The Art of Coping With Betrayal

by Sandrene09

Summary

Tony may not be an artist like Steve, but there are some things he’s turned into an art form: building innovative things from scraps, programming, and looking away when the people he loves leave him again for the nth time.
(Or, the art of falling apart.)

Notes

This isn’t a fix-it. This is my funeral.

See the end of the work for more notes

Ten.

The phone’s right in front of him.

He doesn’t want to look at it, but he can’t quite look away. It’s a black, nondescript flip phone, the kind that would have been produced by Stark Industries twenty years ago if the company wasn’t
making most of its money from weapons then. For all intents and purposes, it should be unnoticeable, but it isn’t—in fact, it’s anything but. Compared to the rest of the items in this room—hell, in this entire compound—the phone might as well be lit up in neon lighting for all that it screams that it doesn’t belong here.

Black, clunky, and with a screen that’s smaller than his thumb, all it really does is call attention.

Tony sighs and looks away, directing his attention to the envelope with his name on it.

The letter, almost mocking in its pristine whiteness, is handwritten. Tony shouldn’t even be surprised —Rogers always did prefer the old way of doing things, no matter how much Tony taught him about modern technology. While he did learn how to use a computer and a printer, he no doubt insisted on getting a pen and paper instead—if Tony listened hard enough, he would be able to hear him say something along the lines of how good old-fashioned letter writing is more personal and more sincere, which is why he’s trying not to listen too hard to the silence.

He doesn’t want personal or sincerity. At this point, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to handle it.

Chewing on his bottom lip, Tony turns the envelope over, looking for something he’s not really sure he’ll find. A growing sense of apprehension fills him slowly, like drops of water falling into an empty bucket, and he sighs.

God, who is he even kidding? Of course he’s going to read the damn thing. Of course he’s going to open the envelope and hear Rogers’ voice in his head, because that’s what he does. That’s who he is.

He’s a man of Science, for fuck’s sake. If he’s not going to find the truth after ceaselessly searching for it, then he’s at least going to look for an explanation. Subjective truth made up of someone’s words is better than no truth at all.

The rip of the envelope is deafening in the silence. The white envelope, once clean and pristine, is torn at the top, the jagged ends a stark difference from the neat straight line of the bottom of the envelope. He never did learn how to open envelopes without the use of letter openers.

A laugh, ugly and self-deprecating, bubbles up his throat. Poetic, how Rogers gave him something pure and white, only for him to tear it open.

(Tear it apart, he carefully doesn’t think, because it wasn’t him who tore the team—the family—apart, was it?)

Carefully, Tony takes the piece of paper out from the envelope and reads through its contents, hearing Rogers’ voice in his head all the while.

When he’s finished reading through the entire letter, he sighs and puts it down, feeling a deep sense of dissatisfaction. The letter and the envelope, while looking white and pure, are anything but, because while he had opened the damn thing expecting answers, he had finished reading the letter with more questions than before.

(And Christ, isn’t that just like Rogers? Isn’t it just like him to come in a neat, orderly package, only to surprise you with what’s inside? Isn’t it just like him to hide something like this in a clean exterior?)

The Avengers are yours—maybe more so than mine.

And that’s just it, isn’t it? It’s easy for Rogers to give it away because he had it in the first place. It’s easy for him to say this, because fuck if it even means something.
The so-called Avengers are gone. There’s nothing for Tony anymore, because most of them have already chosen their side, because most of them don’t trust Tony the way they used to. Can he really say that the Avengers are his when all he has with him is his best friend and an android who’s basically his ex-A.I.?

It’s easy to give something like that away, Tony thinks, because it’s stopped meaning something.

*My faith’s in people, I guess. Individuals.*

Tony swallows past the lump in his throat. *What about me?* he doesn’t ask out loud, because that will sound ridiculous in an empty room, because it will sound pleading, because he is done with begging for scraps.

