around him. He nudged a hunk of broken cement with his foot, shoving it away so he could get a better look at the cables that were poking through the floor. Whoever had been here had pulled out every last copper wire, stacking it neatly in the corner by the mashed remains of what had once been the Viper he had been rebuilding from scratch. “I don’t think it was humans that did this, Steve. These guys are at least meta – at worst, vampire.”

Steve caught a ceiling panel as it fell, gracefully stepping out of the way as another one tried to nail him in the shoulder. “I don’t know about you, but this doesn’t feel like a random break-in. This feels like it was planned.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Tony muttered. “Jarvis has a three hour memory gap that started the minute we left the building – someone erased the before and after, and they did a damn good job of it, because he didn’t even realize it had happened until his circuits had been completely cut from the mansion.”

“It’s got to be Tiberius’ doing,” Steve grunted, dropping the broken tiles to the floor beside him. “Dinner was a lure. It was nice steak on a hook, that’s what it was.”

“The only problem is we can’t prove any of it. No one saw anything – including the rat bastards outside.”

“I’m pretty sure they would have been cheering and shouting if they saw someone in your mansion. Someone would have said something, even if it was just to rub it in your face,” Steve sighed.

“Yeah,” Tony said, flipping the gauntlet over. “If there was anything to see it would be all over the news by now, and I don’t see anything, even on Viastone’s latest news update.” He scraped around in the debris, working a half-crushed memory stick free. He lifted it up, inspecting the damage in the dim light. “This definitely isn’t one of mine. I’m guessing our obnoxious house guest dropped it.”

“Do you think it will still work?” Steve leaned over Tony’s shoulder, squinting at the drive.

“It should. The only problem is I need somewhere to put it to test that part out. Extremis didn’t give me any ports when it rebuilt me,” Tony said with a smirk, “And I don’t think it’ll be any fun converting the ones I have.”

“Classy,” Steve chuckled. “Did you want me to call it in? I’ve got to check up on Bucky anyway,”
Steve said, patting his pockets for his phone. “I know I had it somewhere….”


“Bucky,” Steve sighed, finding his phone, “is a friend of mine. Maybe we should go upstairs and talk about this somewhere less… dangerous.” He batted a hunk of wire out of his face, sending it flying. “I can’t get any reception down here anyway.”

“That’s impossible,” Tony said, snatching the phone out of Steve’s hands. He tried to tap into it directly, but it was as dead as everything else in the mansion; it didn’t even have enough charge left in the battery to let him access Steve’s contact list. “I’ve got the entire house rigged to carry signal. How the hell did this happen?”

“Maybe something happened when I was at Viastone,” Steve hummed, giving his phone a dirty look.

“Well whatever it was, it was some seriously impressive tech,” Tony grumbled. “I have this entire building and the block around it shielded against EMP. Whoever got through fried everything, and when I say everything, I mean everything. I can’t even link Extremis to the internet using Wi-Fi. It’s like this entire place is a dead zone. The satellites aren’t connecting either.”

“So the landlines don’t work?” Steve asked, taking Tony by the hand. He led them around a pile of smashed monitors, successfully navigating the debris field.

“Oh, the landlines work. The problem is finding a phone that isn’t electric,” Tony sighed. “This might take a while. Let’s grab Dummy and haul him upstairs – I don’t want this mess crashing down on him while we’re gone.”

After fighting their way upstairs through the debris filled hallways with Dummy held in between them, a feat Tony was rather proud of considering as they didn’t drop him once, they ended up having to trek across the street to find a phone that worked so that they could send in a distress call to SHIELD; Coulson answered on the first ring and while he was less than happy to hear about what had happened, he didn’t give them any grief about the Avengers being disbanded. He dispatched agents to the mansion to help keep things secure and patched Steve through to Bucky’s nurse, after making them promise to phone in the next morning for a full debriefing. Both Steve and Tony were extremely grateful; a debriefing was a small price to pay.

After that they searched for an outlet for Steve’s phone, and by the time it had fully charged again, miraculously able to power up, Tony placed a call to his favourite restoration company who agreed to get started in two days’ time despite the fact that they had heard all about Tony’s little ‘accident’ as they had called it; the manager had assured Tony that as long as he continued to pay, they could continue to build. He had offered to give them double just for that.

Happy brought spare clothing from the Tower for the both of them and then went home, off to tell Pepper the news before she heard it from anyone else.

They checked into a hotel nearby once security was stationed around the mansions grounds; neither of them wanted to risk being attacked in their sleep, and with the mess in the mansion they wouldn’t have gotten much sleep there anyway. Tony got them the penthouse even though Steve protested that it was too much; it seemed like the least he could do, all things considered. Besides, the place
had an amazing room service menu, and he was pretty sure Steve would enjoy lobster, if he hadn’t tried it already. The manager of the place didn’t seem to care that he was Tony Stark, or that he was a vampire so long as he didn’t leave a mess in the room when they checked out.

“So, you said you were going to tell me about this Bucky guy,” Tony said. He lounged on their King-sized bed trying not to think of the bed as theirs, dressed in a spare t-shirt and boxers.

Steve sat down on the sofa across from the bed; the life seemed to drain right out of him, and when he looked up, his eyes were sorrowful and troubled. “Bucky’s been my friend ever since I was a kid,” he said softly. “We grew up together.”

“Wait – what? I thought all the people from back then were – oh.” Tony sat up slowly, wishing he had put the pieces together earlier. He had read Steve’s file well before the Avengers Initiative had been formed – hell, he practically knew it by heart by now – but he had never really cared about the men who had traveled with Steve during the war aside from a cursory kind of caring. They had been Steve’s squad, not his, after all, even if he had helped foot their family’s hospital bills anonymously over the years; they were good men, bound together by trial and battle, and they had missed Steve fiercely. There had been a James in the group, Steve’s best friend – James Buchanan ‘Bucky’ Barnes – but he hadn’t returned home with the rest of the Commandos. The reports on him had been brief. He had been drafted and then caught on the field, sent to a concentration camp run by the Red Skull as a test subject only to be found again when Steve had blasted his way through that same camp. After fighting at Steve’s side through battle after bloody battle, Bucky had fallen from a train while they were capturing their most important target of the war – Armin Zola – lost to the snow and mountains. Bucky had been the first of many losses, one that some of the psych reports had claimed Steve Rogers had never recovered from.

“They found him a few days after he fell,” Steve said. He sounded tired, like he was about to break down, but the tears didn’t seem to want to make an appearance. “The Soviets took him. The Red Room – Natasha’s people – they built him an arm to replace the one they had to hack off, and gave him a new life. They trained him up, wiped his memory and made him into something better – something willing to serve them and cater to their every need.”

“But that’s… that must have been years ago,” Tony murmured. He wanted to dig through the files right then and there, but knew that if he did he would miss something important.

“Yeah,” Steve said with a sad smile, “it was years ago. They had him cryogenically frozen in between missions. He was a nightmare to control, their reports said.”

“I’ll bet.” Several of the reports Tony remembered reading had said that Barnes was one of the more hot-headed soldiers; he had apparently picked up Steve’s knack for bar fights – or maybe it had been the other way around.

“On one of his last missions, he escaped. Somehow he managed to throw his controls, and went off on his own, trying to find Natasha. We caught him before he could perform his last assassination,” Steve said, running his fingers through his hair. “That was why I couldn’t come over.”

“Wait… you… you caught him yourself?”

“Yes,” Steve said, licking his dry lips, “he’s been in SHIELD’s secure lockdown facility ever since.”

“Steve,” Tony said, “I don’t mean to be a jerk or anything, but… why are you even here right now? Shouldn’t you be with him?”

Steve shook his head. “I can’t.”
“You can’t *what*?”

“I can’t see him.”

“They won’t let you? Because I can go down there and scream in Fury’s face until they let you – I can do that – no, I *will* do that. Get you coat, and we can go right now.”

“Tony, no.” Steve stood up, closing the distance between them in two slow steps. He sat down beside Tony on the edge of the bed. He hunched over, resting his elbows on his thighs. “The problem isn’t Fury. *It’s me*.” Steve hung his head. “He doesn’t even know me anymore. Being there – visiting him – is only going to make him unhappy.” He balled up his fists. “I’m the one who took him down. He doesn’t even want to *look* at me. He panicked when he was first locked up – screamed himself hoarse, begging for them to kill him, and when they wouldn’t do it, he tried to kill himself by biting into his wrists. They had to tranquilize him and tie him down.”

Tony didn’t know what to say; he wanted to wrap his arms around Steve’s shoulders more than anything, but he could tell by the way Steve was sitting that he didn’t want to be comforted, so instead, he offered Steve his warmth by moving closer.

“He hates me,” Steve said with a sob, finally breaking. “He hates me. He’s my best friend, and he *hates* me. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Tony looked down at his hands. He knew what it was like to feel hated by someone he had loved; it wasn’t something he would wish on anyone, let alone Steve, and there was nothing he could do, no words he could say that would give anything more than a brief, counterfeit form of comfort. Steve didn’t need empty words. “Can I hold you?” Tony asked.

Steve looked up, sniffling. “You want to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Tony said. He didn’t wait for Steve to give him permission this time, and just moved, pulling Steve against him; Steve’s shoulders shook as he started sobbing harder. Tony wrapped an arm around Steve’s waist, resting his chin on Steve’s brawny shoulder. He rubbed larger and larger circles on Steve’s back with his free hand, wishing he could do more. “You can’t save everyone Steve,” he said after a minute of quiet contemplation, planting a kiss on the now-healing bite mark on Steve’s throat. “I know how much you want to help him, but sometimes you have to wait for the other person to want to help themselves first.”

Steve sniffled, burying his tear-slick face in the crook of Tony’s neck. “What if he never comes around? What if he doesn’t ever remember?”

“Then you learn to live with it, and you try and make new memories with him – you show him that you don’t want to hurt him and that he means a lot to you. You still remember him, right? So show him how much you love him. Give him a better future. Let him know that there’s still hope.”

Steve sighed as he wrapped his arms around Tony, holding on as if afraid that Tony might disappear.

“We’ll get through this,” Tony murmured, giving the back of Steve’s neck a gentle squeeze, “We’ll do it together. You helped me get through the worst time in my life, honey, and you’re not alone in this, even if you feel like you’ve lost the best thing you had in your life, you’re not alone.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, squeezing Tony closer. “I’m sorry you had to see this.”

“No problem,” Tony said, giving Steve’s neck another kiss. “Steve, you’ve seen me naked, sick and insane with hunger. Seeing you upset because your best friend doesn’t remember you isn’t embarrassing. You’re human – it happens. You’re still the same cuddly Steve to me.”
“Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Bucky isn’t the best thing in my life anymore,” Steve murmured, pushing Tony backwards onto the bed. He brushed Tony’s bangs out of his face, tracing lightly along Tony’s cheekbone. His eyes were still wet with unshed tears, but he didn’t look so terribly sad anymore. “Can I kiss you?”

Tony looked up at him, smiling softly. “Sure.”

The next morning Tony woke to Steve talking on his cellphone. He groaned and rolled over, burying his head underneath Steve’s now-abandoned pillow; it was still warm, so Steve likely hadn’t been up for that long. “Noisy!” Tony grumbled in protest.

Steve sat down on the edge of the bed, the phone still pressed up against his ear, and started tickling Tony’s heel. “Yes ma’am, I understand that I’m not a part of the Avengers Initiative anymore, but what’s been happening to Tony could affect SHIELD too. Yes, I understand that you have budgetary constraints to worry about. Yes. Yes. I understand that. Can you put Coulson on the line please? He’ll understand what I’m talking about.” Steve rolled his eyes. “Thank you Agent Hill.”

“SHIELD?” Tony mumbled from under his pillows, stifling a girlish squeal as Steve’s fingers found a particularly ticklish patch of skin near his heel.

“Yes,” Steve sighed. He stopped tickling and started rubbing Tony’s heel instead, “I’ve been on the phone with Maria Hill for the past twenty minutes. Fury won’t even take my calls.”

“I see,” Tony said, peeking out from under the pillow. “So you’re sneaking your way in through Coulson?”

“It’s not exactly sneaking if I ask for him directly,” Steve said dryly, giving Tony’s big toe a squeeze.

“Mean! You’re mean! I should tell the papers – I bet no one believes you’re capable of pinching poor, innocent billionaires.”

“Uh huh – Oh, hi Phil! I called in like you asked, but Agent Hill doesn’t seem to want to tell me anything about what happened last night. She claimed that Fury didn’t authorize any security team to guard the mansion.”

Tony sat up, dumping the pillows onto the mattress beside him. He stretched leisurely, yawning, wondering if he could get away with taking a shower while Steve talked on the phone; his stomach rumbled loudly, yet again ruining his plans. He was never going to get the hang of this whole ravenous hunger thing, was he? The oh-so-familiar ache in his bones seemed to be spreading all over his body with each breath he took, radiating from his stomach; this was worse than coming off a week long bender.

Steve gave Tony’s toe a gentle tug, motioning for Tony to move closer. “So the mansion is fine? Alright. Yeah, it’s been a busy night here too. We’re trying to track down the person who broke in, but so far we only have a few leads.” When he noticed that Tony hadn’t moved closer, he gave Tony’s toe a tug again. “Go ahead,” he mouthed.
“You sure?”

Steve nodded, baring his neck; he waited for Tony to bite before switching the phone to his other ear so that Coulson didn’t get an earful of Tony slurping up blood. “Can you do me a favor Phil? The vampire who turned Tony claimed his name was Walter Stone. We think he’s related to Tiberius Stone – yes, that’s the one. He’s the CEO of Viastone. Tony’s tried looking for information, but he hasn’t been able to find anything that goes back far enough. We’re thinking the records are still all on paper – maybe something not scanned into any database.”

Tony nibbled at Steve’s throat, licking a stripe up the side of Steve’s neck.

Steve shivered, swallowing hard. “I see. So, you’ve heard the name before?” He shifted Tony’s weight, almost laughing aloud when Tony licked a splotch of blood off his earlobe in retaliation for the tickling. “I see. And this is the same Stone? Alright. Tony and I are staying at the – oh. You already know. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, huh?”

“Spying on us?” Tony said, circling the bites he had made on Steve’s throat with the flat of his tongue until they had closed up. His stomach was delightfully silent, his belly full and bloated; he could have curled up and gone to sleep again right there in Steve’s lap if he had thought he would be able to get away with it.

“Of course,” Steve said, stroking Tony’s hair. “Thanks Phil. I know you can’t promise anything, but I really appreciate the help.” Steve sighed. “I know. I’m sorry about Captain America too. I don’t know what I’m going to do about it. I guess the name will be retired. Maybe SHIELD or the government will find someone to replace me. I don’t know.”

Tony rubbed his hand over Steve’s chest. He knew how hard it was for Steve to let go of Captain America; if the idea of someone walking around in Steve’s uniform made Tony’s heart hurt, it had to be a thousand times worse for Steve. If someone had taken over for him as Iron Man he would have been furious. Sure, he would have appointed his own successor – because no one was going to get a hold of the Iron Man legacy without him knowing about it first – and he was fairly certain that there would always be some part of him that would remain bitter about having to step down. He wasn’t sure how Steve was keeping so calm while talking about it.

“I’ll keep in contact. Yes. Tony’s thinking about what to do with the Avengers. He’s offered to fund them outright in order to keep us all together – oh? You want in too? I’ll ask him.” Steve leaned down, putting his hand over the bottom half of the phone, “Would you be ok with Phil sticking around on the team when you fund them? He says he wouldn’t mind being a liaison if you need someone to deal with SHIELD.”

“That sounds fine,” Tony said, flopping across Steve’s legs. “He can work for me or SHIELD. Tell him he can think about it and get back to me with the details. Oh – and ask him how we could go about recruiting Natasha and Clint. I don’t know if they want to still work with SHIELD or not. Does he know?”

Steve repeated Tony’s questions to Coulson, drumming his fingers idly on Tony’s shoulder. “You’re kidding,” he said after a minute of silence on his side.

“What?” Tony said, looking up.

“Coulson says Natasha and Clint have already resigned from SHIELD because they didn’t feel they could work for an organization that would disband a team that’s so important. They’ve already moved back into the Tower and are apparently chasing SHIELD agents away from it.”
“And why are SHIELD agents wandering around my tower?” Tony growled.

Steve nodded his head, listening to Coulson. Tony could have broken in on the conversation with Extremis if he had wanted to, but he restrained himself; waiting wasn’t so bad, all things considered. He decided to lounge where he was, enjoying the warmth of Steve’s thighs.

“Coulson says that they were instructed by the Council to try and locate you,” Steve said. “Someone was spreading around rumors that you were trying to create an army of vampires and they wanted to keep an eye on you.”

“So why weren’t they at the mansion? Hell, why aren’t they here right now. I used a credit card with my real name on it. I wasn’t exactly hiding.”

“Coulson says Fury didn’t agree with the Council’s decision. They’ve sent out briefings telling everyone that they’re trying to clear up the rumors, and they aren’t giving locations to anyone, provided of course that they have contact with the two of us at all times,” Steve said, turning his attention back to the phone call. “Is there anything else we should know?” He nodded stiffly.

“Alright. I’ll keep an eye out. Tell Fury we’ll be in touch.” He hung up, tossing the phone onto the chair beside the bed.

“What?” Tony yawned, dragging his fingers over Steve’s pajama bottoms. “I take it something bad happened?”

“He says we should watch out for Justin Hammer’s security squad. Apparently Hammer got a little worked up when the news got out that SHIELD was standing guard in front of your mansion all night. He assumed that it meant that the Iron Man armor had been stolen.”

“So he’s running around with what? A brute squad?”

“A what-now?” Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t get that reference. Please,” Tony grumbled, sitting up.

“I haven’t exactly worked my way through all the movies in the world yet,” Steve chuckled.

“Ok, well that one’s going on your to-watch list,” Tony said, wiggling a finger in Steve’s direction, “Right now we need to get you food and we need to get back to the mansion before Hammer’s goons try to storm the place to search for booty.”

“There’s no booty to find,” Steve said, flashing Tony a grin. “We’re both here, right?”

Tony nearly strangled himself with his own shirt as he tried to get it off; he wiggled free after Steve helped him get the kink out of the collar, laughing so hard he was almost crying. “You’re evil, you know that?”

“I know,” Steve said solemnly, handing Tony a clean shirt from the pile Happy had brought them. “We’ve probably got an hour or two before Hammer gets past SHIELD – assuming he tries to sneak in and isn’t let in by ‘accident’.”

“Exactly. We’re getting take out.”

“Burgers?”

“Sure, why not.” Tony attacked his hair with his fingers to try and squash down the last of his bedhead, pulling his shirt on as an afterthought. “You can even get coffee if you want.”
“That’s very sweet of you,” Steve said, stripping out of his pajamas with military precision.

Tony forced himself to look away, clearing his throat. “Well, you know. Everyone gets what they want sometimes.”

The mansion was still being guarded by a surly looking SHIELD agent when they got back to it an hour later, take-out bags in hand. Steve, the gentleman that he was, gave the poor guy a breakfast burger in exchange for his good work; the agent gratefully accepted it before ushering them inside, giving the protestors and would-be thieves a dirty look when they took a step forwards as it to try something, glaring them into submission.

Tony strode up the steps, taking a quick look around him; the yard was littered with trash and stones, all likely having been launched over the walls. It was a miracle no one had managed to hit the windows yet. He unlocked the door, muttering under his breath when he noticed a chunk of mushy tomato smeared all over the top step. “You’d think they’d come up with something more original.” He heard a splat and turned, aware of movement to his left; Steve steered him out of the way as a rotten egg flew over the gate, headed straight at them. It hit the ground a few inches to the left of Steve’s shoe, collapsing into a vile green puddle of goo and broken bits of shell. Tony wrinkled his nose. “Well that’s just fan-fucking-tastic.”

Steve scowled at the gate, looking like he was about to head down the stairs to tell the egg-thrower where he could go stick the rest of his ammunition. Tony put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. “It’s fine. We’ve got work to do, remember?”

“They shouldn’t be such jerks,” Steve muttered, turning his back to the crowd.

“I know,” Tony said, leading the way inside. “But at least they’re not throwing livestock.”

“You think they’d do that?” Steve asked, shutting the door firmly behind them. It was much brighter inside than it had been the night before; they had been too concerned about privacy to open all the blinds, so there were still pools of darkness all around.