Still, the thought echoes in his head. What about him? Where was this so-called faith when Tony was extending an olive branch? Time and time again, he had tried to compromise, tried his best to keep things from ending the way they eventually did, and isn’t that just typical? No matter how hard he tries, he still fucks things up. Maybe that’s really his superpower.

*If you need us—if you need me—I’ll be there.*

Tony takes the phone in hand and examines it. Already, he knows he’s not going to use it, not unless he really needs to. He does need them—he’s man enough to admit that, man enough to admit that the compound is too big, too cold, too *empty* without them here. The compound, without the various noises of daily activity, is no better than the mansion he grew up in, impersonality hidden behind a modern and expensive exterior. He’s not going to call him and tell him this though, because why should he?

Rogers has made it clear that he doesn’t have faith in Tony. And Tony—Tony doesn’t have faith in Rogers, either. Not after what he had kept from Tony.

It was inevitable, he thinks, for him to disappoint his childhood hero. He just hadn’t expected for his childhood hero to disappoint *him*.

Tony *knows* it’s unfair to think of Rogers-the-friend as Captain America-the-hero, but he can’t help it. It’s easier to process the feeling of betrayal when it’s not your friend, when it’s not the person you’ve been eating breakfast with and going to art museums with.

He has no doubt that if he called, Rogers would indeed be where Tony needs him to be, probably even with the rest of the Avengers if Tony requested it. That’s *if* he calls, though, which he already knows he isn’t going to do.

He’s done with pleading for people to come back. If they want to walk away, he’ll let them. He’s not going to go dragging them back just because they made promises on a handwritten letter they can’t edit anymore. Besides, it’s not like he can blame them anyway—he thinks that if he could, he would want to walk away from himself as well.

Sighing, Tony puts the letter back in the envelope.

He puts the phone in a desk drawer, obscured by a small box of paperclips and a stack of Post-it notes.

*Nine.*
Sometimes, he dreams of that night.

There’s an empty road before him and the lights from the streetlamps are flickering in, out, in, out—a prelude to something, maybe. He doesn’t really know. He’s never been the type to try and read into something too much.

He changes perspectives, sometimes. On some days, he sees everything in Howard’s perspective—he’s a man in a suit with his hands gripping the steering wheel so hard he imagines he can feel the pain, a man in a suit with eyes staring straight ahead, a man in a suit, a man in a suit, a man in a suit—

Not today, though. Today, he’s seeing everything through his mother’s eyes, his hand idly playing with the pearl necklace adorning his neck.

Everything is silent except for the dull sounds of the car running and the occasional night-time noise.

Suddenly, there it is—the roar of a motorcycle.

Tony blinks, and he’s no longer playing with an expensive pearl necklace. Instead, he feels the thrum of machinery under him, feels the coldness of a gun in his hand, feels his finger about to pull the trigger—

There. The sound of a gunshot, deafening.

He feels his lips start to form the word ‘no’, feels his vocal cords prepare themselves to scream, and he blinks.

He opens his eyes to a darkened bedroom, silent except for the ragged breaths he’s been dragging out of his lungs.

He’s alone. He’s alone except for the haunting nightmares, and he puts his hand to his chest to feel the reassuring throb of his heartbeat, to feel the blood pumping through his veins, to feel his lungs steadily catch up to his racing heart.

This is new, he thinks. He’s never seen that particular nightmare from Barnes’ perspective before. Of course, back then, he actually thought it was just a car accident, and he never really knew that Barnes was involved with his parents’ deaths.

He drags one hand down his face.

He’s exhausted.

“Howard!” his mother screams, and it rings in his ears even as he closes his eyes.

Eight.

Pepper and he might be on shaky ground, but they’re still friends and they still care about the same company. Now that he doesn’t have much of a team of superheroes to handle, he spends most of his time at Stark Industries, proving to everybody—proving to himself—that he still deserves to have his last name in the company name as well as on the company building.