“Oh, I don’t know. The horde does what it feels makes the best mess. We’re probably lucky we didn’t get any flaming bags of dog shit.” Tony tapped his fingers along the wall as he stepped around broken bits of furniture. He pulled up the mansion’s blueprints using Extremis, using the plans to locate the power lines still lying dormant with the walls; without Jarvis’ uplink, it was slow going, but it was manageable. “I see the electrician hasn’t been in,” Tony grumbled, prodding the nearest light switch.

“What can you do anything about it on your own?” Steve set a vase back on the living room bookshelf, blowing the dust off of it. He felt around in the dark, and found the ceramic flowers that belonged there, setting them back in place.

“Sadly no. I can’t do anything unless I get the wire trucked in and start stripping the place down bit by bit. The wires in this place are all extra crispy, and not in the fun bacon-y kind of way.” Tony pulled his sunglasses off, tucking them in his pocket. He strode into the kitchen and stopped dead in his tracks. He lifted up his favourite mug, cradling it in his hands. “Aww… my mug made it. I’ve had this baby since MIT.” He set it down beside Dummy, who was sitting frozen in the kitchen beside
the table, half hidden from sight under a tablecloth. “Keep him company,” Tony said, tapping Dummy on the head.

“What’s this?”

Tony looked around in the darkened kitchen; it was hard to miss what Steve had found. The cardboard box sitting on the now upright kitchen table was big enough to have held a spare car tire in it and then some. It was perfectly clean, puncture and ink free, likely having been purchased from the post office. Tony circled the table as Steve opened the box, ready to jump on it if he needed to.

Steve whistled, lifting out a pile of yellowing papers. He scanned the pages, flipping through what he had in his hands before setting them down and diving back into the box for more. “Coulson sure moves fast,” he said with a grin, re-emerging with a thick family bible and a photo album that looked like it had seen better days. He pulled up a chair and started looking through what he had found.

“I don’t think he moves this fast,” Tony said. He flipped a chair back upright and sat down beside Steve, scanning over the outside of the box, using Extremis to capture images of what he saw. There were fingerprints all over the place, and they weren’t just his and Steve’s. Extremis broke them up into five different sets; he threw them into every database he could, hacking every network that wouldn’t let him in and told Jarvis to send him the results when they were ready.

“I think you’re right,” Steve said, as he perused the papers in front of him. “This is handwritten, and old. There’s no way Coulson would have had all of this on hand. Some if it looks like it was ripped out of a book – maybe another bible or something. There’s a family tree here that definitely doesn’t belong in a security archive.” He set the papers down, frowning at them. “But it’s all stuff about the Stone family line alright. There’s birth notifications, death notifications – land deeds, titles – oh.” He flipped the photo album closed, looking queasy. “You probably don’t want to look in that.”

“Found yourself some Mourning Portraits?” Tony asked, letting Extremis comb through the results Jarvis sent him. Photos of the dead were popular, and while they had always existed in some form or another, they had become more accessible for the average person after the invention of the camera; he had never really understood the fascination himself, but apparently some people had gotten a kick out of taking pictures of their dead relatives sitting upright in a chair or posed with flowers. Apparently the Stone family had embraced that tradition wholeheartedly, judging by the thickness of the album.

“That’s creepy,” Steve said, pushing the photo album away. “I mean I knew about it being common and all, but I’ve never seen them before.”

“Yeah, they’re a real treat,” Tony chuckled. He blinked. He hadn’t expected to get results so quickly, but here they were. He reminded himself to buy Jarvis a new glass orchid for his collection; the AI had taken a shine to them for some reason, and Tony loved giving them to him.

The first four sets of prints were from the postal facility the box had been processed in, likely put there when they had been packed and moved around on the factory floor. The last print, however, was one from a European wartime stamp-card database; they wasn’t from either of the world wars, but from well before them, taken sometime after fingerprints had first been used to catch criminals. He frowned at the results, wondering why anyone would leave them behind. Maybe she hadn’t known he would be able to find them – or maybe she wanted to be found.

“I take it you found out who delivered the box of goodies?” Steve plucked a glossy photograph from the pile, glancing at it before holding it up. “I’m pretty sure your friend Tiberius is part of the Stone family line after all,” he said, tapping Tiberius’ smiling face. Tony recognized the photo almost immediately; he had been there when it had been taken. They had gathered on the lawn of their
boarding school, during spring break. There he was, standing beside Ty, almost hidden by the frame, having ducked out of the way when Ty’s mother had taken the picture. God, had he really been that young? He gazed in awe at the picture, surprised by the shy smile on the younger-him’s face. He hadn’t smiled like that in years – at least not at home.

“She left her fingerprints all over the box,” Tony said, sliding the family bible across the table, tearing his gaze away from the picture. He flipped to the family tree, drawing his finger carefully over the stiff pages until he found what he was looking for. “Her name is Luzia Stone,” he said, smirking to himself when Jarvis sent him details about a credit card in Tiberius’ name floating within Viastone’s registry servers; it wasn’t being used by Tiberius, judging by the charges on it, but it was definitely being used. Tiberius wouldn’t have so much as walked past the places being charged to the card. On second thought, he mused, Jarvis deserved a whole dozen glass orchids. “She’s apparently in town, staying at the Down’n Out Motel. That sounds classy. I wonder if you get a chocolate mint on your pillow or a baggie of crack.”

Steve shook his head sadly. “He gave her a credit card with his name on it? Isn’t that a little dangerous?”

“Oh yeah,” Tony sighed. “It’s dangerous all right, but he has it buried in the office accounts, so it’s kind of hard to find unless you go looking for her directly. He’ll probably say it’s a stolen card.”

“But it’s not,” Steve said, lifting out another glossy picture. “Why would she leave such an obvious trail? Isn’t she worried we’ll come after her for trashing your house?”

“I’m assuming it’s intentional,” Tony sighed, giving the picture Steve was holding up a gentle tap. “She wouldn’t have left us her picture if she wasn’t meaning for us to find her.”

Chapter End Notes

As usual, let me know if you find anything weird! : ) Thanks for reading!

One last chapter to go!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tony hadn't expected to find her so easily - but then again, she hadn't exactly been hiding.

Chapter Notes

Warning for sexy-time later on in the chapter. Warnings also for gore, injury, major injury and blood - and death. Lots and lots of death. Also, trigger warnings for assisted suicide.

The Down’n Out Motel was just as glamorous as its name implied; there were prostitutes standing around on the corner nearby looking for their next customer, panhandlers on the other side of the street waving cups for change and johns slinking around looking to pick up someone cheap for the night. It wasn’t a part of the city Tony would normally travel in, even when he had been young and dumb and drunk. Steve didn’t look like he was at home here either; neither of them fit in with the regular clientele, even though Tony had taken the time to wear low key clothing. He blamed Steve for all the stares they were getting. Steve looked fabulous in anything he wore, and even the baggy hoodie and sweat pants he was now sporting couldn’t make him look any less gorgeous. Although apparently some people were immune to Steve’s charms. The greasy looking man working the counter at the Down’n Out Motel didn’t even look up when they approached. “It’s ten dollars an hour, money up front,” he said.

Steve cast Tony an amused look. “Uh, we’re not here for a room. We’re looking for someone.”

“Everyone’s looking for someone,” the man at the counter snorted, finally looking up from his notebook. He froze, his eyes widening, when he recognized the two men standing in front of him. “Look, this is a legitimate business, fellas. I’m not looking for any trouble Cap,” he said, pushing the notebook under the counter and out of sight.

“Well trouble’s found you,” Steve said, looming over the counter. “We’re here to see one of your patrons. Her name is Luzia Stone. She’s been here two weeks already – she pays by credit card.”

“Oh, yeah. Luzia. Sure – she’s in 35A.” The man looked around the office, as if suspecting that someone else was lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce. “She’s, uh… a handful. We get a lot of bloody towels back from her room. She’s probably a cutter.”

“Anything else we should know about?” Steve asked with a growl.

The man shook his head. “No sir. Everything else is above board. She doesn’t do any drugs to my knowledge – housekeeping hasn’t noticed anything, and they usually report that shit. They don’t like running into needles any more than I do.”
“Thanks for your time,” Steve said, giving the man a stern look. “And don’t phone ahead to tell her we’re here.”

“I won’t,” the man said, flinching under Steve’s stern gaze. “Scout’s honor.”

“Very funny,” Tony said, peering at the man through his sunglasses.

The man shrugged, smiling weakly. “Just go through the door back there. It’s in the back on your left. You can’t miss it.”

“You think he’ll tell her we’re coming for her?” Tony asked, checking room numbers as they passed closed doors; everything was hopelessly outdated here, and there weren’t even any cameras to peek through. It didn’t surprise him in the least; cameras were probably bad for business.

Steve shrugged. Even in his hoodie he looked like he could bench press a Sherman tank. “I don’t think he’s going to do anything other than cover his own ass. He doesn’t seem to want to get in the way unless someone doesn’t pay their bill. That book he had behind the counter was probably filled with credit card information.”

“You think he’s scamming people?”

“I’d be surprised if he wasn’t. SHIELD finds targets here all the time. Natasha tipped me off when I phoned in to tell her what was happening. The team says they’ll be on standby if we need them.”

“That’s good. At least they’re keeping busy. That’s what retirees are supposed to do, right?”

Steve nudged Tony in the side with an elbow, a smile spreading across his face.

Room 35A was at the end of the hall; its door was made out of solid wood that had been painted forest green, and like all of the doors connected to the hallway, it had a peep hole in the centre of it. It was a good thing they hadn’t been trying for stealth, because Room 35A had a direct view of the entire hallway leading up to it; that was probably why Luzia had picked it. Steve raised his hand to knock and jerked back in surprise when the door swung open all on its own.

Luzia Stone was a tall woman with sharp cheekbones and pencil-thin eyebrows. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a loose bun, her bangs hanging loosely over her forehead; she was wearing a thick layer of make-up to try and mask her deathly pale complexion. The make-up was noticeable, but it looked good; it would be hard to tell that she was a vampire just by looking at her. She must have been wearing contacts too, because her eyes were a lovely shade of light blue instead of the deep ruby red they should have been. Somehow Tony had been expecting something different. He had thought she might be dressed in gothic clothing, maybe wearing something older in style; instead she was dressed in a long navy blue dress with white heart-shaped polka dots all over it; it wasn’t the most flattering of dresses, but it did keep her bony frame from standing out, turning her from drug-addict-thin to runway-model-chic. She smiled at them and held the door open, looking almost friendly.

“Come in, come in. I’ve been waiting for you.” She padded softly over to her bed and sat down, not waiting to see if they were going to follow her. The coverlet hadn’t been disturbed; it seemed as if she was simply hovering over top it.

Tony looked around, gauging the danger. The room itself was sparsely furnished; the curtains were
taped shut with duct tape, and if the lights weren’t on it would have been pitch black inside her room. All in all there was nothing here to worry about – aside from Luzia, of course.

“I assume you know why we’re here,” Steve said, stepping inside. Tony followed, refusing to take his eyes off of her on the off chance that she tried something.

“Of course,” she murmured, looking bored. “You’ve come because I took something from you at the behest of others. It’s not *that* hard to understand.”

“So you admit you did take something,” Tony grumbled, closing the door behind him. He leaned up against it, knowing full well it wouldn’t stop her from leaving if she wanted to take off. If she was Walter Stone’s daughter, she was likely just as strong, and by the looks of her she had eaten, and recently. This wouldn’t be a dried out, emaciated corpse they were fighting; this fight would be on a completely different level.

“Of course I robbed you,” Luzia said, quirking a smile. “You have to know what I took, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. I’m assuming you are searching for something important, yes?” Her original accent was gone for the most part, smoothed over by years of practice; it sounded a little like she was from Brooklyn instead of an ancient German town lost to time. “You want your drive, but it isn’t here.”

“Then where is it?” Tony asked, smiling at her instead of glaring. He had dealt with more than a few thieves in his time, and they never appreciated outright attacks; it was better to be smooth and casual, smiling instead of scowling. She would tell him what he needed to know – or at least he would try to charm it out of her, assuming of course that she decided to play along. He needed to work fast. He knew exactly which files had been stolen; if he hadn’t taken precautions when backing up the Extremis blueprints, someone might be walking around with a working recipe for the virus right about now, but she didn’t know that. She probably thought she had the finished product. “What you took is extremely dangerous in the wrong hands,” he said, starting with something simple.

“And vampirism isn’t?” She laughed, her eyes still locked on his. “You got the worst of the deal, sweet heart. Or is it sweetling? My father so loved that word.” She spat on the floor, her smile darkening until it was more of a grimace than anything else. “The man is a monster, but what can you do?”

“I don’t think you need to worry about him anymore.” Steve crossed his arms over his chest; he seemed much bigger than usual, like he had somehow figured out how to double in size. If Tony had been a stranger, he might have been scared of the look on Steve’s face.

Luzia didn’t seem even remotely impressed, but she did seem amused. “Truly? You’ve killed my father?”

“You didn’t feel it?” Tony tucked his sunglasses in his pocket.

“No, darling, I did not feel it. I was not made by my father, so I do not share his blood-bond as you do. Or did, I suppose. That virus of yours is powerful if it stopped father’s death from killing you. You’re lucky,” she said with a chuckle, “you could have ended up nothing more than a pitiful handful of ashes. I’m sure that would have displeased your little friend here.” She smirked at Steve. “Look how pale he is now! Perhaps he didn’t understand the agony you felt at the time, but he understands now what was done.” She shrugged, clasping her hands over top her knees. “It matters not. You have survived, and the one I work for wishes that you had not.”

“Who do you work for?” Steve growled, moving into Luzia’s space. He stood over her, his hands held at his sides, ready to attack while still passive in appearance.
“Who do you think I work for?” She smiled sweetly up at him, completely unconcerned by the fact that Steve was three times her size.

“I think you work for Tiberius Stone,” Steve said, narrowing his eyes.

“Excellent guess,” Luzia said, clapping her hands. “You got it in one. I was worried I had not been clear enough.”

“You put his picture in that box you left us,” Steve snorted. “You wanted us to know who he was. The question is why.”

“I suppose you are correct. I did want you to know,” Luzia chortled, covering her mouth with her hand. She wasn’t quick enough; Tony caught sight of her fangs and tensed, ready to spring forward if she tried to attack. She waved him off, rolling her eyes when she saw the look in his eyes. “Come now. Do you seriously think I would attack your dear Captain? I brought you two here because I want to propose a trade, not because I was hungry.”

“A trade? What could you possibly have to trade?” Tony asked, forcing himself to remain where he was, leaning casually against the door. He would have liked to rip her limb from limb, but he was fairly certain that wouldn’t help the situation much.

Luzia smiled sadly. She lifted her arm and delicately wiped her sleeve over her face, smearing her make-up until it was gone from the right hand corner of her face. She looked younger almost immediately, much less like a woman and more like a child. “Do you know how old I am?”

“The report you delivered said you were turned in 1605,” Tony said, eyeing the beige smear on her dress. “Assuming we can believe it, of course.”

“But it did not tell you how old I was when I turned, did it?” She sighed, wiping at the rest of her face until her dress was a mishmash of colours. “Father was turned by another, one who in turn decided to turn my mother, who in turn, made me when I was seventeen.”

“And where’s she?”

“As far as I know, my mother remains sleeping in our castle, locked away where no time passes within the Black Forest’s Twin. It is not a place you would like to visit. Hellish is too pleasant a word to describe it.”

“So what do you want us to do? You want us to free her? Because I’m telling you right now we’re not going to release that kind of creature into this world.”

Luzia’s eyes narrowed. “What makes you think I care about my mother?”

“You don’t?” Steve asked, sounding surprised.

“I am here because I wish to broker a deal regarding my own life. My mother was a maid, sold to my father to repay a debt her father incurred. I am not a Stone, although I bear his name now – I was a bastard child, unfit for marriage. They did not want me. I was a living reminder of my mother’s shame. I do not know why she bothered to change me, in truth. Perhaps it was out of guilt or maybe,” she smiled thinly, “maybe she just wanted to devour me as my life had devoured hers. Whatever the case, I am not here to barter for her life or her wishes. I am here on my own behalf. I want absolution.”

“And you think we can give it to you? Look, lady,” Steve said, his hands moving to his hips, “You stole from my friend and trashed his house. What makes you think we should even be listening to
“You will listen, dear, because I will tell you exactly where to find your precious drive.” She stood up, prodding Steve in the chest so hard he had to take a step backwards. “I do not care for the Stone name – I do not care for your Tiberius or Walter or any of them. I was bound to the castle in Black Forest’s Twin by blood magic cast by my mother’s master and I cannot die until I am slain by one of clean blood – untainted by their strain. At first I thought I could be free when our human cousins returned to claim our land and wealth. I waited generation after generation, watching from our prison, but it was not to be. I was deceived, and our master was tricked into selling us to the humans in exchange for food and comfort. He hated the thought of us leaving him, yet couldn’t do enough to make us stay.” Luzia’s lips curled into a snarl. “To make matters worse, our human cousins do not have the right blood to break the curse. Eating them does nothing – when I can catch them of course – and believe me, I’ve tried so frequently they took protective measures against me.”

“You’ve tried to eat your own family members?” Tony curled his lips in disgust. “I’m sure they appreciated that.”

Luzia smirked. “You eat what you can when you are starving, Mr. Stark. You know that as well as I do. If your mother walked through that door and you were hungry, you’d drain her in a second.”

“If she walked through the door I’d be chopping her head off because she would be a zombie,” Tony said dryly. “But nice try. I’m sure you’ll get it right if you keep picking people at random.”

“Darling, you got the point. I don’t need to pick another. None of us can die by our own hand – it is a curse all of us bear. Some of us are lucky,” she said, peering at Steve, cocking her head to the side. Her smile turned sour and a little angry. “You’ve found someone you can keep with you – someone you can’t kill. It’s sweet.” She scowled, staring down at her make-up smeared hands, clenching and unclenching her fingers, baring her teeth. “I wish I had something like that. I tried looking once, but after the fifth died, there wasn’t much hope in trying again.” She walked over to the plain white dresser beside her bed and tugged open the top drawer, yanking out an electronic keycard. She held it like it was something precious, pursing her lips as she decided what to do next. “This,” she said with a slow sigh, “this will get you into the floors Tiberius has allocated for his Extremis project. You will need it to get through security to retrieve your drive. The gates are locked with a lot more than just technology, I’m afraid. This is the only thing that will keep the blood magic from killing your friend and crippling you.”

“And what do you want in exchange for it?” Tony snorted, “You want a place to live by yourself? Some people to eat?”

“I want to die.”

Tony stared at her, sure that he had heard wrong. “Sorry, what?”

“I want to die,” Luzia repeated. “I have wanted to die for years, and I have tried everything – even starvation does nothing. It only makes the hunger harder to control once you recover. You are the first with clean blood to have survived both your creation and your master’s destruction; you will be able to end things – at least for me. I will give you this card in exchange for my death – that is all I want.”

Tony could understand why she didn’t want to continue living; the ache of hunger was already starting to act up in his belly again and it felt like it had only been minutes since his last feeding. Could he survive over four hundred years living like this? Would he want to live that long? Four hundred years was a long time and Steve – well, Steve wasn’t going to last four hundred years; there was no way to tell how long Steve would live, and while he aged, Tony would have to watch him
grey and wrinkle and eventually die. Had she done the same? Had she watched her friends wither and die around her?

“I was sent to plant my father in your garden,” Luzia murmured. “Does that help you make your decision?”

It did. Anger surged through Tony so fast he barely had time to realize what he was doing; he grabbed Luzia by the throat, his fingers digging into the cold porcelain skin he found there. He opened his mouth, ready to let loose a snarl and found himself yanked backwards by the scruff of his neck, his arms pinned to his sides by Steve’s strong arms.

“Tony – no!”

Tony couldn’t help sinking his teeth into Steve’s shoulder; the anger throbbing through his body made it impossible not to snap and strike. He panted, Steve’s blood dribbling from his sharp fangs and came back to himself, mortified by what he had just done. He squirmed, trying to get as far away from Steve as possible, wishing that he had never been born.

“Tony, it’s alright,” Steve said, soothingly. He held tight until Tony had calmed enough to fall still in his grasp. “I know you’re mad, but we need her for information, remember?”

Tony felt awful for doing it, but he still licked Steve’s blood off his lips. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Steve said, “You were angry. I guess we’re going to have to work on that.”

“You shouldn’t have to put up with it,” Tony muttered, trying desperately not to stare at Steve’s bleeding shoulder. It was bad enough he had bitten Steve in an uncontrollable rage. Did he have to leer at the damage he had done too? He licked his lips again, wishing they still tasted like Steve.

Luzia cleared her throat.

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin. He went stiff as a board, slipping in front of Steve to shield him from the attack he knew was coming. It was his fault after all. There was blood in the air now and judging by the way she was licking her lips, she was just as ready to eat as he was.

But she didn’t move. She held out the keycard instead, giving the air a tentative sniff. “Do it,” she said, licking her lips again. She dropped to her knees in front of them, pressing her forehead to the carpet. “Please. End me. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t stand the hunger.”

“We’ll do it, but only if you do us favor first,” Steve said, pulling Tony back when he took a step towards Luzia again.

“What?” Luzia refused to look up. She dug her fingers into the carpet so hard she gouged marks into it. “You want me to give you more?”

“Make a history for us. Put everything you think a new vampire would need to know in it and don’t leave anything out. Please, we need the information.”

“You want a manual?” She lifted her head, surprised into action. “That’s what you want from me?”

“We don’t know enough about what’s happening to Tony, and if he can’t be changed back, we want to know every last detail about his condition. That’s fair, isn’t it?” Steve kneeled down in front of Luzia; Tony tensed at the sight, startled by the amount of trust Steve was putting in a stranger, let alone in a strange vampire.
“I doubt he will be able to become human again, but I suppose it doesn’t really matter.” Luzia rolled her shoulders, her eyes locked on Steve’s. “Alright. I will do this for you. I will give you everything I know in exchange for you ending my life once we are done. I will need time – it is not so easy to write down over four hundred years’ worth of information and tradition.”

“That’s fine with me,” Steve said. He plucked the keycard from the carpet, tucking it into his pocket. “We’ll go deal with Tiberius and Extremis while you work, if you don’t mind.”

“Feel free,” Luzia said, rising and sitting back on her heels. “I do not like Extremis. It feels… evil. It should not be in this world.”

“Look who’s talking,” Tony grumbled, bristling from the comment. Everyone was a critic these days.

“No, you do not understand,” Luzia sighed, “I can smell Extremis in you, Mr. Stark, and it does not smell the same as it does in Tiberius’ lab. What you have is different – less brutal and dark. What he has been creating is worse than anything I have seen in my four hundred years. The ones he gives it to become mindless drones, creatures capable of tearing and rending flesh without thought. They move swiftly, like any vampire, but there is something in them that does not belong – something broken.”

“Broken?”

“They are imperfect. He has tried substituting ingredients to bolster the strength of the doses he gives them, but it will not do what it wants.”

“He took your blood,” Tony murmured, startled by the revelation. “That’s why the guy at the front desk thinks you’re a cutter.”

Luzia nodded. “He does not allow me into the building without an escort, so he came here directly to retrieve his sample. He is afraid the creatures might react… negatively… to my presence. His subjects are not well. Imagine that you are walking through an asylum of old. They scream and shout and beg for mercy but there is nothing left inside them except fear and anger. They live off of stolen and borrowed hope, Mr. Stark, and those kinds of men do not answer well to masters who cannot fulfil their promises.”

“Right,” Tony sighed. He used Extremis to pull up the network of security cameras in Viastone’s Headquarters, making use of Stark International’s satellites. He scanned the many viewpoints the cameras provided, looking for anything they might be up against; it seemed like a waste of time. There was nothing blocked out with code, no special rooms or empty floors devoid of cameras; everything was labeled clearly, every camera running at peak efficiency. He watched some employees chat around a vending machine as they took their evening break; there didn’t seem to be much in the way of scientific discovery going on from what he could see, even if a few of them were wearing lab coats. It was kind of boring, to be honest. “You’re sure this is happening in Viastone’s headquarters?”

“The cameras tell nothing but lies. They have stock footage that lasts a week which they keep on repeat so that no one can find out what they are doing.” Luzia stood up, turning towards the window. “You should hurry. He spoke of testing batch eighty seven tonight. I would not want to be there after he finishes that dark work.”

“Alright.” Steve turned for the door. “Meet us back at Tony’s mansion when you’re done and we’ll finish this. You know where it is.”
“And remember to bring the information with you. I’m expecting quality workmanship here,” Tony grunted, following Steve out. “If you stiff me, you’re going to spend the rest of your life in a SHIELD cell.” He called Happy in his head and arranged for a pickup, hoping that they weren’t going to be too late.

Viastone was deserted when they arrived; they left Happy in the car and told him to go for the Avengers if they didn’t come back out within an hour. They weren’t happy about going in without backup, but at least they had been able to get Tony’s spare suitcase armor from the trunk of the car so they weren’t entirely outmatched; it was the last one he had ever built, saved from destruction only because it hadn’t been within range at the time he had been busy implementing the house party protocol. It had sensors and repulsors – the only two things they really needed – and if they were lucky, it would be enough.

Steve had his shield strapped to his forearm, ready for battle. He was clad in his Captain America armor, but hadn’t been able to find his helmet in the wreckage of the mansion, so he had gone on without it. They walking through the lobby, checking corners as they moved. Steve swiped the keycard behind the front desk, watching the floor number display as the elevator started moving towards the lobby. “I don’t like it. This place is too empty. It should be busy – it’s not even six p.m. yet.”

Tony scanned the building using the armor’s sensors; he managed to spot his stolen drive, but couldn’t catch anything else before his view as blocked, blurred out by a strange electrical field. It wasn’t something he had ever seen before, but if he had to put down money, he was certain he was looking at what had fried the mansion’s systems. There was a secondary power system embedded within the first, guiding electricity up through the elevator shaft at an alarming rate; it didn’t seem to be effected by the magic, at least not from what Tony could see. He wondered what the building engineers had done to keep it separated from the rest of the grid, considering it was using the same generators. “I guess he really is using a lot more than just tech here,” he grumbled, trying to recalibrate the sensors to pick up signal again. “There’s a lot of interference, and it’s definitely not electrical.”

“EMP?”

“Nope – but it’s similar in structure. The energy level fluctuates too frequently for it to be anything other than magic. This is definitely what Luzia used to short out my security system. That’s some powerful shit up there, Cap.”

“Sounds messy,” Steve said, leading them towards the elevator. “You sure we should go this way? Won’t they just shut it down from upstairs?”

Tony scanned the elevator shaft for the fifth time; there was nothing around to cause damage – at least from what the armor could see. His sensors adjusted to lock on to the strange magical field, adapting slowly; he cursed not being able to use Extremis more efficiently. The armor around him felt like it was made out of feathers and moved like a dream with Extremis at the helm, but the synapses and response time were still nightmarish compared to his newer armor. He was going to have to build something better once he had more time on his hands. It was going to be beautiful once there was more than just the under-sheath stored within his bones; calling the armor would be as simple as blinking. “There’s some kind of bubble-shaped force field up there that’s absorbing energy – the elevator shaft is basically the only ‘doorway’ through it from what I can see. We wouldn’t be able to get past it by flying around the building – not without tripping their sensors, frying my
systems and dropping through the air like a rock. We’re definitely going to have to take the elevator like normal folks. I’ve got the rest of their security system on locked down though, so they’re not going to lock us out. No one’s getting in or out without me knowing – the tech is weak. The magic not so much.”

“Which floors have the highest concentration of power? They’ve got to be using a lot of it if they’re running the kind of experiments Luiza was talking about,” Steve said, slipping the keycard back into his front pocket.

“Floor seventy to seventy seven are running hot – and by hot I mean smoking hot. They’re either growing the world’s best weed up there, or they’re creating something big.” Tony stepped into the elevator, holding the door open. He gave Steve a mock bow. “Going up, Captain?”

“I guess so,” Steve chuckled. “Which floor are we hitting first?”

“Let’s try floor seventy. May as well work our way up. I’ve got to make a pit stop on floor seventy one, too. Someone has my drive plugged in and it’s still running.”

The elevator opened with a soft swoosh. At that moment, Tony was very glad that he was wearing the suit; there was blood splashed all over the white metal walls, smeared in long streaks in some places as if someone had leaned on the walls with an injury. Tony identified two bloody handprints before the sight of it overwhelmed him and he had to cut the feed on the suit’s cameras. “It’s as bad as I think it is, isn’t it?” he gasped, struggling to catch his breath as the air filters in the suit tried to scrub the coppery scent of blood from the air; it didn’t work fast enough. He could taste blood in the air, and he was more than ready to feed. The suit creaked unhappily as he flexed his muscles in time with each breath in. He wasn’t sure what kept him from tearing at his suit to get free of its self-imposed control, but he managed it, at least partially. “God I wish I’d put in an air freshener,” he tried to joke, hoping that Steve couldn’t hear the desperation in his voice.

“It’s bad,” Steve said from somewhere in the darkness outside. “I don’t see any bodies, but there’s enough blood here to paint the walls. It looks fresh.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Tony gritted out, taking in a sharp breath through his nose. He almost lost it right then and there. He could almost feel the blood on his tongue, could smell it so strongly it felt like he was feeding. He jerked back into control when Steve grabbed him by the shoulder, giving him a brutal shake; he rocked back and forth on his heels, praying that the armor would hold.

“Tony? Are you alright?” Steve sounded concerned.

“I’m fine.” Tony shook his head, forcing himself to turn the cameras back on. His stomach growled angrily when he caught sight of the blood everywhere and he took an involuntary step forwards, hands reaching towards the largest puddle.

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Tony gritted out, taking in a sharp breath through his nose. He almost lost it right then and there. He could almost feel the blood on his tongue, could smell it so strongly it felt like he was feeding. He jerked back into control when Steve grabbed him by the shoulder, giving him a brutal shake; he ro
“No.”

“Open the helmet, Tony. Open it and feed. I need you here with me, and you’re not going to be able to help if you’re still starving,” Steve commanded, tapping the helmet on the cheek. “Jarvis – open the helmet.”

“I’m sorry Sir,” Jarvis said, sounding sad, “I cannot comply without Sir’s permission.”

“Please – Jarvis, open the helmet.”

“Do it,” Tony grunted, running his tongue over his teeth. “Open the helmet.”

“Are you sure sir?” Jarvis asked.

“I’m sure.”

The helmet sprang open; Tony was on Steve in an instant despite the weight of the armor, sinking his teeth into Steve’s neck, suckling there as a haze of red clouded his vision. He could smell Steve’s sweat and his shampoo and it was infuriating that he couldn’t get it to go away. It just seemed to be getting stronger for some reason, although his hunger-addled brain couldn’t process why that was exactly. He moaned aloud as drops of blood hit his tongue and wrapped his gauntleted hands around Steve’s shoulders, pinning him to the nearest metal-clad wall so hard the metal buckled; unfortunately for them, that wall was the one that housed the main power control grid for the upper floors.

The lights above them flickered and struggled to stay on.

Tony panted against Steve’s throat, desperate for more blood, feeding relentlessly until he felt Steve slump against him. He frantically licked the wounds clean, shoving his hands under Steve’s armpits to keep him upright. He could hear electricity thrumming in his ears, and was all too aware that they could be electrocuted by the wall if they didn’t move quickly. “Steve?”

Steve groaned softly, trying to push himself upright. “It’s… I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not fucking fine!” Tony roared in despair, pressing his forehead against Steve’s. He eased Steve away from the wall, afraid to press their luck further, dimly aware that he was holding on so tight his gauntlets were going to leave bruises on Steve’s sides. “Goddamn it Steve!”

“It was my fault,” Steve said with a feeble shrug, trying to stand up straighter. He staggered, and nearly fell out of Tony’s grasp; if Tony hadn’t seen the muscles in Steve’s legs spasm, Steve would have crashed to the floor on his knees.

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine.” Tony lifted Steve up, wrapping an arm around Steve’s middle to steady him when Steve swayed in his grasp. “We need to call for reinforcements – no. We need to go back downstairs and get Happy to drive you to a hospital.”

“We can’t leave. There are people here, Tony, and they’re in danger. Something took the people who work here upstairs,” Steve said grimly, holding on tightly to Tony’s armor-clad shoulder. He forced himself to stand, refusing to let his weakened state take him out of the fight. “We need to help them.”

Tony looked around for a place to sit Steve down, praying that someone had left a chair out somewhere. What he found wasn’t pleasant in the least. There were scraps of clothing littering the floor, mingling with puddles of blood and another unidentified fluids; nametags had been torn free and thrown across the hall, left lying where they had landed. The rooms around them were open,
their doors torn off and smashed. A lab coat hung off one of the lights, bloody and torn, its buttons missing. A disembodied sleeve was trapped between the electronic sliding glass doors nearby, hanging limply, torn in the front and stained with blood, its wearer long gone.

“You need to get your drive, and we need to keep going,” Steve said, lifting his shield higher up his arm as he tried to keep his balance.

“Steve, you’re hurt,” Tony whispered. He felt sick to his stomach. His belly was bloated and warm, but it was far from pleasant. He might have thrown up if Steve hadn’t taken him by the face and gently kissed him, pressing their foreheads together.

“Tony, honey, we need to do this now. There are people dying up there, and we need to move. Have Jarvis call in the rest of the Avengers, but we can’t wait. If we wait, people will die,” Steve said.

“The Avengers are on their way, sir. They estimate they will be on site in approximately ten minutes,” Jarvis said, his voice slightly distorted.

Tony nodded slowly, giving Steve another kiss. If Steve thought they could do this, then they could do this. He couldn’t let anyone else die because of Extremis; this was his job, his fight. “Alright. Here we go.” He leaned back and closed the helmet, pulling up the HUD with a blink, praying he would have time to get everything he needed from Viastone’s system. “I’ve got seventeen heat signatures in the upper floors, but they’re dimming – shit – they’re gone. Floor seventy five seems to have the most life signs. Something cold is up there and it’s moving fast. I’ve got – nothing...” He banged his fist against the wall beside him as the magical barrier around them crippled the suit in one move, draining every last bit of energy from his hotwired arc reactor. “So much for the scans. The goddamned magic’s eaten through the rest of my reserves. Whatever that was, I don’t think it appreciated me spying on it.” He grabbed the faceplate on the helmet, firmly locked in place, and ripped it off, tossing it onto the floor. “I guess I’m walking this baby the rest of the way.”

“Where are we headed?” Steve asked, shuffling into the elevator.

“They’re on floor seventy six,” Tony said, helping Steve inside. “I need you to sit here. Wait for me. I’ll take the stairs and get the drive. When I come back, we’ll go up together, alright?”

Steve leaned heavily against the safety railing, slumping against it. “Alright. Go. I’ll be fine.”

“You’d better be,” Tony said, stroking the side of Steve’s face. He turned and sprinted down the hall, moving as fast as he could with the armor’s limbs locked up. The nearest corner seemed to come out of nowhere, and he nearly crashed headfirst into it.

The lights above him flickered three times and then died with a dull roar. He had known it had only been a matter of time after he had mashed the wall paneling, but it would have been nice if they had stuck around a little longer. Without the lights the hallways felt like a tomb; there was nothing here that was warm, or even office-like. Every lab that hadn’t been open to him before was now locked in place, frozen by the lack of electricity.

He stumbled, crushing a plastic recycling bin as he rounded the corner and headed toward the stairwell at the end of the hall. This floor was empty, but the ones above had shown some signs of life; the electricity probably wasn’t running up there either, judging by the scans he had seen earlier, but hopefully that wouldn’t hinder them. Someone had been busy trying to hide the massive amount of electricity Viastone was drawing from the main grid, and they had done a fairly good job of separating the floors so that the entire building wouldn’t lose power at the same time. The only problem Tony could see with that delightfully structural system was that the entire top half of the building would go down if the power was severed at the main grid – the one Tony had accidentally
crushed in his rush to get at Steve’s blood; the elevators, thankfully, were on a separate grid, being fed by the generator in the basement instead of the upper level power room. Well, Tony thought with a sigh, at least he already knew where he needed to go; he wasn’t exactly going into this blind. He threw open the door and stepped into the stairwell, praying that the concrete could hold the suit’s weight.

The stairs were harder to navigate than he had expected, considering it was pitch black in the stairwell; the suit’s joints weren’t being cooperative, but after a little sweet-talking they warmed up to him again and he could make it up the stairs two at a time without them locking up. The suit was still felt lighter than it had when he was human, but just because it was lighter didn’t mean it was any easier to move around in; he was going to have to build something into the suit to give it better maneuverability when the power was out. He didn’t want to do this again anytime soon.

The lights flickered overhead again, bathing Tony in yellow light before plunging him into darkness. “Fan-fucking-tastic,” Tony muttered. He moved to take another step, wiggling his fingers to test the dexterity in his gauntleted hands. He reached for the hand rail and froze when a shrill scraping noise tore through the relative silence of the stairwell. The hairs on the back of his neck went upright so fast he was surprised they didn’t go clean through the neck plate on the armor. He turned slowly, trying to locate where the sound had come from, swallowing hard, but even with his enhanced hearing he couldn’t pinpoint an exact location – there were just too many echoes to filter through now that he had moved, too many thuds and crashes from the upper levels to block out. He went completely still and waited, hoping that it had been a one-off.

The scraping noise echoed and drifted up from directly below him.

It was louder this time, and getting louder by the second.

Something was moving.

Tony looked down, peering over the edge of the stairwell; he couldn’t see anything even with his Extremis-enhanced vision. He swallowed down his fear, wishing his armor had enough juice left in it for a full environmental scan.

Even if he couldn’t see it, he knew there was something down there.

He took another step up the stairs.

Something grunted.

He froze in mid-step, his leg still raised. Should he speak? Was whatever it was down there human? Maybe it was an injured worker – someone who had escaped the creatures the first time by ducking into the stairwell. He gave the air a sniff, tentatively turning his head from side to side, trying to track movement and smell at the same time. Something scraped across the concrete on the floor below him, thudding against the handrail.

That was definitely getting closer. And unless his nose was deceiving him, and it rarely did after he had fed, the thing down there was not human. He had two options – one, he could turn around and wait for whatever it was to drag itself up the stairs, or he could continue on to the upper floor and grab his drive.

The lights flickered, turning on; electricity sparked around the fluorescent tubing as it struggled to
Tony caught sight of something massive with two large, lopsided eyes looking up at him from the bottom of the stairs before the lights went off again; whatever it hadn’t appreciated the flash. It hissed in annoyance, slapping at the stairs as it resumed its ascent. He could hear it breathing, despite the distance between them; it sounded like it was having trouble drawing in a breath, but he couldn’t be sure and he had no intention of sticking around long enough to find out. That thing was definitely not human – nope – not even close – and while he was fairly certain he could take it down if it came to that, he didn’t want to fight anything in such a narrow space.

Tony started up the stairs again, using the handrail to haul himself up the next step when the armor’s legs seized in protest at the sudden increase in speed. He staggered, swearing when the handrail bent sideways under his added weight; he teetered, almost going over the edge as the railing swung out. He dragged himself backwards, digging the tip of his armored boots into the concrete step, wedging himself in place. The handrail squealed in protest but held – barely.

The thing in the stairwell cried out, its voice a low, whistling growl.

“Sorry buddy – not sticking around for the show,” Tony muttered, dragging himself up the last step.

He made it to the next floor in time to hear something slap wetly at the top of the stairs behind him. He lunged for the door intending to yank it open, barely able to make out where it was despite the dim light coming from an overhead exit sign. This was going to hurt, he thought, as he sailed forwards, preparing to hit the door head on.

Someone pulled the door open for him. He hit the ground on his knees.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked, leaning against the doorframe. He was drenched in sweat, but he looked much more alert than before, when Tony had left him in the elevator; the red light from the exit sign hanging above him made his pale skin glow eerily.

Tony wasn’t sure whether he should be furious or extremely happy that Steve was here. He decided to settle on feeling mildly annoyed. “I thought I told you to wait for me to call the elevator?” he panted, dragging himself upright with Steve’s help.

“Someone called it up by accident,” Steve said with a grimace, shaking his head. “By the time I got up here, the guy was dead already.”

Tony gingerly removed Steve from the door, backing them both up. “You’re sure there’s nothing on this floor?”

“Not that I’ve seen. All the doors are open – it’s mostly cubicles up here,” Steve said, tensing. “Why? What did you find?”

“It’s not what I found,” Tony growled, taking another step backwards, crushing an empty soda can underneath his heel, “It’s what found me.”