While he doesn’t really show up to work often, he’s still the head of the Research and Development division, which means that somewhere in the building is an office with his name on it.
The Monday he shows up to work, he sees at least five different employees drop their cups of coffee as they stare, astonished, at him. Tuesday, and there aren’t as much dropped cups of coffee, though he is subjected to way more double takes than is probably appropriate since he actually still owns the company, technically.

On Wednesday, he raises his gaze from paperwork to find Pepper standing in front of him with a raised eyebrow and a cup of coffee in hand.

“Oh,” he says, watching as she puts the cup of coffee right in front of him. “Thanks?”

Pepper sighs and drops into a seat right across him, graceful as she does so. Tony watches as one of her fingers carefully tucks a stray lock of hair behind an ear, and is hit with a painful pang as he remembers past instances when he had been the one to do that specific action for her.

He momentarily gives up on the paperwork he’s supposed to be reading through and grabs the coffee cup.

“I’m worried about you,” Pepper says, straight to the point, the moment Tony swallows the coffee in his mouth and puts the cup back down. He can hear the worry in her voice, and he gives her a small, strained smile.

“I’m fine,” he says, the lie coming to his lips easily.

“You’re not,” she counters.

Another sip of the coffee. “No, I’m not,” he agrees.

He’s tired of fighting everything.

“You know,” Pepper says, smiling in that sad way she thinks Tony doesn’t know how to decipher, “I never actually thought the time would come when I would be begging you to go home when you’ve finally showed up to work out of your own volition.”

Tony smiles and fiddles with the pen, his hands unused to having a pen instead of a screwdriver to play with. “There’s always a first time for everything,” he says, looking at Pepper once more.

Pepper nods. “That’s true.”

A beat, and then—

“Go home, Tony.”

Tony thinks about the Avengers compound, empty except for Vision, thinks about the upper floors of this very building where he used to live with the other Avengers back when there was just six of them, thinks about the haunting silence that’s been following him no matter how hard he tries to escape it, and says, “kicking me out of my own office, Pep? That’s low.”

Pepper raises an eyebrow, and suddenly Tony feels like a schoolboy coming to the town priest for confession, feels small and exposed and not at all like the billionaire-genius-playboy-philanthropist he really is.

“Pepper, I—” he starts to say, and there are so many different possible endings to this. Pepper, I miss you. Pepper, I miss them. Pepper, I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and there’s nothing more I want than to find you lying next to me. Pepper, I want you to stay the hell away from me. Pepper, I regret our break-up. Pepper, I told him and he still didn’t stay for me.
Pepper, I’m tired.

“Yeah, okay,” he says instead, because he’s not going to say those things to her, because he’s tired of having to explain why he has to be here.

Pepper looks at him and stands up from her seat, quickly walking around the table and bending down to hug him. For a few moments, he finds his arms frozen where they are before he finally moves them and reciprocates the hug.

“I still care about you, Tony. You’re one of my closest friends,” Pepper says, her voice soft. “Don’t ever think that I don’t care about you anymore just because we realized the relationship wasn’t going as well as we thought it would.”

Tony closes his eyes and hugs her just that bit tighter. “I know,” he says, even though he didn’t, not really.

Eventually, they part. Pepper looks at him, her eyes looking a bit wet, and says, “go home, Tony. You can come back again tomorrow, just as long as you’ve had enough sleep by then.”

“Okay,” he says, and he doesn’t tell her about how hard it’s been for him to fall asleep without ending up in the same nightmare, about how he’s been fighting the urge to unlock the liquor cabinet, about how there’s a bottle of sleeping pills in the drawer of his nightstand, ready to be used and abused.

“Okay,” she says, a relieved smile on her face. “Okay.”

Not okay, Tony thinks as he watches her leave his office. Not okay.

Seven.