Steve and Tony jumped back as a garbage can lid sized hand reached around the doorframe, grasping it so hard the wall cracked. The creature roared, struggling up the last of the stairs, wedging its lumpy head into the door. It snapped at them, its teeth the size of dinner plates and razor sharp.

“What the hell is that?” Steve gasped.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that’s an early batch of Extremis gone wrong,” Tony grimaced. “Shit – there’s not enough room here.” The armor was too bulky for a regular hallway, and with Steve beside him they were too close to the walls to be able to swing anything freely.
“Do you know how big it is?”

“No – aside from freaking huge? I’m pretty sure it moves slowly though. Either that or it was checking me out while we were climbing the stairs,” Tony said. He looked around for something to throw. There wasn’t much here that was detachable; he debated on ripping the counter off the sink beside him, but decided against it.

“We can’t leave this here,” Steve said, turning to look behind them at the creature.

“That’s what I thought. I guess we’re going to have to play tag. We’ll take it to the cubicle farm back near the elevator,” Tony grunted, grabbing a coffee machine off of the counter beside him, hurling it at the creature’s head. It bounced away harmlessly, but did its job, distracting the creature enough to keep it from slipping completely through the doorway.

Steve felt his way along the walls, looking for something. “Tony – run!”

“Running!” Tony shouted, ducking under the water cooler Steve hurled at the creature’s head. They sprinted around the corner, dodging scattered office supplies and kitchenware, skidding their way towards the cubicle farm; some were already tipped over, their grey carpeting shredded down to their metal frames while others were merely bent and smeared with blood. Steve drop kicked the first row of cubicles, clearing space, taking out the only desk still standing with a sharp chop from his shield. Tony followed his lead, punching and kicking things out of his way, building a ring of broken cubicles to fight in; it might be hard for them to avoid stepping on things, but this way the creature wasn’t going to be moving around so easily.

“Do we have a plan?” Tony asked, shoving a table towards the hallway. He could see the creature watching him as it struggled to break free from the doorway; it would be loose in approximately two point seven seconds if his math was right, and it always was.

“Lure it in – smash it?” Steve asked, wryly.

“Sounds good to me,” Tony grinned.

The creature tore through the doorway with a shriek, falling forwards as its weight once more started obeying gravity; the floor shook as it lumbered towards them on its hands and knees, its gait uneven and hobbled.

Tony picked up the first computer tower he could find and used it to smash the beast in the side of the head as Steve swung his shield at it from the other side. They moved in a circle, avoiding the flailing arms, claws and teeth as they continued to strike, hitting it again and again until Tony was fairly certain his arms would be sore forever.

The creature roared, lowering its head. It ground its heels in and charged at them, trying to hit Steve in the chest, but Steve was too quick, too experienced to be caught in such a meager trap. The creature ended up crashing head first into the pile of broken cubicles; it struggled to break free, tangled in computer cords and printer cables, its legs and arms pulled tight against its body. It roared in frustration, pawing at the cables. Drool started slopping down the sides of its jaw; it turned its head towards Steve and snapped its teeth, sniffing at him.

“Oh no you don’t,” Tony grunted. The creature squawked in surprise when Tony smashed it in the head with half a desk and then went still, sagging onto the ground in a puddle of drool, blood and sticky black ooze.

“Lovely,” Steve said, hopping down from the table he had been standing on, avoiding the puddle.
Tony shrugged. “Could be worse. I think it wanted to lick you.”

“I got that feeling too,” Steve sighed. “Let’s get your drive before another one of those things gets up here.”

“You think they’ve got more?” Tony asked, surveying the damage they had done. The hallways were mostly intact; his drive should have been two doors to the left of Steve if the GPS marker had been right. He pushed his way past a mangled filing cabinet and unblocked the doorway, tearing the sliding glass door off its track in one move.

A woman peeked up at him from underneath her desk. She was wearing safety goggles over her long black hair, the kind Tony usually used when he was messing around with volatile chemicals in his workshop. She smiled sheepishly and held up a drive, the exact one Tony was looking for. “Uh, Luzia said you would be looking for this?”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “She called you?”

The woman stood up, tugging her lab coat out from under a pile of binders; she had stacked them around the underside of the desk as a temporary wall. How well that might have worked out, Tony didn’t know, but the mini-fortress she had built had kept her safe somehow.

“She’s a friend of mine – well,” the woman sighed, “She probably doesn’t consider me a friend. I used to take all her blood samples.” She rubbed at a patch of gauze taped over the side of her neck, shuffling her feet. “She didn’t seem to care about that part, really.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “You fed her?”

The woman bit her lower lip. “Maybe,” she muttered, handing Tony the drive.

“What’s your name?” Tony asked, looking the drive over. He was surprised to see that it was still functional.

“I’m Millie Stone. She’s my cousin,” the woman said with a huff, as if they should have already known all about her.

“You’ve got a pretty impressive set up here,” Tony said, turning the drive over in his hands. He could see that something was drawn all over the drive’s outer casing in what appeared to be a mixture of ink and blood; the symbols were all perfectly formed, each line straight and clean. He wrinkled his nose, displeased by the smell. “I take it you’re either a necromancer or some other kind of blood magic user.”

Millie scowled, crossing her arms over her chest. “So what if I am.”

“You bypassed my security with blood magic – I don’t like that,” Tony said, tucking the drive into a hidden compartment in his suit, one he normally hid tools in. “Where did you learn how to do it? I mean, you can find anything on the internet these days, but I’m assuming you had some help.”

“My aunt taught me. One of her sisters is the dayguard for the family castle. She’s the one with the books on necromancy, not me,” Millie grumbled. “I only learned because my mother needed to pay off her mortgage and this was the quickest way to do it.”

“Is this hooked up to anything?” Tony asked, frowning. The last thing he needed now was an open network powered by blood magic. How the hell was he supposed to block that?

“It doesn’t work outside the main circle,” Millie sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “They’ve
got what they want already though. The rest of it’s garbage – well, except for maybe the programming on the nanites.”

“Hey! That’s my work you’re talking about!”

“Well it’s the truth,” Millie said. She winced, rubbing her thumb under her nose. “Shit,” she muttered, wiping away a trickle of blood. “Look, I need to get out of here. The magic’s becoming unstable, and if it goes down while I’m still here it’ll take me out with it.”

“And we’re supposed to care?” Tony snorted.

“Yes, well,” Steve sighed. He grabbed Millie by the shoulder, marching her out of the room. “You’re going to turn yourself in when you get downstairs,” he said in his sternest Captain America voice.

“Yeah, yeah,” Millie grumbled. “Look, can you tell Luzia I’m sorry I couldn’t help more?”

“What makes you think we’ll be seeing her again?” Steve growled, pushing the down elevator button. He leaned his shoulder against the wall, letting his eyes droop closed for a moment, his face contorting with pain.

“She’ll find you. You’re going to kill her, right?” Millie looked sad. She wrapped her arms around her middle, swaying where she stood. “She’s a good person, alright?”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” Tony said.

The elevator doors snapped open. Millie hesitated, putting a foot inside. “Look – I’m not saying you shouldn’t do what she wants you to do – I’m just saying, be nice to her, alright? She took care of me when I was little, you know? She used to read to me all the time.”

Tony sighed. He didn’t want to hear this sort of thing; he didn’t want to know how nice Luzia could be – how sweet or kind she was to her cousin. This was the woman who had told them she had tried to catch and eat her living relatives; this was the woman who had buried her murderous father in his petunias. Millie’s fond memories were probably all some elaborate ruse on Luzia’s part to get Millie to help her break her curse.

“When you get to the lobby, you need to turn yourself in to Agent Coulson,” Steve said, putting a hand on Millie’s shoulder. “He’ll be looking for you.”

Millie snorted. “No, he won’t. But fine, I’ll turn myself in if that’s what you really want.” She stepped into the elevator and leaned back against the nearest wall. “At least this way I don’t need to pay off my mother’s stupid mortgage.”

“I’m sure they’ll find you something to do that’ll be just as tedious,” Tony chuckled.

“Sure,” Millie said, rolling her eyes. “Just think about what I said, ok?”

“I’ll think about it,” Tony promised.

“Oh,” Millie said, snapping her fingers. “I should probably tell you. There’s more of them upstairs. They came from the lower lab, but they were definitely looking for something to eat. Just a word to the wise – don’t let them bite you. They’re pretty nasty, and this batch of Extremis kind of…” Millie grinned sheepishly. “It kind of replicates and moves from person to person. Seriously, we only had like ten test subjects and now there are way more of them.”
“And you waited until now to tell us this?” Steve growled, unimpressed with Millie’s candor.

“I’m telling you now,” she muttered. “I could have kept my mouth shut.”

“Get moving,” Tony sighed, reaching inside the elevator to press the lobby button. “And don’t try any funny business, or I’ll know.”

“No you won’t,” Millie chuckled.

Tony stepped back as the doors closed, his hands on his hips as the elevator left. “You think she’s going to turn herself in?”

“I think so,” Steve said. “Even if she doesn’t, she’s not going to get far. I’m pretty sure Coulson’s been keeping an eye on this place ever since I asked him about Tiberius. The minute she walks out that front door with blood on her, they’ll grab her. Besides, I doubt Doctor Strange would let someone like her walk off. A necromancer is a magic user. He’s not going to let that go unnoticed, even if she seems to be mostly harmless.”

“Good point.” Tony chuckled. “Although if he’s watching, it would be nice if he, oh, I don’t know – stepped in?”

Steve sighed. He called the elevator, still leaning against the wall. “Well, we’d better get going.”

“I just hope there’s someone still alive up there,” Tony muttered.

The elevator chimed as they arrived at floor seventy five; Tony and Steve staggered out, greeted by a trail of blood droplets on the floor leading away. The trail was marred from perfection by handprints and footprints; they followed it, worried about what they might find. Tony shuddered at the sight of so much blood. He needed to do this, he chanted to himself, he needed to make it up to Steve. He couldn’t fail now – he wouldn’t!

They moved through destroyed workshops and labs, shoving broken glass and equipment out of their way as they ran towards the last spot Tony had been able to pick up heat signatures; with the armor’s sensors gone, they could only guess how far they needed to go, but thankfully – and unfortunately – the blood trail seemed to be pointing them in the right direction.

When they reached the end of the trail, they found bodies waiting for them, or at least, what had once been bodies. The creatures milling about in the cafeteria had clearly been human at one point in their lives, but they were far from it now. Their human features had warped, leaving their jaws elongated and rounded, like their skin was made of wax; some of them were missing chunks of flesh and limbs. Those with hands had clawed ones that were the size of dinner plates, with webbing between their long spindly fingers. Most of them wore the remains of hospital scrubs and lab coats, but some were completely naked, having grown too large to remain clothed.

The first creature hissed, pushing its snout into the air, sniffing at them. It licked its lips and roared as it charged at Steve.

Tony smashed his fist into the creature’s disgusting face; its head exploded with a wet pop, leaving its body to crash to the floor in an unsightly pile of peach coloured limbs and mint green scrubs. It was clear that Extremis had failed to activate properly, doing far more harm than good to those who had ‘survived’ the injections. Tony shook his hand, curling his lip in disgust. The creature might
have been strong, but their bones were weak, bordering on downright pudding-like.

Steve and Tony moved in unison, attacking every creature that came their way. They blocked, kicked, punched and sliced as best they could, mowing down every foe that wandered into their path. It still felt like they were moving in slow motion. Creatures hit tables, knocking them over; they struck the walls and ceiling again and again, collapsing drywall and splintering wood, but they wouldn’t stay *down*. They clawed their way to freedom from the wreckage of the room, limbs dangling at their sides, jaws open, teeth bared, blindly attacking again and again. Any creature that fell from an inadequate blow to the head staggered upright again seconds later; their bodies worked to repair the damage done to them almost as quickly as the damage could be done in the first place. Thankfully the repairs were sluggish to start if the blow was hard enough; it was all too familiar to Tony. Their bodies weren’t on fire, but their eyes had the same vicious glint to them.

“The heads – hit the heads,” Tony shouted. He smashed the creature attacking him in the head with his elbow, shattering its skull like it was nothing more than a rotten peach. Steve followed Tony’s lead, slashing and chopping at anything that came into range with the edge of his shield. Soon the creature were down for good, sprawled across the floor in a pile amidst blood and blackish ooze; Tony didn’t even want to *see* the cleanup report SHIELD was going to be making for this mess.

They only found one survivor amidst the carnage. She must have been manning the cash register, because she was still wearing her apron from work; it was splattered with blood and gore. She didn’t even seem to notice the mess; she sobbed in terror beside an overturned serving cart stacked high with dirty dishes, clutching a handful of bloody change. Steve swept food off of the young woman’s shoulders and escorted her towards the elevator as Tony stood guard, watching for more enemies.

“Do you remember how many creatures there were?” Steve asked.

The woman shook her head, trembling as she stepped into the elevator. “They came up from the lower floors – everyone was here celebrating the success of batch eighty seven. We had cake,” she cried, smearing blood across her cheeks when she wiped her eyes. “We were waiting for the CEO to come before we cut it. He’s still upstairs.”

“Take the elevator to the lobby and head outside. The Avengers and SHIELD will get you to safety – you’ll be alright. Trust me.”

“Thank you,” the woman said, stabbing the lobby button, her fingers slick with blood. “Thank you.”

Tony looked around the room, double checking to see if there was anything left that had escaped their attention; SHIELD was going to have to comb through the rest of the place on their own, but he didn’t want to take the chance of leaving behind something for them to deal with – not after Millie’s comments about their Extremis-attempt being infectious. The last thing they needed now was this thing getting out into the public – finding its way into a crowd. When he was satisfied that there was nothing else around, undead or alive, they got into the next elevator and headed up to the penthouse. Tiberius was going to have a lot of questions to answer – assuming he was still alive, of course.

The penthouse was pitch black when they stepped out into the living room; the windows were tinted to block out the sun. Tony gagged and took a step back, covering his mouth with his gauntleted hand. The stench of blood was even stronger here than it had been down below, and it was much richer, much stronger due to age.
Had this happened before or after the disaster downstairs?

Without the suit’s sensors, he couldn’t be sure. Even Extremis couldn’t do anything to help him.

Tony felt something in the air; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, feeling more like steel wool than hair. Whatever it was passed quickly. All at once he could hear the room’s electricity flowing again, the hum loud and vicious; it was like someone had broken a dam, flooding the room with sound. His suit still wouldn’t draw power or turn on, but he could sense the security systems for the building turning on one sleepy camera at a time. Millie had been right; the spell keeping the place locked down had failed. He wondered idly if she had made it outside alive.

“Welcome,” Tiberius called out from the darkness. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Hiding in the shadows, Ty?” Tony coughed, lowering his hand. He dove into Viastone’s network and turned the lights on with Extremis, blinking back splotches of green and blue as the fluorescents took their sweet time turning on.

He almost wished that he hadn’t bothered with the lights.

Tiberius was seated regally in a puffy white-leather chair, surrounded by the corpses of his interns and maids. Their bodies were spotted with bite marks; every last drop of blood had been drained from their bodies, aside from what had splashed onto the carpet, turning their savaged skin a mottled pale grey. There were twenty people up here, and from what Tony could see, none of them had willingly allowed Tiberius to feed on them. Their fingernails were ragged and torn. Their faces were contorted in terror.

Tony gnashed his teeth, wanting nothing more than to bury his fist in Tiberius Stone’s face; he ignored the voice in his head screaming for him to feed again, concentrating on the scene at hand. “What the hell did you do?”

Tiberius flashed them a gory smile, his fanged teeth stained pinkish-red; his grey suit was spotted with dark splotches, torn in places where his victims had tried to rip their way free from his grasp. He sighed in contentment, kicking a corpse away from his foot when it sagged towards the floor. “Come now, Tony. You didn’t think I was going to sit around while you had all the fun.”

“Fun?” Tony felt like he had been hit upside the head. He looked around again, thinking at first that he might be hallucinating. Ty couldn’t be this crazy, could he? He hadn’t – he hadn’t been like this in school! Hell, Ty hadn’t even squashed bugs back then. Had he really changed this much? Was this the man he had been in love with all those years ago? “You think this is fun? You’ve killed at least a hundred people in this place – in the name of fun? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I did what I had to, and you, my dear boy ate it up. How do you think the press found out about your unfortunate little change? Someone had to feed it to them in time for the evening news. I had my people arrange everything. It had to be perfect – your defeat had to be perfect.”
“My defeat? What the fuck does that mean?”

“Did you honestly think I was so in love with you all those years ago?”

Tony was surprised that the words could still hurt; as children he had thought that they were going to be friends, if not lovers, until the day they died. It had been a stupid, childish wish, one Ty had always laughed at; he had never been cruel about it though – it had been more like he had thought Tony was being too sentimental, too mushy for his own good. He should have never have trusted Ty and his stupid charming smile and warm hands, but if he hadn’t there wouldn’t have been anyone keeping him company at boarding school, nothing keeping him motivated aside from his irregular visits home to see Jarvis and his mother.

“We were in competition, Tony. You never did seem to notice though. That’s what made it so infuriating. Everything I did,” Tiberius sneered in disdain, “every accolade I earned, you usurped from me within a matter of days. There was nothing I could do – you were always there. Well, you’re the one in the back now, Tony. You’re the one not good enough this time.”

“You’ve got some serious problems, pal,” Steve growled, aiming his shield at Tiberius’ head. He loosed it and grunted when it struck Tiberius in the forehead rebounding and returning to his hand without causing any damage.

“Oh please,” Tiberius snorted, rubbing his forehead where the shield had struck him, fixing his hair with blood stained fingers. “Do continue standing up for your little boy-toy. It’s nice to see such a strapping man in action. It’s a pity you weren’t defrosted when I was around. We would have had so much fun together.” He cracked his wrists and careened forwards as he rose; his thighs splayed beneath him, twisting gracelessly as his legs tried to support his weight. He grimaced, hunching over, slapping at his knee as if the abuse would fix the problem. “The nanites aren’t working,” he muttered, glaring at Tony. “Why the hell aren’t they working?”

Tony chuckled darkly, swallowing down a mouthful of bile. “I hate to break it to you Ty, but I didn’t use any nanites when I implemented Extremis – those came after I was already booted up. Someone got their information wrong – and I’m betting you built your little virus wrong too. You never were any good at following instructions.”

“You’re a liar,” Tiberius snapped, dragging his leg forwards, pounding on it until the muscle softened enough to allow it to bend properly. His eyes narrowed for a split second when he noticed Tony’s armor; he laughed shrilly as a smirk spread across his face, pointing at Tony with a trembling finger. “Why are you even wearing that outdated piece of trash? You’re a goddamned vampire! You don’t need it anymore.”

Tony shrugged, glad that Tiberius was focusing on him instead of Steve; he flashed Tiberius a cocky grin, forcing himself to relax. If they were lucky the Avengers would be getting into position soon and with them around there was nothing Tiberius could do to escape. Tiberius might have been a vampire, but even a vampire couldn’t out-smash the Hulk. “I like what I like. What can I say? I always was into suits.”

“Oh that’s just silly,” Tiberius scoffed, rolling his eyes. “You and your precious suits. What a waste of time. What’s this one? Number five? It looks like a piece of garbage compared to the ones you oh-so-unwisely destroyed while fighting that idiot Killian. Really, Tony, you make rich people look low class.”

“Look who’s talking – Your suit’s tackier now than it was last night,” Tony snorted.

Tiberius lunged, headed straight for Tony. He stumbled, barely keeping himself from toppling over
like a windup toy running out of energy when his muscles locked up again. “Fix it,” he shrieked, yanking at his other leg when it refused to take another step. “Fix what you did!”


“You messed up the work – I can see it now,” Tiberius hissed, looking around the room, his eyes wild and wide. “I knew you were protective of your projects, but I didn’t think you would be stupid enough to break up the instructions. Even you have to know that what you’ve done will have consequences.”

“Not for me, Ty. I told you not to screw around with Extremis. I specifically warned you about doing anything with it – and yet here we are. This is like our sixth grade science project all over again. You never listen.”

“Oh yes – here it comes. Sixth grade again – do you have anything in your head aside from that?” Tiberius grumbled. He tugged at his leg and grinned when it began to bend on its own.

“Oh, oh,” Tony mocked, looking over at Steve, “we’re in trouble now. He can bend his legs.”

“You’re not that wonderful, Tony,” Tiberius spat, baring his teeth. “You think you’re so special, but I can do everything you can – and I do it better. You got turned by a pathetic, old man – and I? I was turned by the youthful young woman I brought over from my family’s estate. Lilia is going to be so happy when she sees what’s happened. She’s been waiting a long time for this.”

“Come on Ty, you’re not going senile on me, are you? The vampire you sent to rob my house is Luzia - not Lilia,” Tony said.

“Darling,” Tiberius chuckled, “Luzia is old news. Her mother Lilia on the other hand – is far more powerful – far more blessed with her genetics. Speaking of genetics… my, my – is that super soldier I’m smelling? Because that smells divine.” He sprang into action, moving far faster than should have been possible with his rigid muscles. Steve fended off the first blow but staggered under the weight of the second, dropping to his knee in order to keep his shield in hand. Tiberius slashed at Steve’s face, snarling when Steve rolled nimbly out of the way. “Stand still, you little bastard!” Tiberius snapped, striking at Steve again.

Tony threw himself onto Tiberius, putting all of his power into his first punch; it was a risky move, one Steve would have chided him for using, but he knew it was the only thing that would get Tiberius’ undivided attention. It worked – barely. Tiberius grunted when the blow connected with his chest but he didn’t so much as stagger in response. He slapped Tony away as if he was a bug, laughing hysterically to himself when Tony smashed into the plate glass windows behind him. Tony flew through it, the weight of the armor pulling him down as gravity fought to have its way. Safety glass hit the carpet in a shower of square lumps, bouncing off Tony’s back with a clatter, falling off the ledge and vanishing from sight. Tony caught himself on the windowsill at the last second. He pulled himself up one-handed, trying to ignore the panic attack threatening to overtake him as the metal he latched onto started twisting around and groaning in protest.

“You’re pathetic, Tony. Why don’t you just give up and fix what you did like a good little boy, and maybe I’ll leave enough of your boyfriend to eat when I’m done,” Tiberius said with a sneer.

“Screw you, Ty,” Tony panted, struggling upright.

“Suit yourself.” Tiberius swivelled in place, smiling sweetly at Steve. “I bet you’re going to be a real treat, aren’t you, Captain,” he purred. He threw himself through the air again, landing with a dull thud beside Steve. He kicked over the chair he had been using as his throne, slashing at Steve with
his clawed hands.

Tiberius missed; Steve nimbly ducked out of the way, shield in hand, smashing the edge into Tiberius’ arm. Vibranium was strong – it didn’t dent, but it also didn’t do much damage either. Tiberius laughed in Steve’s face, flexing his arm, amused by the way the shield had torn his shirt and jacket but not his flesh. He wrestled the shield away from Steve despite taking several solid blows to the head from Steve’s fists and then held the shield up above his head, grinning triumphantly; he tossed the shield across the room, lodging it in his television. “I’ve always wanted to try that.” He stopped his rampage to watch the sparks fly from the screen, laughing throatily when Steve backed away from him, trying to get out of his range. “I’m going to eat your little boyfriend up, Tony. I’m sure he’ll be good for healing, hm? You’ve been using him so extensively, I hope he isn’t diseased.”

Tony charged across the room at Tiberius, digging his heels into the carpet when Tiberius started shoving him backwards towards the window again; Tony had thought he was strong – but Tiberius was stronger even though he was maimed. There was nothing he could do to keep Tiberius from ripping the suit off of him piece by piece, his claws digging into the gold titanium alloy as easily as they would sink into butter. Tony heard the armor’s breastplate hit the ground behind him but didn’t dare take the time to assess the damage. He slammed his fist into the side of Tiberius’ head, trying to stun him enough to get away.

Tiberius sank his teeth into Tony’s armored shoulder; metal screamed and tore, splitting down the sides. It hadn’t been designed with vampires in mind, but it held long enough for Tony to kick Tiberius’ knees out from under him.

Tiberius went down in a blur of arms and legs, sprawling amongst the corpses of his former employees. He struck at them, disgusted that they were touching him, righting himself stiffly as Tony circled around him. “Very funny,” he said as he leapt at Tony. He changed direction in mid-air, throwing himself at Steve instead.

Tony rolled and pushed himself in the way, knocking Steve into a chair and out of harm’s way.

It hurt.

Tony coughed up a mouthful of blood, all too aware that Tiberius’ hand was now buried deep in his gut like a rusty knife. He was surprised by how little it hurt; he wondered if that was adrenaline at work, or merely his body refusing to die a second time. Whichever it was, he took advantage of it and pressed on.

With Tiberius’ hand trapped inside Tony’s chest, there was nothing he could do to block Tony’s next three blows. Tony struck again and again, until his arm was tired and his gut was burning fiercely.

Tiberius’ hand slipped free. He dropped to his knees and fell limp onto the floor, flopping backwards amongst the dead.

Tony panted, hearing nothing but a dull roar. He felt Steve’s hand on his bare shoulder and came back to himself with a jolt; he could feel his golden under-sheath struggling to pull itself over the hole in his chest. His gauntlets were covered with bits of blood and hair. They looked ghastly in the fluorescent light; he ripped them off and threw them onto the ground.

He glared down at Tiberius’ unconscious form.

What was he supposed to do now? Should he kill the man who had destroyed his life or let him live? Tiberius had been his friend once. Had that man died years ago? Or had Tiberius always been this way – twisted and warped beyond reason?
“Natasha says they’re on their way,” Steve said softly, tugging Tony towards the last upright chair. “I’ll get something to wrap you up – you’ll be alright.”

Tony laughed so hard he started crying. He put his head in his hands and sat there weeping as Steve wound a sheet around his torso, trying to stop him from bleeding out. It was absurd, really, Tony thought, his vision going blurry. A vampire – bleeding out.

Tony woke to Steve snoring loudly in his ear. He rolled over to get some peace and groaned in agony, clutching his ribs when pain tore through him. He wondered idly if hell looked like a hospital room and then slowly rolled himself onto his back again, staring up at the ceiling through watery eyes. He could hear machines working all around him, but the sound was muffled, like he was hearing it from a distance.

Why hadn’t he died?

Hadn’t he been bleeding out?

“Tony?” Bruce murmured, leaning over him. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Did we get him?” Tony gasped as pain tore through his gut again. He needed to know the truth. If Ty was still out there –

“Yes, we got him. Calm down. Tiberius Stone has been taken in by SHIELD and put in their best lockdown facility. He’s not getting out of there any time soon; I’m pretty sure they rented out my old room,” Bruce said, sitting down in an orange plastic chair beside Tony’s bed.

“Oh yeah?”

“He was pretty out of it when they brought him in. He was making a bunch of crazy claims about how he was working for SHIELD and the Council. I think Fury’s planning on personally interrogating him every day for the rest of his life,” Bruce said. He smiled fondly at Steve, crossing his legs so that he could balance his Styrofoam cup of tea on his knee. “You scared the shit out of us, you know. I think this is the first time I’ve seen Steve sleeping since he brought you in.”

“How am I still alive?” Tony croaked.

“Extremis and the super soldier serum in Steve’s blood pushed you through the worst of it even before the vampire regeneration could kick in. According to Doctor Strange, it wouldn’t be that big of a problem as long as you got enough blood to drink as you healed. Apparently, vampires are a lot harder to kill than that – especially Extremis-vampires.”

Doctor Strange had been here?

Tony scrambled to sit up, belatedly remembering the hole in his chest. He let out a shaky breath, praying that Steve would stay asleep, and slid back down onto the bed, trying to make himself comfortable despite the throbbing pain radiating from his gut. “Can he do anything?” The words sounded funny in his ears, and for a split second he wished he could have taken them back. Maybe it would be better to never know.

Bruce hung his head.
That was all Tony needed to see to know the truth.

“No?” Tony whispered, tears streaming uncontrolled down his cheeks. “No? He can’t do anything?”

“He says he could have changed you back if you hadn’t used Extremis.”

Tony stared up at the ceiling, not wanting to look at Bruce’s face, ashamed of the sadness and pity he knew he would find there. “I brought it on myself then,” he murmured, closing his eyes. “Shit. I always jump the gun.”

“When you used Extremis, your genome was re-written. Strange says that the change overwrote your original human code because it was rebuilding you with the vampire template in mind,” Bruce said softly, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. “I’m sorry. If it’s any consolation, he says you probably would have gone insane if you hadn’t used Extremis. The guy who turned you would have made you kill everyone you cared about. He’s apparently done that before.”

“It saved over?” Tony choked out, stuck on the coding error, ignoring everything else. He tried to not outright sob, but couldn’t quite manage it. “Oh god – I overwrote myself.”

“Tony, it’s alright.” Bruce took Tony’s hand in his, holding on tightly. “There’s nothing you can do now, but it doesn’t mean your life can’t go on. Believe me. It’ll get better.”

“I know,” Tony said miserably, giving Bruce’s hand a squeeze. Bruce was right after all. His life wasn’t over; his human life was, but his vampire one was just beginning. “Steve and I sort of talked about this already – what we would do if we found out I couldn’t be changed back. I… I guess I was just hoping it wouldn’t come to this.”

“That’s… good,” Bruce said, patting Tony’s hand. “Steve’s been nervous ever since Strange showed up to give you the bad news.” His smile turned sorrowful. “I kind of hulked out on him – Strange, not Steve. I didn’t destroy anything, but I don’t think Strange appreciated having the Hulk scream in his face.”

“Well, at least someone got to yell at him. How long was I out?”

“You’ve been asleep a little over fourteen hours,” Bruce said, glancing at Steve, who was still peacefully sleeping on Tony’s other side. “Steve carried you all the way to the tower, you know. He refused to take a car because he was afraid of what you would do if you were in an enclosed space while unconscious. Natasha and Clint made sure everyone got out of the way – don’t worry. Nothing happened that can’t be repaired with a little old fashioned elbow grease.”

“What did I do?”

“You kicked a mail box over and thrashed against Steve’s shoulder for most of the trip. On the bright side, you didn’t let go of him and you never even made a move to run for the crowd. He got you up here into medical and stood guard while I stitched you up. He refused to let anyone else in while you were out of it because you looked like you were going to try and attack someone in your state. Thankfully you seem to be very good at measuring how much blood to drink from him even when you were semi-conscious.”

“That’s good,” Tony sighed. “At least I didn’t hurt anybody.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that exactly. I mean, you did bite my hand,” Bruce chuckled, lifting up his tea so Tony could see the bandage wrapped round his palm, “but you let go almost immediately after you sunk your teeth in. Honestly,” he smiled, sipping his tea, “I think you were terrified the Hulk was going to step on you. You were as meek as a kitten after that – you didn’t even try to bite Steve
unless he shoved his neck in your face on purpose.”

“I’m sorry about your hand, Brucie-bear,” Tony grumbled, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing that the dull throb in his chest would just go away and leave him be.

“Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t hurt all that much – and it gets me out of filling in the paperwork for this, so we’ll call it even.” Bruce finished his tea and tossed the cup into the garbage can beside the door. “The press found out about Tiberius’ work by the way. I wish I could say they took it well and are singing your praises, but it’s… a little more complicated than that.”

“Complicated? I’m used to the press Bruce,” Tony said, settling a hand on Steve’s head. He tangled his fingers in Steve’s greasy hair, contented by the way Steve started snoring louder, still sleeping nightmare free in spite of all they had been through in the last few days. “What did they do this time?”

“They stormed your mansion.”

“What?” Tony turned sharply, ignoring the pain in his neck as he did so. “Define stormed?”

“Stormed – as in they forced their way past the security guards you hired and broke into your house. They ran around pillaging, destroying and eventually setting fire to everything they didn’t like the look of. The mansion’s gone,” Bruce said with a grimace. The skin around his eyes started to turn green; he frowned, seeming to catch himself. He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out, sighing until the green went away, closing his eyes. “SHIELD has been confiscating everything they find, but some of it’s probably gotten into Justin Hammer’s hands by now. He isn’t outright bragging about it yet, but Pepper’s pretty sure he’s planning something. She’s working on getting the stolen tech seized and his labs searched.”

“Well, thankfully there wasn’t anything in the mansion that wasn’t already backed up forty or fifty times over,” Tony sighed. “I’m suddenly glad I wasn’t really working on the armor in that workshop. There’s nothing Hammer can use at any rate, aside from maybe the mop. He’s going to be so disappointed.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think he walked off with a bunch of your clothes and a box of Captain America memorabilia you were stashing in one of your locked rooms.”

“Aw man! That fucker got my cards, didn’t he?”

“Thankfully, Coulson’s had his eye on your collection for years, so he when he saw the entire thing go down he jumped into action. He managed to get most of them back – except for the ones Hammer made off with. He saved your phone too. You owe him a new one by the way. He clubbed a looter in the head with his and broke it.” Bruce pulled Tony’s phone out of his pocket, tossing it to him.

“I guess SHIELD’s standard issue phone isn’t that bad. I’ll make sure he gets a new one from Pepper – Stark Tech this time, no more of that SHIELD discount crap. He can have his pick from my collection too – whatever he wants. Seriously,” Tony chuckled, turning his phone over in his hands. “Does he need me to call in?”

“No,” Bruce said, standing up. “He says he’s got all the information he needs out of Jarvis and Steve. He told me to pass on his condolences for everything. I think he feels pretty bad about not being able to get you any information on Stone’s work.”

“When do you think they’ll let me out of here?” Tony asked, setting his phone down in his lap. He
wondered just how much of his house was left for him to pick through; he didn’t like the idea of being in the Tower with so many people around, but if the mansion was burned to the ground, there wasn’t anywhere he could go unless he found himself some new property, and fast. Why the hell had people looted and pillaged the mansion? The building was expendable, a tax write off; Steve’s things, however, weren’t. Tony mourned that loss even more than he did the loss of the mansion. The mansion could be rebuilt – Steve’s art, his personal property and reclaimed memories, could not. Steve had tried so damned hard to recover his things after the initial break in; he couldn’t imagine how much it had hurt Steve to still lose them after all that hard work. Tony vowed to do whatever he had to do to get Steve’s property back. He’d offer a King’s ransom for those sketchbooks if they were still around. If they were lucky, someone had wandered off with some of Steve’s things and they could be recovered – if not, well, they would have to build Steve new memories – better ones.

“Don’t worry about rushing out to get your stuff back,” Bruce said, pushing his chair back against the wall. “We’ll take care of it, alright? Pepper’s on the case – and we’ve got Jarvis monitoring every auction site we know about. Believe me. Steve would rather see you get better than get his stolen t-shirts back.”

Tony looked guiltily at his phone. “I know. I just… I feel like I need to do something.”

“Well, if you have to do something, think about what you’re going to do with the mansion and the Avengers. We’d all rather have you planning that sort of stuff than out on the street hunting thieves down one by one. Believe me, Clint and Natasha are having a good time doing it in your place. They’ll make sure the bastards are chased down and properly terrorized.”

“Do they know who started the fire?”

“They have three suspects in custody but Natasha thinks that Hammer is involved somehow,” Bruce said. “I’m going to go get something to eat. I’ll bring Steve in something when you two are done talking.”

“You’re so cruel,” Tony grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. He winced. “Also, ow.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bruce chuckled. He patted Tony on the shoulder and left, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Steve practically jumped up, stiff as a board, looking around frantically for the source of the noise. So much for his nap, Tony thought to himself with a sigh. He had been hoping for a few more minutes of lethargic procrastination; stupid Bruce and his stupid door.

“It’s fine, Steve. Bruce just went to go grab something to eat,” Tony said, reaching for his phone. Steve plucked it deftly from Tony’s hands, setting it on the bedside table, out of reach; Tony wiggled his fingers at his phone, willing it to fly back to him. Sadly, it didn’t.

“Did he talk with you about Doctor Strange?” Steve asked, settling himself back into the chair he had been using as a bed.

Tony scowled petulantly. “Yes.” Part of him wanted to break down crying again, but he wasn’t ready to do that to Steve; it didn’t seem fair to burden him with this anymore than he already had. He could cry when he was alone, where no one could see him.

Steve looked down at his hands, his shoulders slumping.

“We knew it was coming,” Tony said, wishing he could be more nonchalant about it. He could hear the bitterness in his voice, and hated it for being there. “It’s not as if we weren’t expecting it.”
“I should have been there,” Steve said, refusing to look up. “It’s my fault – if I had gotten there earlier…”

“Steve,” Tony slowly sat up, shocked by Steve’s words, “Honey, it’s not your fault. It was my fault. I’m the idiot who decided to use Extremis in the first place. You couldn’t have controlled that – not in a million years.”

“Tony,” Steve looked up sharply. His eyes were solemn, slightly red around the edges. “It’s ok. You don’t have to blame yourself.”

“And I don’t have to blame you either,” Tony growled, heaving the ridiculously heavy hospital blanket off of his legs. He grimaced when his stitches pulled but refused to let the pain slow him down as he scooted across the bed towards Steve.

Steve opened his mouth to say something smart, probably about how Tony was supposed to sit still and rest. Tony clamped a hand over Steve’s mouth, settling himself on the edge of the bed so that Steve’s knees were nestled carefully between his own. “Steve, I know you think you’re doing the right thing by telling me it’s your fault, but you’re not.” He let his hand drop, resting it on Steve’s knee. “We promised we’d do this together, right?”

“Of course,” Steve said immediately.

Tony smiled. Steve never had been one for hesitating. “Sure, I’m disappointed that I can’t be turned back – I’ll probably always be disappointed, but I’ve got you with me, and I know what I want to do with my life. I’m not letting this take me down – not now, and not ever.” He squeezed Steve’s knee, thankful that he was still able to touch Steve, even if it was just to do something simple, like this; it was easy to not be afraid of what the future might hold with Steve sitting there beside him. “You’re making it better by being here, I promise. I promised you that I would at least try to see the good in this, and I am – I’m trying.”

“I know you are,” Steve said. He sounded tired, as if he had come back from running around Central Park a few thousand times. He put his hands over Tony’s, holding on as if he expected Tony to pull away. “I just wish I could have done something.”

“Me too Steve,” Tony said with a grunt, lifting his hands up as he stood. Steve looked confused by the movement and then caught on, draping an arm around Tony’s middle as he shifted forwards. Tony slid across Steve’s jean-clad legs, moving lazily, mindful of his stitches. He could feel Steve’s warmth leeching into his thighs and was glad for it. If there was a heaven, he thought with a smile, this was it; heaven was a warm Steve. Tony kissed Steve, planting one then two then three kisses on Steve’s lips in rapid succession before he could lose his courage. “I love you,” he said, giving Steve another kiss for good measure. “I will always love you, even if you think you’ve screwed up somehow, I will always, always love you.”

“Yeah?” Steve’s smile was tentative, his return kisses feather soft.

“Well, I mean you’re not perfectly sweet,” Tony said, smirking. “You ruined me for everybody who’s not you.”

“Jerk,” Steve grumbled warmheartedly, kissing Tony again.

“Don’t I know it,” Tony chuckled, rubbing his hands up and down Steve’s back. It was nice to just sit like this, even if his stomach was trying to inch its way out of his body; he felt at peace, but then again, being around Steve had always made him feel calm and in control. He loved the way Steve melted against him, like he was something special. He deepened the next kiss, letting his tongue slide
between Steve’s parted lips. He pulled away when Steve moaned, feeling warm all over.

“Tony,”

“I know,” Tony said, shifting his hips closer, wishing he could bend well enough to do something more than just sit on Steve’s lap.

“Bruce is standing in the doorway,” Steve whispered into Tony’s ear, burying his face in Tony’s throat.

Tony laughed. He pressed a kiss to Steve’s forehead. “He’s seen me doing so, so much worse. Believe me, babe,”

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not. Although to be fair, that was in my younger days, when I was still partying and drunk seventy percent of the time.”

“Tony,”

“Steve,”

Bruce cleared his throat, leaning against the door frame; how they had missed the sound of the door opening was a mystery, but Tony wasn’t exactly bothered by Bruce’s arrival. He could smell breakfast sausage in the air, and if he had still been able to eat actual food he might have thrown himself off Steve’s lap to get at it.

“Should I come back later?” Bruce asked dryly, looking around the room at everything other than them.

“I would say yes, but I think Steve, here, needs to eat,” Tony chuckled, feeling Steve’s stomach rumbling against his own. He gave Steve’s hip a pinch and then started sliding backwards, trying to make a valiant attempt at standing up.