FRIDAY’s voice, while familiar and friendly, is still different from JARVIS. She’s soft and inquisitive where JARVIS is sarcastic and knowing, and though she’s also Tony’s own creation, Tony sometimes finds himself longing to hear a British accent.

It feels a little too much like losing Jarvis (or a loved one) again.

Sometimes, he finds himself wandering through the corridors of the Compound, looking for Vision, because even though he’s not JARVIS, he’s similar enough to him that Tony can close his eyes and pretend that he is.

Tony normally isn’t a denial type of guy. He, like most people, has his moments, but generally speaking, he tends to face problems head on. Some people would even say too head on, because they thought Tony didn’t spare a moment to think about the consequences.

Tony thinks about the consequences. A lot. Before going into a situation, he has mapped out every problem and every probable solution, has figured out almost every possible outcome and almost every person who will be affected. Tony is, by all means, a realist, and a realist looks at all angles of a situation.

The one thing he’s bad at, some people would say, is factoring himself into the equation. Vision in particular has taken to looking at him with that worried expression on his face every time he thinks Tony can’t see him.
He doesn’t like including himself in the list of people who can be affected by an action. Including himself in the list implies that he is worth the same value as the people he saves, and though he knows in the back of his head that this is true, he doesn’t act with this belief in mind because it’s not his job to save himself. It’s his job to save them. He’ll take being collateral damage if it means doing what he’s set himself to do since he made the first Iron Man suit.

“You do not look so good.”

Tony opens his eyes and finds Vision sitting down. There’s an inquisitive look in Vision’s eyes, and Tony finds himself closing his own, eager to escape the worry—and the pity—he knows he will find there.

“Yeah, well, sometimes your age catches up to you,” he says, and stretches more fully on the couch.

“I may not be an expert in this matter, but I do not think your age is the only factor.”

Tony snorts. “Ding ding ding. You’re right.”

“Do you not wish to talk about it?” Vision asks, patient and kind, ignoring Tony’s smartass comments. He’s too nice, really, and it’s that thought that makes Tony’s chest hurt, because though Vision’s voice is familiar, the words are not.

It’s not that no one has ever asked him to talk about his issues before—God knows that if Tony had a dollar for every time someone in his life asked him to talk about something emotions-related, he would have twice the money he has right now—it’s just that JARVIS would never ask him this question, or any other variation of it.

JARVIS is a silent listener where most people are not, and Tony finds himself wanting—not for the first time—that kind of support, a steady, invisible shoulder he can lean on.

“No,” he finally says after a few moments. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

The look Vision shoots him is one of disappointment. Tony ignores it the way he ignores everything, which is to say he doesn’t forget about it.

That night, as he tosses and turns on his own too big and too empty bed, he thinks about how Vision is just another person—android, superhero, whatever—he has disappointed.

Fall in fucking line, Tony thinks.

Six.

He doesn’t forget about the phone. Of course he doesn’t. It’s the one thing that can connect him to Rogers at a moment’s notice, and though he doesn’t value Rogers the way he used to, he still respects what they had.

What did they have?

It’s a little hard to describe, he thinks. It was uncertain and it was messy and it was anything but absolute, but it was so, so good. It was push and pull, Newton’s Third Law of Motion in action—every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

They were never lovers. Tony likes to think they were almost something, both of them on the
precipice of something great—something more fulfilling than what they had—but he’s more of a realist than an optimist, and he’s found out the ending to that particular story before he could even begin to fantasize about another way things could go.

The story ends in tragedy.

For Tony—a man who’s entire life story is a goddamned tragedy—to be able to say that about him and Rogers and the almost something that they could have become means a lot. It means that in Tony’s entire miserable existence on this green, green Earth, Rogers has hurt him enough to rank on the top ten people who hurt him the most. Some nights, Tony even thinks Rogers could be part of the Top Five.

But anyway.

Tony looks at the outdated phone in his hand and thinks about taking it apart, about reveling in taking it apart the way Rogers took him apart in Siberia. He wants to find out where Rogers and the rest are, and this phone is the key.