Steve, of course, didn’t seem to have gotten the memo that Tony didn’t want to be helped up; he lifted Tony as if he was picking up a teddy bear and carefully deposited him on the bed, even going so far as to rearrange and fluff Tony’s pillows as if they were somehow going to get fluffier than they already were. Tony pretended to pout and then gave up on being irritable, leaning back into the comfort of his newly fluffed pillows. Steve diligently continued rearranged Tony’s blankets, tucking them around Tony’s hips, smoothing them out when he spotted an errant wrinkle.

“You know,” Bruce said, tapping Steve on the shoulder so that he could hand him the tray of sausage and eggs, “I think Clint owes me fifty bucks.”

“Oh?” Steve said, gratefully accepting the food. He looked around for his chair and settled back onto it, borrowing the overbed table beside Tony so that he could eat without getting everything all over the floor.

“Oh yeah.” Bruce nodded, “In fact, I think Natasha and Thor owe me fifty bucks too.”

“They bet we weren’t going to get together?” Tony asked, genuinely amused by the look on Bruce’s face. If he had to guess what the expression was, he would have to say it was smug satisfaction, something he rarely saw on Bruce.

“Oh no,” Bruce said. “No, the bets were about whether or not you were going to show up one day
with one of you wearing the other’s clothing.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, his fork held halfway to his mouth. “We’re not wearing each other’s clothing.”

“Oh, you’re not,” Bruce said, adjusting his glasses. “But Tony sure is.”

Steve turned to Tony, looking him over. “I don’t get your meaning. He’s not wearing anything of mine.”

“He’s wearing your underwear,” Bruce said, ducking out the door.

Tony threw a pillow at him; it hit the doorframe. “Traitor!”

Bruce peeked back into the room, “I’m not the one stealing my boyfriend’s underwear.”

“Hey!” Tony grumbled, shaking his fist in Bruce’s direction. “I did not steal them. I claimed them. That’s totally different.”

“Liar,” Bruce sang, disappearing down the hall.

Steve gave Tony a look that said he was both unimpressed and amused by what had just happened; he stuffed his mouth with eggs instead of saying anything.

Tony smiled sheepishly. “I’m not sorry.”

Steve smiled back. “I didn’t say you had to be. Although to be fair,” Steve said, lifting up another forkful of eggs, “I was kind of hoping that was where those had wandered off too.”

Tony sighed, settling back onto his pile of pillows. He closed his eyes. The room smelled like sausage, eggs and Steve; if he could have bottled that scent he would have turned it into a cologne that he could wear whenever he was feeling down. He let himself drift off to sleep to the sound of Steve chewing, knowing that no matter what, Steve would still be there when he woke up.

Extremis and his Vampire regeneration made healing easy; usually Tony was laid up in bed for days before his doctors even considered letting him take the bandages off, but this time the bandages were off in two days, and that was only because Bruce was being careful about things. Tony was out of the Tower’s medical bay a whole day after the bandages were gone, which wasn’t too bad, considering he had had Tiberius Stone’s hand through his chest a few days earlier.

Luzia must have been watching them, because not even three minutes after they stepped out the front door, destined for the burned out wreck of Stark Mansion, Tony received a text message telling him that she was ready to meet.

Steve wasn’t happy about having to see her again, but they both knew that the information she had would be what would get them through the next few years unscathed. They arranged to meet once night fell.

Luzia was there early, lurking amongst the charred remains of the petunias; fire had reached even the garden, and what hadn’t burned down had been tossed around by the fire department who had torn
through everything in order to stomp the blaze out for good. Luzia seemed at home where she was, resting on the marble bench that had once been beside his now blackened fountain. She had brought a heavy duffle bag and a wooden box as tall as she was with her; it was surprising she had gotten everything past the security guards standing outside the front gate.

She was clad in the same blue and white spotted dress she had been wearing when they had first met her, but she wasn’t wearing any makeup this time. She looked up, hearing them approach, her eyes glinting red in the starlight. “You’re late,” she drawled, turning her attention back to the blackened petunias beside her.

“We decided to stop for dinner,” Tony said, stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets. “You know how it is.” He eyed the wooden box beside her, curious. “What’s all this? My birthday’s not for another few months.”

Luzia smiled knowingly. “I brought you a gift,” she said, stretching out like a cat. She tapped the bag beside her with her foot, nodding to the box. “You’ll like it.” She stood and stooping to deftly pluck one of the flowers from amidst the charred vegetation and wood in the flowerbed. She stared at the flower, marveling at the way it crumbled when she ran her fingers over the petals. “Humans so love their fire. It’s a pity they don’t really understand that it burns as well as cleanses.”

Tony bent down and hoisted the duffle bag up, setting it on the bench. He unzipped it slowly, watching Luzia, baffled by her behavior. She continued to admire her flower, ignoring him, staring at the veins within what was left of the leaves.

Tony’s heart clenched; he hadn’t thought he would ever see anything in this bag again. He grinned wildly, setting Steve’s sketchbooks down on the bench. He plucked his favourite coffee cup from inside, surprised to see it still intact. “How did you …”

Luzia shrugged. “They smelled strongly of you and your Captain,” she said, throwing the flower away. “There’s more. They were stealing, and it didn’t seem fair for you to lose so much because of Walter.”

Tony dove back into the bag, no longer nervous. He lifted out Steve’s leather jacket and photo album. He reached in again and came up with his favourite cookbook, the one Jarvis had helped him write when he was a child. Tony felt like he was drowning; he swallowed down tears, running his fingers over the worn cover. He had thought it had burned up with the rest of his things. This cookbook had followed him from house to house ever since his parent’s and Jarvis’ had died, keeping him company wherever he went. He had it scanned into the computer, its text digitized, but the hard copy had always meant more to him; maybe it was because Jarvis’ handwriting was there, nestled within its pages.

“Your manual is in there as well,” Luzia said, eyeing Tony, suddenly curious. “I assumed I got everything you cherished. Was I wrong?”

“No,” Tony said, smiling down at the book, “you got pretty much all of it.” After a minute fumbling around, his eyes blinded by unshed tears, Tony came up with a thick book, bound in leather; every page was written in beautiful, neatly printed script. There were even drawings on some pages, painstakingly etched out, likely from memory. “You wrote it by hand?”

“I prefer the old ways,” Luzia said with a shrug, turning her back on him so that she could stare at the moon. “Your robot was quite the handful. I had to drag it most of the way, but thankfully its wheels were still functional.”

Tony dropped the book he was holding in shock. He whirled, staring at the wooden box with wide,
hopeful eyes. “You…” He swept forward, prying at the wooden lid with his fingers, trying to get it open.

Steve pushed Tony’s hands away, gently rubbing Tony’s reddened fingers. “It’s fine. Let me do it.” He pulled his shield’s case off of his back and took out his shield, using it to pry open the lid.

Tony went up on his tip toes to peer over the edge; even in the dim light he could tell what lay within. “Hey buddy…” Dummy was covered in soot, and a little scratched up, but he was whole, safe from the worst of the damage. Tony ran his fingers over Dummy’s hand, stroking his way down Dummy’s immobile arm. He swallowed hard when he noticed that Dummy’s tennis ball was tucked neatly into his hand; it was the ugly one that hadn’t like the bleach, too, one he had been meaning to chuck out. “You even got his ball…”

Luzia smiled and stepped around the bench. She put a gentle hand on Tony’s back. “It smelled like him, and who was I to keep them apart?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Tony sighed, leaning heavily against the box. Did he have to do this? Could he do this? She had brought him back Dummy – she had brought him back Steve’s things.

“You don’t have to say anything.” She stalked forwards graceful as a dancer, her feet not quite touching the ground, and kneeled in the flowers, resting her hands on her thighs. “I trust it’s everything you were hoping for? If so, I would like to get this over with.”

Steve rested a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I can do it,” he said. “You don’t need to be the one.”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. He put everything back into the duffle bag, wishing it would buy him time, knowing that it wouldn’t. He knew she wasn’t going to change her mind; the look on her face had been enough to let him know that bitter truth. “No. It should be me.”

“Are you sure?” Steve pulled Tony’s gauntlet from his backpack, reluctantly handing it over. They had decided this would be the fairest way – the gentlest of all the deaths they could give her. Tony had tuned this gauntlet up special, just for her. When they were done, he was going to melt it down – end it like it had ended her.

“It’s only fair,” Tony said, pulling the gauntlet on, watching it unfold and wrap around him. The metal warmed under his touch, fitting perfectly around his hand and arm. Blue light flowed from the arc reactor as he tucked it into his pocket; in the olden days it had been simpler. All he had had to do was hook his gauntlets up to his arc reactor, but those days were long gone. Now he had to carry around an arc reactor with him all the time if he wanted to use one of the gauntlets, and he didn’t entirely feel comfortable with it in his hand; part of him still panicked when he saw it, thinking that he had accidentally torn it from his chest somehow.

He handed Steve the duffle bag, moving slowly towards Luzia, making himself to take each step even though each one made his heart sore. “How do you want to do this?” he asked, digging his gauntleted fingers into the fabric of his jacket, suddenly unsure. “We don’t have to do this. If you changed your mind…”

“I have not,” Luzia murmured. She clasped her hands in front of her as if in prayer, but held her head high, staring up at the moon. “You know,” she said, as he powered the gauntlet up, “sometimes I used to dream about a place like this. My mother thought I was nothing more than a foolish child, but I know that what I saw was my end – my gateway to peace. I’m grateful – and I’m sorry. I wish I could have kept Walter from turning you, but there is nothing I can do now to repent for that.”

“You saved Steve’s sketchbooks,” Tony said, aiming his gauntlet at the back of her head. “That’s
“Enough.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to forgive you for burying your asshole of a father under my petunias, but you did right by me in the end. I wish there was another way – I wish I could do more to help you.”

“Thank you, but you’ve done all you need to do for me. In truth, you’ve probably done more than my father ever did,” Luzia sighed, closing her eyes. “This curse will haunt you too, youngling. You will need to find someone to kill you in the end, just like me. If you are lucky,” she said with a smile, “you will find someone as kind as you who will fulfil your wish. Good luck Mr. Stark. Keep your Captain safe – and watch out for my mother. She may come looking for you one day. She does not forgive easily.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks… and I hope it’s better, wherever you’re going.” Tony fired; energy tore through the darkness, lighting up Luzia’s face as the blast connected. Her head was enveloped in blue and then it was gone. Her body turned to ash, tumbling to the ground, leaving behind her clothing and nothing else. Tony looked down at the pile, awed and terrified by the way she had become so small so quickly. “I guess it’s over,” he said, powering the gauntlet down. He could still see Luzia’s face, smiling softly up at the moon; he would remember that smile until his dying day.

Steve put his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You did the right thing.”

“Did I?”

“She wanted to die,” Steve said sombrely, bowing his head. “You gave her peace. I don’t think she had a lot of it when she was alive.”

“You’re probably right,” Tony sighed, wiping stray tears from his eyes. “What do we do now?”

“Now?” Steve wrapped his arm around Tony’s middle, pulling him close. He pressed a kiss to Tony’s forehead. “I guess we give her a proper resting place.”

Doctor Strange looked up from the twin wooden boxes sitting on his coffee table. Steve and Tony had brought them over as soon as they were done digging the last of Luzia out of the flowerbed; everything else, including Dummy, was sitting outside on a flatbed truck, waiting to be taken back to the Tower.

“I can’t say I’m surprised to see you,” Strange said, leaning back in his chair. “Although I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“Well,” Steve said, “we figured they would be safest here with you.”

“That’s very true,” Strange murmured, clasping his hands in front of his face. “You have brought me every last bit of ash, yes?”

“Of course we did,” Tony grunted, hovering beside Steve as if tethered there. Strange didn’t smell even remotely appetizing, but a part of him was tempted to take a leap at him just for the hell of it.

“If you have succeeded, she will remain sleeping for all eternity,” Strange smiled. “I’m sure she appreciated your kindness. Vampires rarely get the solace they yearn for, but sometimes they find
someone to keep them company and they remain sane.” He rose from his chair, sweeping towards Tony. He took Tony’s chin in his hands, peering into his eyes. Tony tried not to flinch away from the sudden contact; Strange’s hands were icy cold, very different from Steve’s.

“What?” Tony growled, wanting nothing more than to squirm away. Strange’s eyes felt like they were boring into him, seeing every secret he had ever kept.

“I am sorry I couldn’t help you,” Strange said finally, letting Tony pull free. “It saddens me that you will have to suffer for the rest of your days.”

“Yeah, well,” Tony muttered, looking away, “what can you do?”

“You can do nothing,” Strange said, flatly. He gestured to the boxes sitting on his coffee table with a magnanimous wave. “When your time comes, I will gladly accept your remains into my home. I trust that you won’t object.”

“I’ll object,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“My mistake. Well, perhaps we shall amend things then. If the dear Captain remains alive, and you come to pass, Mr. Stark, then I will allow him to safeguard your remains until he passes. Does that sound amiable to you?”

“Sounds good to me,” Tony said, turning to stare at the bookshelves behind him. The last thing he wanted to think about now was Steve carrying ashes around with him if he died; it was weird enough imagining himself living in a tiny box for the rest of his days. He wondered if there was consciousness there, or if it was a dreamless sleep. He hoped it was the latter; if he was conscious in that box, he would go insane.

Strange patted Tony on the back, unconcerned by the tension in Tony’s shoulders. “The road you travel will be long and dark, I’m afraid,” he said, turning to stare intently into Steve’s eyes. “But I know that you will have someone to safeguard you. I would advise heading away from the city for a while – at least until you can control your bloodlust. The hunters do not appreciate untrained vampires, after all. Perhaps it would be a good idea to find yourself a cabin somewhere in the countryside. I’ve heard they can be quite nice for couples.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, I’ve heard that too.”

“Good. Then you have my blessing and protection. I will inform the hunters that they will not need to seek you out for any reason.” Strange drew a symbol on Tony’s forehead with his thumb and then walked over to his bookshelf; Luzia and Walter’s wooden urns levitated, floating beside him as he made a place for them amidst his ancient books. He settled them in, laying a round river stone on top of each box, murmuring something Tony couldn’t understand. When he was finished, seemingly satisfied with the results, he turned around and faced them again. “I’ve placed an enchantment on each of them and on the two of you. It will keep you from being sought out by the other vampires of the Stone family line and by the hunters. The Stone family may well choose to seek vengeance – be aware of your surroundings and keep watch. They are far older and stronger than the creatures you have faced. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to return to my dimension gazing.”

“He’s probably watching some other dimension like its his own personal soap opera,” Tony muttered as they turned to leave.

“It’s not my personal soap opera,” Strange chuckled, waving goodbye, “but it’s certainly entertaining. Have fun, you two. Keep safe and enjoy your freedom.”
Tony was quiet on the way back to Stark Tower. He leaned his cheek against the window, looking out at traffic, aware that Happy was busy trying to start up a conversation with Steve, who was definitely not in the mood to talk.

Tony would have given anything to get out of the car; every noise inside was amplified, every word cutting into his hard-won calm. He had wanted Strange to say something more than just a cursory ‘I’m sorry’. He wasn’t sure what he had expected entirely. Maybe he was just too tired to think straight anymore. There was dirt under his fingernails he wanted to scrub away and bits of burned grass in his hair; he wanted to go home, but somehow the Tower didn’t feel like home anymore.

He wondered what Steve would think about buying a new place and moving in without telling anyone where they were going. Steve would enjoy small town life, he was sure, and he probably wouldn’t mind being able to hide away from the public eye for a while; after all, Tony wasn’t the only one the press was following around, especially after all the Captain America Is No More story had started to spread.

The city was too busy; Tony had never thought he would think about civilization that way. When he had been younger, he had loved being in the city because it had been the best way to be swallowed up by the crowd – to be one of them instead of the child-genius everyone kept harping on about. He had grown used to the stares after a while, but there had always been a part of him that liked losing himself in crowds. Now the thought of walking through a crowd made him cringe; the smell of so many humans around made him itchy all over, like he had been rolling around in stinging nettle. He didn’t trust himself to be close enough to touch anyone. Touching would lead to biting, and he couldn’t do that – not to them, and certainly not to Steve. He sighed, slumping against the door. This was going to be his life; he was going to spend it running and hiding.

“Tony?” Steve sounded worried. He leaned closer, whispering in Tony’s ear, “Hey, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tony said, keeping his eyes closed to drown out the sights blurring outside his window. It would be better to get the hell out of New York altogether. The mansion had been built with heavy, thick walls to keep the explosions and noise inside from getting out but that was only true for the lower levels. The car felt like it was paper thin by comparison. Hell, he could practically hear the man standing outside by the bus stop breathing even with the car running and the windows rolled up. He shuddered. Sure, he could rebuild everything and make it all better, but did he want to? Did he really want to be here, so close to temptation? “Just get me back to the tower, alright?”

“Alright, boss,” Happy said. “We’ll be home before you know it.”

Sure, Tony thought, breathing in sharply through his nose, we’ll be home. It wasn’t going to be a home – at least not until they were away from all these goddamned smells.

Tony started packing the minute he got into the penthouse; he grabbed things even if they smelled like Pepper’s perfume, wanting to keep the last of his favourites with him. With any luck they would smell like Steve soon enough.
He used Extremis to methodically write up a list of what he wanted to take with him and what should stay, working to keep his hands busy so that he wouldn’t crack. He could feel the exhaustion and tears building up again. He would have given anything to push them away, but they wouldn’t leave him alone.

He choked up, pitching forward onto his knees, pressing his face into the carpet beside what had once been his bed; tears started streaming their way down his face, unbidden. He sobbed so loud he was sure someone was going to hear it through the floor; he tried to muffle the sound, but it just kept getting louder. Wrapping his arms around his head, he floundered, trying to find something to cling to so that he could keep working – anything to keep working.

Steve’s hand was broad and perfect, pressing against his back like there was nowhere he would rather be. “Tony,” Steve murmured, kneeling beside Tony.

Tony continued to sob, curling into a ball. Oh great – just his luck – Steve had to be the one to find him like this. He wanted a drink – it just got worse and worse. He couldn’t even get drunk – he couldn’t even take a sip.

“Tony?” Steve sat down, leaning casually against the bed frame as if he sat there on the floor in Tony’s bedroom all the time. He gathered Tony up, lifting him into his lap and tucked Tony against his chest, resting his chin on the top of Tony’s head. “I know it’s hard,” Steve murmured, rubbing circles on Tony’s back, “but it’s going to be alright.”

“No it’s not,” Tony sobbed, burying his face in Steve’s shirt. “It’ll never be alright.”

“Someday it will,” Steve said, firmly. “It will. We’ll stick together and it’ll be alright. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but I promise you it will get better.”

Tony sniffled, wiping his nose on his arm. “I can’t stay here. It’s too much.”

“Then we’ll move,” Steve said, carding his fingers through Tony’s grimy hair. “We’ll go somewhere where we don’t have so many neighbors – where no one will know who we are.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, “we’ll find a cabin or something – somewhere far away, and we’ll be safe.”

“I don’t want to steal you away,” Tony said after a minute of quiet contemplation. “If you don’t want to go, I’ll find a way to reinforce the Tower. I’ll build a room here where no one can come in or out and I’ll… I’ll do whatever needs to be done.”

“I want to go away,” Steve whispered into Tony’s ear. “I want to be able to sleep in bed with you without worrying that someone’s going to sneak in and try to kill us both. They burned down our home Tony,”

“Our home,” Tony mumbled, lifting his head to look Steve in the eye, “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too,” Steve said with a soft smile. “So we’ll go. It doesn’t have to be forever – a year or two maybe, until we’re ready to come back. We can decide when we get there. The important thing is that we choose what happens next.” He stroked Tony’s cheek, tracing along the lines of Tony’s jaw.

“That sounds good,” Tony said, sniffling. He hoisted himself up, wincing, and straddled Steve’s lap, kissing him. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Steve said, kissing him back. “When do you want to leave?”
“In the morning maybe?” Tony kissed his way across Steve’s face towards his neck. He stopped when he reached the spot he normally bit into, caressing it with his thumb; Steve shivered against him, very obviously aroused by the touch.

“Morning sounds fine,” Steve said, swallowing thickly. “Did you have any place in mind?”

Tony hummed, tracing the bite marks on Steve’s neck. They were faint, but still there, two little red bumps marking Steve as his; it shouldn’t have warmed his heart to see them, but it did. “As a matter of fact, I do. It’s a little place I bought years ago – untraceable, by the way – it’s in Northern British Columbia.”

“You want to move to Canada?” Steve asked, sounding amused.

“Not just to Canada – to our own town,” Tony said, kissing Steve’s neck.

Steve laughed, fingers tangling in Tony’s shirt. “You bought yourself a town? Why does that not surprise me?”

Tony chuckled, giving Steve’s neck another careful kiss. “I bought it because it was an old mining town and I was debating on reopening the mine. The original company who owned the place built themselves a town there for their employees, but then ended up abandoning it when the ore prices turned to shit. It’s beautiful up there. It’s got lots of forest and grass and all the nature crap you could ever want. It’s got acres and acres of space too. All the buildings are fully furnished still, although I’m sure most of its hideously outdated by now and musty as hell – the point being though is that it’s got everything you could want.”

“I’m sure,” Steve nodded, settling a hand on Tony’s hip. “If it’s got you in it, then you don’t need to change a thing.”

“Really… so you don’t mind that the movie theatre is probably falling apart, and the swimming pool is going to be all grubby?” Tony wrapped his arms around Steve’s middle, his stomach clenching in nervousness. “I mean, I’m going to take care of a few things before we move in. I’ll have the caretaker go up and pick a house for us. They’ll renovate and swap out all the furniture and bedding and stuff. It’s not like I’m going to force you to move into a house that smells like mothballs or something.”

“It’ll be lovely,” Steve said, stroking the back of Tony’s neck. “I’m going to need to pack if we’re going in the morning.”

“Oh,” Tony murmured. “Right. Well, uh…” he moved to get off of Steve’s lap and found himself held there, anchored in place by Steve’s hands perched so delicately on his hips. He couldn’t help growling in pleasure at the feeling.

“Did you want to tell anyone about where we’re going? Or are we going to just, well, leave?”

Tony shrugged, resting his chin on Steve’s shoulder. “I guess we can tell Natasha and the others. Jarvis, you’ll tell Pepper and Happy, right? I mean, Pep knows all about the place already. She was there when I bought it, so she’ll be fine. SHIELD probably doesn’t know about it though.”

“Should we tell them?”

“I don’t know,” Tony grumbled. “Should we? Do we want Nick Fury butting in on our honeymoon?”

Steve kissed Tony’s cheek. “I don’t think he’ll butt in unless he’s got a good reason.”
“Oh, I dunno,” Tony sighed, fiddling with Steve’s t-shirt. “He’ll probably visit to make sure I’m not teaching you to be a depraved hobo.”

“Since when have you been a depraved hobo?”

“Since forever?” Tony chuckled. “But what about Bucky?” He wasn’t sure why he said it; the moment Bucky’s name left his mouth he felt cold all over. He knew why, and knew at once that he was being selfish.

Steve leaned back against the side of the bed, his eyes closed. “I don’t know.”

“You should be here for him,” Tony said, sitting lightly on Steve’s thighs. “I can fix the Tower – I’ll fix the Tower. We’ll say.”

“We’ll go,” Steve said, opening his eyes. He took Tony’s hands in his, kissing Tony’s knuckles one at a time. “We’ll arrange to have a way to get back to civilization when we need it, and we’ll figure something out when he’s ready. Right now, I want to give him space. Natasha will watch him – He likes her better anyway.”

“Steve,”

“I’m serious, Tony. I can always come back and visit – or if he gets his memory back, he can come visit me. We’ll work things out when he gets better,” Steve murmured. He took Tony by the chin and kissed him firmly. “You can still make a room in the Tower if you want – for when he’s ready – but we’re going.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Alright,” Tony murmured, kissing Steve’s on the tip of his nose, “If that’s what you want to do, then we’ll do it. We should start now I guess. I’ve got a list of stuff to have shipped out and a bunch of business to take care of if we’re going to disappear into the wild for a few years. You, my lovely Captain, have packing to do.” Tony sighed. He gave Steve another kiss, taking his time, drawing the breath from both their lungs until they were panting.

“I’ll go stock up on art supplies,” Steve said, clearing his throat. His face was flushed by the time Tony was done nibbling his way along his collar bone. He reluctantly pried Tony off his lap, setting him on the bed when Tony refused to release his grip on Steve’s hips. “Go,” Steve chuckled, ruffling Tony’s hair. “Take a shower, and go pack. Do what you need to do. I’ll come back in and feed you in a bit, ok?”

“Fine,” Tony grumbled, flopping backwards on the bed. “Go do your shopping.”

“Go do yours,” Steve said, giving Tony’s leg a squeeze. “We leave bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Dawn hadn’t quite broken when they left; they said their goodbyes quickly, leaving Jarvis in charge of the tower under Natasha’s control in case she needed to do anything important like avert a crisis or stop Justin Hammer from trying to rob them blind. Neither Clint nor Natasha had been surprised by Tony and Steve’s decision to leave the city. They were solemn about it, but happy for the couple,
knowing that privacy was what the pair needed. Natasha told Steve that she would check in with them as often as possible; she pinched Tony’s cheek and told him that if he didn’t answer their calls, she was going to personally fly up to his town and beat him to death with his own arm. Tony assured her that she didn’t have to worry – he knew how much Steve needed to keep an eye on Bucky, and would have plucked the sun from the sky in order to keep him happy. Natasha pinched his cheek a little softer after that. She even kissed him on the forehead.

Tony arranged for their new house to be upgraded, going so far as to fly workers in to have everything ready when they got there. He gave them a week to get the work done and made sure Jarvis supervised and instructed the workers, knowing that with Jarvis in command, things would be perfect when they arrived.

Tony fabricated a version of his last prototype armor, taking it with him in case he needed to get Steve out of the country or into the city in case of emergencies. He was going to build himself a new suit when he got settled again, but for now he would keep the old one on standby just in case; Dummy and the other bots were coming too, and there was a whole box of tennis balls waiting for him in the new house. He wasn’t worried; there would be plenty of supplies flown in to work with when he got there, and anything else he needed was only a phone call away. He decided to leave most of the lab equipment in case Bruce needed it for Avengers business; he had duplicates of everything he needed shipped to his new home. It would be different being away from the city, but hopefully different would be a good thing this time.

There wouldn’t be a way to track them once they were gone – at least not through conventional means. Tony had been squirreling away cash for a rainy day, hiding it in different accounts and names, stuffing it in folders and depositing it in safety deposit boxes in case he ever needed to get out of the country in a hurry. Pepper had called him obsessive; Tony had preferred to think of it as being pragmatic. Being rich meant someone always had an eye on you, and he had no intention of living in the limelight forever; he had set up accounts for her and Happy too, and but they didn’t about them yet. Hopefully they would never need them. The Avengers had their own special accounts as well, ones he told Coulson and Natasha all about in case the worst happened while they were out of reach.

All in all, Tony was ready to go; Steve was just as ready, although he had far less stuff to pack.

It surprised Tony how easy it was to pick up and leave.

Coulson showed up to see them off, bearing belated gifts; he handed Tony a file with information on the Stone family line, apologizing for having gotten it to them so late. Tony smiled and shook Coulson’s hand, telling him to go pick out whatever he wanted from his Captain America collection for saving the day – as usual.

Pepper called Tony as he got into the car; he told Steve to drive, and listened to her ranting about how he had ruined a perfectly good mansion by irritating the ‘idiots outside’. She sounded sad when she wished him the best; he told her to woman the fort while he was gone, and gave her his private number in case she needed to get a hold of him or Steve, instructing her to call whenever she needed, even if it was just to talk. He told her to give Rhodey the number when he came back from his latest tour of duty with instructions to bother him as much as was humanly possible. He told her that they would make plans for a get together in the future – when it was safe for everyone. After that, she gave him shit for sending her a hundred different pairs of Louboutins, and told him that she would miss him. She ordered him to keep out of trouble or she would drive up to his new house and personally stick those new shoes up his ass. He wondered idly if she had been taking lessons from Natasha, but didn’t comment.
Steve had looked at him strangely after he had hung up; it was probably because he was trying not to cry, but he choose to ignore that little detail, and ordered Steve to drive on, watching the road instead of focusing on what he was going to miss about the city.

They were already out of the city by the time the sun was bright on the horizon. Steve drove them to the airport where they boarded Tony’s private plane, hopscotching their way over the country under the watchful eyes of Jarvis and Nick Fury, who broke over the comms only once in order to tell them to keep their asses out of the fire.

It took them a full week to get to their new home; they took the last leg of the journey by helicopter, landing in a small field a few feet from the first broken patch of town. There was a car waiting for them down below with a photocopied map of the city sitting on the driver’s seat; the pilot handed them the keys and then flew off once they had their luggage. He didn’t even wait to make sure they got into the car alright.

Steve wasn’t entirely impressed with that. He packed their bags into the trunk, eyeing the sky as if expecting to see someone at any moment.

It was quiet here, almost too quiet. Tony had never been this far outside of a city before, at least while not on a mission. Even when he had been held hostage in Afghanistan, there had always been someone around, lurking out of sight. Here there was nothing but crickets, birds and other assorted wildlife wandering about in the bushes and trees. It made him uneasy, but at the same time he felt giddy that he couldn’t smell another human around for miles.

“So the rest of our stuff is already in the house?” Steve asked, climbing into the driver’s seat. He waited for Tony to finish giving the area a hearty sniff before reaching over and throwing open the passenger’s door, beckoning for Tony to get in the car.

“Everything is here, yeah – got here almost two days ago, actually,” Tony said, arranging himself in the passenger seat. He didn’t bother doing up his seatbelt. It was so empty here, Steve would have to go blind in order to actually hit something. The roads weren’t the best, but they were empty aside from a few weeds. They were wide enough to support two cars driving side by side, so it wasn’t like they would run out of space. The roads hadn’t been used all that frequently after the city had been built; the mining facility had been shut down only four years after opening, so the wear and tear was minimal at best. If he needed to he could call a company in and have the entire place repaved, but he didn’t think it would come to that – at least not for another few years, and by then who knew what would happen?

Steve frowned at Tony’s decision to go seatbelt-less, but didn’t say anything. He started the car, glancing down at the dashboard where he had spread out their city map, running his finger along the main route to a house that was circled in red ink. It was located dead centre in the city, the perfect point where it would blend in with the rest of the homes and vanish from sight. “I still can’t believe you own an entire city,” Steve murmured, starting the car.

“Technically,” Tony said, kicking his feet up on the dashboard, “we own a city.”

“We?” Steve said, smiling crookedly.

“Yep,” Tony said, pulling his shades off, tucking them in his pocket. He wouldn’t need them out here, at least not for cosmetic purposes; there was no one here to scare. He grimaced. It was a hell of
a lot brighter outside than he had expected, considering all the trees around, but it was a nice kind of bright – the warm kind, where sitting out in it wasn’t too much of a burden.

They drove in silence; there was no reception up here, at least not in a car this old, and even if there had been a radio to listen to it wouldn’t have been all that interesting considering they were in the middle of nowhere and nothing had probably happened here in the last fifty years – well, aside from the whole town-springing-up-and-then-going-bankrupt thing. That had probably been pretty interesting when it had happened.

Tony took stock of the buildings as they passed by, listing out buildings that would need their siding and flashing replacing in the coming years. He wasn’t the best with carpentry, but he would have plenty of time to learn.

It was a little creepy staring into windows as the passed; the curtains were still drawn, as if someone had gotten tired of the noonday sun and simply pulled them to get some relief from the heat. It almost looked like the residents had simply gone off to work one day, and never come back. There were still some toys sitting in the driveways they passed, dropped and abandoned after their owners had packed up and left.

They pulled up in front of their new house. Like all the others it was large, square and sided with faded brown boards on the outside; it had been three houses at one point in its life, but now it was just one massive house. The workers Tony had hired to check the structural integrity had knocked down walls inside, creating a custom workshop in the lower levels. They had lifted the top half of the building up off the foundation and rebuilt it piece by piece until it only looked old; inside was probably just as spacious and modern as Stark Mansion had been once Tony had renovated it, although it wasn’t nearly that big.

Tony rolled up his window and pulled out his keys, clicking them into the garage despite the fact that there was no one here to steal from them; he wasn’t going to ignore security just because he was in the middle of nowhere. He knew better than to leave any openings for an attack. They had enough space here in the garage for three different cars, but right now all it was housing was Steve’s motorcycle; Tony had shipped it in secretly, knowing just how much Steve loved it. The look on Steve’s face made it worth all the trouble of getting it through customs; Steve was so happy to see his bike he nearly took the door off the car in his rush to get at it.

While Steve fawned over his motorcycle, Tony wandered to the trunk and popped it open, lifting out their bags. They hadn’t brought much with them except for a few sets of clothing for the trip. Their things were inside sitting in boxes, ready to be unpacked, having been flown in beforehand. There was nothing to wait for, nothing left behind; everything they needed, they had at their fingertips. Sure, he still needed to finalize Jarvis’ hookup, but aside from that the place was pretty much as good as it was going to get; they were finally home.

“You done making muumuu eyes at your bike?” Tony drawled, tucking the first of his bags under his arm.

Steve gave his bike a reverent pat. “When did you find the time to get her shipped up here?”

“Oh,” Tony said, shrugging, “you know. I had lots of time on the plane. It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“Tony,” Steve said, taking Tony’s bag from his hands. He smiled widely. “This means a lot to me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, pulling Tony closer by the collar of his shirt. He kissed Tony, soft and sweet,
and then pulled away, grabbing the rest of their bags with an excited grin. “Let’s get settled in.”

“Sure,” Tony chuckled, feeling a little lightheaded. “Someone’s excited.” He lugged his bags towards the door and led Steve into their new living room, kicking his shoes off into the plastic tray lying beside the door; Steve did the same, following along slowly, taking in the scenery with wide eyes.

The room looked fantastic, considering how much time the team had been given to work their magic. The carpet in the living room was soft and fluffy, cream coloured and gorgeous; there were leather couches settled around the room in a u shape, everything custom made to withstand an elephant sitting on it; they were the soft kind that were easy to sink into, perfect for late night movies and snuggling.

The kitchen and dining room were floored with dark hardwood laminate, easy to clean and quick to repair in case of scratches. The interior designers had set everything out ahead of time, just like Tony had expected; everything was unpacked, clean and ready for use. The kitchen was furnished with top of the line appliances made of stainless steel. Sitting on the counters were blenders and waffle irons and everything else Steve might want or need to cook with. Looking at it now, Tony was fairly certain he had gone a wee bit overboard. He knew for a fact that Steve didn’t need a quesadilla maker, but there one was, sitting beside the fridge. At least they could still see the counters; he would have been more worried if they had been completely buried. He reminded himself to tell Pepper to give the decorators and renovators a surprise bonus. The kitchen looked better than he had expected considering it had been first constructed in the late seventies. They had clearly taken his ‘clean lines and no funny business’ notes to heart.

All of the rooms had their own crisp crown moldings, and while there wasn’t anything fancy on the walls, there was lots of space. He had a feeling the walls wouldn’t remain plain for long; Steve would make sure of that.

Tony set his bag down on the chestnut coloured coffee table, giving the matching dining set an appreciative nod before going to peek into the fridge; as expected it was packed with food. He had spared no expense on this, and intended to keep the place stuffed with food. There were three freezers downstairs filled with meat and other perishables, ready and waiting to be cooked up. He whistled, picking up a cold bottle of beer from the side rack. “I think we’re set.”

“I see that,” Steve laughed, leaning his chest against Tony’s back, peering over his shoulder to get a better look at the contents of the fridge. “Looks like they brought a whole supermarket.”

“We’ll be getting shipments once every two weeks,” Tony said, offering Steve the beer. “We pick them up at the helicopter pad at nine a.m. every Monday.” He wiggled the bottle back and forth, trying to make it look enticing. He hadn’t smelled beer in a long time; it would be great to smell it on Steve’s breath. If he was lucky, he might even get to taste it on those lovely lips.

Steve took the beer and put it back in the fridge. “I think I’ll leave that for after dinner,” he said, wrapping his arms around Tony’s middle, pulling him backwards into a hug. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Yeah,” Tony hummed, leaning back into Steve’s embrace. “But it’ll be worth it.”

“Give me the tour,” Steve murmured into Tony’s ear. “You know your way around already, I bet.”

“You bet your sweet ass I do,” Tony grinned. He tried to squash a rather undignified squeal when Steve pinched his ass in retaliation. “Hey! You’re supposed to be sweet and cuddly!”
“Am I?” Steve purred, giving Tony’s ass another pinch, one that had Tony’s knees going weak and his cock getting as hard as iron. “I don’t remember that being in my file.”

“You’re cruel,” Tony grumbled, taking Steve by the hand. There was one room he wanted to show Steve, one he had been thinking a lot about. “In that case, the tour it is,” he announced, leading Steve through the living room, towards the grand staircase that lead up to the second floor. He took the stairs two at a time, tugging Steve along after him, trying not to grin like a crazy person.

There were six bedrooms on the upper floor, and another three rooms down in the lower level of the house, just enough space for everyone on the team when they came to visit. He had a few other rooms built specially on the second floor, designed with Steve in mind. One was a library, if Steve wanted it. There were plenty of shelves installed already, just waiting for new books to be brought in. Tony had taken the liberty of shipping in two replica couches, ones that looked exactly like the ones he had kept in the mansion’s library, on the off chance Steve wanted someplace quiet to read. Of course, it wasn’t entirely for Steve; Tony had a few books of his own stashed there, waiting to be cracked open again. His first edition Asimov collection had gone up in flames, but he had managed to get his hands on a few less expensive copies – ones he could actually open and read. He was looking forward to getting at them again.

The next room was an art studio – one Tony hoped Steve would like; he had raided three art supply stores in order to get everything just right, and it was the most spacious of all the rooms in the house, aside for maybe the workout room, which was filled with custom-made Avengers-strength work out equipment. Tony knew just how much Steve loved working out and art; sure, the wilderness had lots of place to hike and run in, but nothing beat hitting the weights or treadmill in the evening before bed. There was an actual gym in the city, but it hadn’t been updated since its original installation. The structural engineers had checked the entire town out at Tony’s expense and request, so if Steve wanted to wander and find himself somewhere to play in private, he would have plenty of different spaces to enjoy. This way, Steve had the best of city and country life.

“So this,” Tony said, leading Steve towards the master bedroom, “is our bedroom. If you want, I mean. You can pick any of them – you don’t need to be with me all the time.”

Steve looked around, his mouth dropping open. The bed was gigantic, big enough for four people to sleep comfortably on it; there were two dressers, two wardrobes and two massive closets, all done up in oak. The walls were a deep navy blue. Steve gaped at the granite fireplace and its leather couches, seemingly amazed by their presence.

“You ok?” Tony asked, pulling at his fingers. He hadn’t felt his nervous in years – not since his first presentation at MIT. Steve hadn’t said a word; he hadn’t even made a sound. Was this good or bad? He really couldn’t tell, and the wait was making him crazy.

Steve turned around sluggishly, looking from the bed to Tony, confusion in his eyes. “Tony? You said you weren’t ready for something like this,” he murmured. “We can wait if you want. I can sleep in one of the other rooms while you decide what you want to do. That would be fine with me.”

“I don’t want you to sleep somewhere else,” Tony blurted. He moved into Steve’s space and wrapped his arms around him. “I want you here.”

“You’re sure?” Steve asked, resting his hands gently on Tony’s hip.

“Of course I’m sure. Look,” Tony grumbled, “I’m ready. I know I wasn’t sure about it earlier, but I know what I want now.” He moved close but not too close, worried that Steve might be uncomfortable if he did anything more. He wasn’t sure what he would do if Steve had changed his mind; maybe he would live outside in the woods, or something. He tried not to think about what
being alone had been like.

“Are you sure?” Steve smiled softly. He didn’t look skeptical, or concerned, to Tony’s immense relief.

“Believe me,” Tony said, cupping Steve’s face in his hands, “I love you, and I intend to spend the rest of your life and mine here with you. That’s not a burden – it’s not a difficulty or suffering or settling or anything else – it’s the truth. I love you, Steve. Now shut up and kiss me before I start regurgitating sappy lines from romance novels until you cave in and kiss me anyway.”

“Alright,” Steve chuckled, pulling Tony closer. “I think I can do that.”

Tony laughed into the kiss at first but soon turned it dirty, biting Steve’s lower lip until Steve was busy moaning in that shy little way he did when he was trying not to show just how turned on he was.

“Take me to our bed?” Tony asked, batting his eyelashes.

“Are you sure? I mean, yes. Yes, please.” Steve kissed Tony again, no longer giving chaste kisses. He sucked on Tony’s tongue as he ran his hands down Tony’s jacket, tracing his fingers along the ridges of Tony’s jeans. “Can I?”

“You can do whatever you want, honey,” Tony murmured, rubbing his thumb over Steve’s shiny lower lip. “Do whatever you want. I’m yours, remember?”

Steve flushed, grinning from ear to ear. He fumbled with Tony’s jacket’s zipper, trying to get it open. “I uh…” He fought with it until he looked like he was going to cry in frustration. “I’m sorry. I don’t have a lot of – I’m not so good at this.”

Tony took the zipper out of his hands and pulled it down, slipping out the jacket. He tossed it onto the floor in a pile and reached out, taking Steve’s hand in his. “Come here,” he commanded, walking backwards until the backs of his legs hit the edge of the bed. He sat down, pulling Steve closer until he could comfortably run his hands up Steve’s broad chest, finger skimming over Steve’s nipples, finding them easily even through Steve’s thick shirt. “Before we do this, is there anything you don’t understand?”

“I understand the mechanics,” Steve said, looking mildly flustered, “if that’s what you mean. I was in the army, not charm school.”

“But you’ve never had sex before?” Tony asked with a smile, trying to make the question less awkward. He tugged at the front of Steve’s jeans, rubbing his thumb over the button, feeling the warmth radiating from the smooth metal.

“No, I’ve never had sex before,” Steve admitted, capturing Tony’s wrist in his hand. “But you don’t need to baby me.”

“Who said I want to baby you?” Tony teased, popping the button open. He drew Steve’s zipper down, unsurprised when he found himself eye to eye with Steve’s straining underwear; they were plain old white briefs, nothing fancy, but to Tony they seemed more like the Holy Grail of underwear. He had always known what Steve wore; they had changed together after Avengers meetings frequently enough for it to be less than mysterious. Hell, he had thought about it while he was in the shower, jerking off, but he had never through he would get to see them like this. It made him feel hot all over. Maybe it was because he had permission to touch this time – maybe that was what was different.
Steve’s cock had definitely taken an interest in what was going on, if the wet spot there had anything to say about it. Tony stroked Steve through his briefs, leaning forward to breathe in the scent of Steve’s arousal; as a human it had never been this intense before. He could smell Steve’s every feeling, could have tasted it if he had decided to lean in to tongue his way up Steve’s lower belly. It was exhilarating, like he was going skydiving without a parachute.

Steve groaned, his fingers tangling in Tony’s hair as if he needed something to hold on to. “Tony,”

In the olden days Tony might have yanked Steve’s briefs down to the floor and started in on him right then and there, but he wanted to savor this; he wanted Steve to remember this as something good – not as just a desperate, rushed fuck. He slipped his fingers up the leg holes of Steve’s briefs, playing with the soft skin of Steve’s groin, dragging his thumb over the root of Steve’s cock. Steve shuddered, gasping and pitched forward, nearly knocking Tony over, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“You ok?” Tony asked, slipping his hands free.

Steve was breathing hard, practically panting. He panted, his face going from faint pink to glaring burgundy as he tried to stand up straight. “Oh god. I’m… I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, no worries,” Tony said, squeezing Steve’s hips when Steve made to take a step backwards. He traced the growing wet spot on Steve’s underwear with his thumb, mesmerized by what had just happened. It wasn’t every day he made Captain America come in his pants like a teenager after all; he had figured it would be him making the mess, not Steve. He helped Steve out of his briefs, careful not to rush the movements, stroking his palms reverently over every last sticky inch of Steve’s cock and thighs. “It’s fine Steve. Don’t worry about it. It happens to everyone.”

“It’s not fine,” Steve muttered, hanging his head, biting his lower lip.

Tony gave the briefs a tug when he got them down to Steve’s ankles. “Lift,” he murmured, stroking Steve’s calf.

Steve obliged, kicking his briefs across the room as if he couldn’t wait to get away from them. “This is so embarrassing.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. I know how hot I am,” Tony said with a smirk, winking at Steve. “I can’t say I blame you.”

Steve scowled, but his smile came back when Tony stood up, taking the hem of Steve’s shirt in his hands. “I’m glad it’s you.”

Tony rolled Steve’s shirt up, managing to get it off without smacking Steve in the nose; he tossed the shirt away, running his fingers over Steve’s hardened nipples, stroking through the fine feather-soft blonde hair he found there. “Honey, this is probably the hottest thing I’ve ever done. The pleasure’s all mine.”

Steve clucked his tongue in disbelief, giving Tony a shy smile. “You don’t have to say that.”

“Lean down, baby,”

“Like this?” Steve leaned forward, putting his knee up on the edge of the bed.

Tony pulled Steve closer. “Just like that.” He ran his tongue over Steve’s clavicle, nibbling his way up Steve’s shoulder, biting down but not biting hard enough to pierce Steve’s skin. “Do me a favor,” he said as he came up for air, his voice raspy, saliva dribbling down his chin, “Get me out of these pants, huh?”
Steve’s hands were gentle and slow, not quite shaking but certainly tentative. He started with Tony’s shirt instead of his pants, as if needing to work up the courage to head lower, popping each button, smoothing down the fabric as he went. He slipped the shirt off Tony’s shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. He moved his hands lower, letting them hover over Tony’s hips as if he didn’t quite know what to do with them.

Tony took Steve’s hands in his, pressing them against his jeans. He let Steve’s hands go and sprawled across the mattress his back. “You can touch me, you know,” he murmured, pushing up into Steve’s hands. “You feel really good.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked tentatively, threading his fingers through the loops on Tony’s belt, feeling his way along the leather towards the clasp at the front.

“Oh yeah,” Tony purred, stroking Steve’s shoulder. “Take me out of my pants, Steve. I want to feel you all over.”

Steve’s hands were much steadier than before; he had Tony’s belt undone and pulled free from his pants before Tony could even take another breath in. He hesitated only briefly when he popped the button on Tony’s pants and unzipped him. Tony wiggled helpfully, tangling his fingers in Steve’s hair as Steve slid down the bed so that he could pull Tony’s pants off one leg at a time. Tony’s underwear, however, proved to be a bit more of a challenge. In hindsight, he really shouldn’t have chosen the red silk briefs that morning; they weren’t quite a thong, but they had been pulled close enough to be distracting. Steve stared at them, flabbergasted, his cheeks going even pinker than they already were.

Tony chuckled, taking Steve by the hand again. “Never seen fancy undies before?” He pulled Steve’s hands back into position on his hip and then let them go, wanting to see what Steve would do.

“They’re… soft,” Steve said, thickly. He ran his hand over Tony’s groin so slowly Tony was fairly certain he was going to have an embarrassing accident of his own; his cock was throbbing painfully, begging for attention. Steve, the kind man that he was, took Tony in hand, feeling his cock through the silk. “I… It… it feels…” Steve seemed lost for words.

“Feels good, right?” Tony murmured into Steve’s ear, pushing his hips forward, making Steve squeeze his cock harder. He groaned. “You can take them off you know. They’re detachable for a reason.”

“Are they now,” Steve said, rubbing Tony’s thigh through the silk.

“Oh yeah,” Tony nodded, kissing Steve again, licking his way between Steve’s lips. “I mean, if you’d prefer to fuck with them still on I think I can arrange something…”

Steve made a strangled sound in the back of his throat. He pulled Tony’s underwear down with a deft tug; they flew off the side of the bed and hit the floor, becoming a puddle of red silk on the soft grey carpet, immediately forgotten.

Tony sat up, making space beside him, motioning for Steve to follow his lead. “Lie down.”

Steve complied, slipping gracefully onto his back. He parted his legs bashfully, as if not sure what Tony wanted from him and then spread them wide when he saw the look of pure unadulterated lust on Tony’s face.

Tony stripped Steve of his socks while throwing his own across the room. He kneeled between
Steve’s legs, admiring the way Steve’s cock was flushed and hard again, standing to attention. If he hadn’t seen it, he would have never have known that Steve had come a few minutes ago. He let out a soft moan, mesmerized by the sound and smell of the blood pulsing in Steve’s groin; it wasn’t quite overwhelming, but he couldn’t help leaning in to investigate further. He pressed his ear against Steve’s leg, scraping his beard against Steve’s inner thigh as he leaned in. Steve’s cock was solid against his cheek, smelling of soap and musky sweat.

Steve moaned; his cock twitched as Tony kissed his way up his inner thigh. “Oh,” he murmured again and again, fingers digging into the sheets below him. “Tony,”

Tony bit down, his teeth piercing Steve’s soft skin. The blood was rich here, heady and full bodied on his tongue. He took a suck and braced Steve’s hips as they came up off the bed, curses streaming from Steve’s lips. Tony looked up, licking his lips. Steve’s eyes were wide, his pupils blown. “That felt good, right?”

“Yes,” Steve said hoarsely, spreading his legs wider. “You can do that again if you want.”

Tony smirked, tonguing his way up Steve’s leg until he had found the same spot he had bitten into earlier. He bit again, sinking his teeth in a little bit deeper when he heard Steve’s next moan, knowing that he had found a good spot. Steve’s erection wavered, trying to stay despite the sudden change in blood flow; Tony wrapped his hand around it, jerking slowly each time he took a mouthful of blood, pleased by the way Steve started thrusting lazily into his hand. He licked again and again, cleaning the wound up, and then moved to pull Steve’s cock into his mouth sucking at it just as fiercely as he had the wound.

Steve wailed, his thigh muscles rippling as he tried not to thrust up into Tony’s mouth; his cock was hot and thick against Tony’s tongue, just a little bitter with pre-cum.

Tony pulled off, licking the saliva off his lips. He looked up at Steve, running his tongue over his lower lip, drawing the movement out.

Steve was a wreck; his hair was tousled, his face flushed, slick with sweat. He sat up on his elbows, looking down at Tony questioningly, seemingly surprised by the sudden stop.

“I want to fuck you,” Tony purred, feeling warm and content now that his stomach full. He crawled his way up Steve’s body, pressing his cock against Steve’s to make his point, enjoying the friction of cock against skin; he bit down on Steve’s throat but didn’t sink his teeth in, sucking a mark there.

Steve gasped, hips thrusting up to meet Tony’s. “Oh god. Please, oh god,” he grunted, grabbing a hold of Tony’s hips. “Please? You want to?”

“Of course I want to,” Tony said, planting a kiss on Steve’s lips.

Steve murmured something soft, his eyelids fluttering.

“What was that?” Tony asked, lowering his head so that he could tease Steve’s left nipple with his teeth.

Steve arched underneath him, gasping in pain and pleasure. “Oh shit – I’ve never,”

“I know you’ve never,” Tony said, letting Steve’s poor abused nipple go. He rested his chin on Steve’s chest. “You said that already, remember? If you aren’t ready, we don’t have to go that far. I can suck you, or we can jerk each other off.”

“I want you inside me,” Steve said, going up on his elbows. “I’ve been thinking about what it would
be like to have you inside me for months.”

Tony stared at Steve, surprised by the sudden admission. Steve had been lusting after him for months? He supposed that he shouldn’t have been surprised; Steve had admitted to loving him after all, so it wasn’t like this was some big secret. He’d wanted to fuck Steve for months too after all.

“Tony?” Steve looked ready to clamp his knees together. “Should I have not – oh. I’m – yeah I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, no,” Tony said, stroking Steve’s thighs. “No. I like it. I want to do that for you. I do. Have you ever tried before?”

“No, no,” Tony said, stroking Steve’s thighs. “No. I like it. I want to do that for you. I do. Have you ever tried before?”

“Tried?” Steve looked confused. “What do you mean tried?”

“With a finger?”

Steve flushed, turning to look at his knee. “Uh… I tried once. It didn’t really do much for me.”

“Did you use lube?” Tony asked, sitting up. He leaned over and pulled open the top drawer of the nightstand; as expected there was a box of condoms and three different hand pumps of flavored and unflavored lube. He tried not to be too gleeful about the amount at his disposal. There was enough there for a month – if they went slow.

“I read the pamphlets Coulson gave me,” Steve said, shrugging. “It said lube was for condoms. I know some guys used hand lotion when they… do that sort of stuff.”

“It’s for anything you want to make slippery, and its way better than hand lotion. Trust me,” Tony said, lifting up one of the bottles. He set it on Steve’s belly, turning it around so Steve could see it better. “It’ll make things much smoother.”

“Smother?”

“I’m assuming it didn’t do anything for you when you fingered yourself dry, right?” Tony said, smiling softly when he saw Steve’s embarrassed scowl. “So, alright. Here’s the deal. We’re going to go slow,” he said, setting the pump bottle on the bed beside Steve’s hip. “You can’t rush this – more importantly, I’m not going to rush this.”

“Slow is good,” Steve said, nodding quickly. He parted his legs when Tony slid back down between them, peering down to watch what Tony was doing.

Tony rubbed at Steve’s thighs, gently massaging his way around Steve’s balls towards his perineum. He paused there, rubbing his thumb back and forth until Steve started squirming at the newfound sensation. “You like that?”

“Yes,” Steve grunted. He looked like he was ready to throw his head back and start moaning again, but he seemed unwilling to look away from what Tony was doing, as if not looking would make the pleasure stop.

“If it hurts, you’re going to tell me,” Tony ordered, giving Steve’s inner thigh a nip. He planted a kiss on Steve’s cock when Steve started nodding feverishly and then pumped a handful of lube into his palm, slicking up his fingers. Strictly speaking Tony had been with enough virgins in his lifetime to know how much lube to use, but somehow he found himself putting more than was absolutely necessary. The thought of seeing Steve open and sloppy made his cock twitch in anticipation. He slicked up his index finger, pushing it in up until the first knuckle had vanished inside Steve’s body.
Steve’s reaction was immediate; he tensed, startled by the intrusion and took in a deep breath, biting his lower lip. Tony rubbed Steve’s thigh, withdrawing his finger slowly. “Hey! I said if it hurt, you need to tell me.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Steve said, letting out the breath he had been unconsciously holding. “It’s just… funny.”

“Sexy funny or ha ha funny?” Tony asked, smearing lube over his finger again. He twisted his finger as he slowly moved it in and out, watching Steve’s face to make sure he wasn’t hurting him; the last thing he wanted to do was hurt Steve.

“Good funny,” Steve insisted. He spread his legs wider, lifting himself up. “Can you – can you do more? Harder?”

“More?” Tony grinned. “Sure. I can do more. Harder will have to wait until you’re more relaxed though.” He worked deliberately, teasing and stroking until Steve was loose and slippery, his muscles relaxed and pliable. Steve writhed under Tony’s touch; he lifted his legs, muttering for Tony to do more than just fuck him with his fingers, begging for more.

Tony patted Steve’s inner thigh. “Do you want to do this from behind? Or from the front?”

“Front,” Steve murmured, grabbing a hold of his knees and lifting until his legs were held up high, offering himself up. “Please. I want to see you.”

“I want to see you too,” Tony whispered. He reached for the condom he had left on Steve’s pillow and was surprised when Steve pushed his hand away. “You don’t want me to use one?”

“No,” Steve said firmly. “I want to feel you. All of it – I want to feel all of it.”

“Are you sure?” Tony gave Steve’s cock a gentle tug, squeezing the head until Steve groaned and wriggled in protest. “It’ll be messy.”

“I don’t mind if it’s messy,” Steve insisted, trying to stop himself from rutting against Tony’s hand. “Go ahead.”

Tony smirked, liking the sound of that. He didn’t need to be told twice. He positioned Steve the way he wanted him, tucking a pillow underneath Steve’s lower back, and then lined himself up, pushing in slowly as Steve breathed out, working himself inside one delicious inch at a time. He hadn’t done this with a man in years; he and Pepper had enjoyed anal sex while they were together, but it had usually been him on the receiving end. This was something special – something he wouldn’t take for granted. He stretched out over top of Steve, balancing with Steve’s calves on his shoulders. “Tell me when.”

“When?” Steve let out a shaky breath. He clenched around Tony and then seemed startled by the sensation, staring at where they were connected. “That’s…” he clenched again, his eyes widening. “Oh god. You’d better start. I’m not going to last.”

Tony rolled his hips. It felt good; Steve was hot around him, wet and slick and open – oh so open to Tony’s cock, welcoming it in, practically pulling it back inside. Tony set a slow pace, dragging his cock in and out, relishing the slide. He kept going, thrusting again and again until Steve’s knees were bouncing up and down on his shoulders. Steve’s grunts got louder and louder; he pushed down in time with Tony’s thrusts, gasping when they started moving together.
Neither of them lasted.

It had been months since Tony had been with anyone, and the combined sensation of Steve’s body heat and the slickness of the lube had him coming before he could even warn Steve about what was happening. As it turned out, Steve could have cared less. He lay underneath Tony, blissed out, his body loose from his orgasm, having come far before Tony had with his cock trapped and rubbing between the two of them.

Tony pulled out, easing himself free. He arranged Steve, wrapping his arms around him from behind and buried his nose in Steve’s throat, letting out a contented sigh. “I think that’s the best welcome home I’ve ever had,” he said once he had his breath back.

Steve patted Tony’s arm weakly, his eyes already closed, half asleep, practically dreaming already. “S’good.”

“Yep,” Tony said, kissing Steve’s earlobe. “S’good, works for me.”

Tony woke up, dragged into consciousness by the sheer quiet of the room. He got up, careful not to disturb Steve, and walked out onto the balcony, letting the door close behind him. The night air was cold, but it wasn’t unpleasant; he didn’t have to worry about mosquitoes anymore, he thought to himself with a smile as he leaned against the wooden railing. They didn’t even try to bother him.

It was strange to see stars again. It had been a long time since he had seen them without having a panic attack; today they didn’t seem so menacing. They didn’t look like a thousand eyes turned in his direction. Tonight, they were just stars, white dots on black velvet. He sighed, listening as the crickets and forest life wandered about in the empty city below. Tomorrow he would make Steve breakfast and then get Jarvis up and running. It wouldn’t be too hard to work, now that he was far away from the scent of foreign blood; no strangers would come up here – not without his permission or knowledge. He had security cameras set up all over the town; there would be no getting in without him knowing about it.

He caught a moth as it flew past him and held it cupped in his hand. He could have crushed it easily if he had wanted to. There were a thousand different insects clambering for the best spot against the windowpanes as they tried to get at the light burning quietly in the living room down below; they were shadflies – they were irritating little fuckers, but harmless enough despite their large numbers. They had forgotten to turn it off in their haste to tour the bedroom, Tony realized with a laugh; no wonder there were so many around. He let the moth go and watched it fly off into the night, knowing that in a few minutes he would see it smacking helplessly against the window just like all the other insects. That was just its nature. His, on the other hand, was to build.

Tony turned away from the stars and went back inside, closing the door behind him.

“Hey,” Steve mumbled sleepily, still tangled in the blankets and pillows. “Why are you up?”

“Light’s on the in living room,” Tony said, bending over Steve to give him a kiss. “I’ll be back in a second, alright? I just want to turn it off.”

“Sure,” Steve said, giving Tony a quick peck before he could move away. “Hurry back, ok? It’s cold without you here.”

Tony ruffled Steve’s hair. “I’ll be back in a sec, babe,” he murmured. He walked downstairs and
turned the light off, chuckling when he spotted the moth among the shadflies. “Better luck next time guys,” he said, heading back upstairs; Steve was waiting for him, and there was nothing in the world that was going to keep him from slipping back into bed.

He looked around the room and spotted Steve’s bag sitting beside the couch. It could probably wait till morning, but he didn’t mind carrying it up. Tomorrow he was going to sit on his bed and watch Steve unpack it. He took the stairs three at a time, grinning.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it! :) Let me know if there's anything strange in here - and thanks for reading! And thank you to everyone who spent the time leaving a comment! I really appreciate all the feedback! Yes, there eventually will be more, but it won’t be for a long time. I migrate between series/fics frequently to keep from getting stuck in one flavor all the time, so I'll probably work on something else before I come back to this series again. Thanks again for reading!

The city that Tony buys is based off of Kitsault - a place in British Columbia that actually does exist; its got a new owner now (who isn't Tony, obviously), but for a long time it sat abandoned and ignored after the mining industry died off in Northern BC. If you want to know more give it a google. The pictures are a little creepy to be honest, and I love the idea of a 'modern-day' ghost town. It's pretty awesome!

End Notes

If you find anything weird, let me know and I'll change it. This will be updated weekly! (It's finished in its entirety, I'm just proofing/uploading slowly to make sure I've got all the kinks worked out.)

Works inspired by this one

Various fanarts inspired by fanfic and headcanons by DragonK

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!