It could be so easy. It could be so easy to figure out where they’re hiding and to tell the appropriate people where they are, but he’s not going to do that.

He’s not that kind of guy.

There would be no satisfaction to be had from seeing his former teammates—his family—get taken away in chains, locked up in a prison they don’t deserve to be in. No matter how strong the sting of betrayal still feels, Tony knows this isn’t the way.

He flips the phone and catches it mid-air.

_Fucking Rogers_, he thinks, resisting the urge to crush the phone in his hand until it’s nothing but a black mess of outdated technology.

The thing with Rogers is that he has always been like this. He has always been this stubborn, has always been this quick to protect the few things—people—he has left in his life. Tony has no idea when he became so dispensable to Rogers’ life that even when he offered to compromise, he was still forgotten, still tossed aside in exchange for Rogers’ best friend, even when said best friend killed Tony’s parents.

He’s not a stranger to this scenario. He had long accepted that he was a means to an end. People, no matter who they were, always wanted something from him. It didn’t matter if it was his tech, his money, or his time—it was always something.

It _is_ always something.

For a long time, he had thought Rogers was above that. He had thought he truly didn’t want anything else from him but his company, had thought that Rogers genuinely enjoyed being with him.

He had thought.

Hindsight is always 20/20, he supposes.

He can’t quite keep himself from feeling the pang in his chest whenever he thinks of late nights and early mornings spent in the workshop with Rogers just a few feet away from him, quiet as he worked on his latest art project. It’s hard to reconcile that Rogers from the Rogers Tony knows now, because the Rogers Tony knew wasn’t really Rogers. He was Steve.
Another flip of the phone. Tony catches it again.

Even in his mind, Tony can’t, for the life of him, keep on calling Rogers “Steve”. Tony likes to think that Steve would never do this to him, that Steve would never betray him like this. Steve is long conversations about anything and everything. Steve is the sound of pencil on paper. Steve is stubbornness in refusing Tony’s help when navigating the internet. Steve is looking at the ceiling when talking to JARVIS, is going on jogs at the ass crack of dawn, is giving Tony his first cup of coffee after three days straight of Tony not having slept—Steve, Steve, Steve.

Steve sounds too personal when Tony tries to form the name with his lips. The name tastes like bitter disappointment.

Tony can’t call him Cap, either, because he’s not Cap anymore. He’s given that up the way he’s given Tony up—without a second thought.

From where Tony is seated in his little office in the nearly deserted Compound, he can see the shield, propped up against a glass wall. It’s still dirty and banged up in places—Tony couldn’t bear the thought of holding onto it longer than it takes to prop it against something.

Another flip. This time, Tony makes sure to just barely catch the phone.

So—not Steve. Not Cap, either.

Rogers, it is.

Rogers is not companionable silences and witty bantering. Rogers isn’t even fighting with capable people in a team of superheroes. Rogers is plain fighting, is dislike during the first meeting, is insults thrown without regard, is disappointment keenly felt on both sides.

Rogers is a stranger.

So why does he want to call him so much?

The house is so silent these days, he thinks, that he would give anything to hear a familiar, friendly voice. And he has no doubt that Rogers would be exactly that—familiar and friendly—because that’s the kind of person he is. He feels too much guilt for him not to try and give Tony what he’s asking for.

Except, it seems, if what Tony’s asking for is for him to sign the Accords.

Tony wonders how that particular conversation would go.

As much as Tony would like to imagine that they would manage to be, at the very least, civil to each other until the end of the conversation, it’s too hard to imagine things going that way if ever they did have a conversation.

Tony looks at the phone in his hand. With one press of a button, they can have that conversation. All Tony needs to do is reach out and call Rogers.

But God, he is so tired of reaching out only to be rejected. There’s only so much he can take. Besides—that conversation will never end pretty. They’re both too hurt—their scars too open and raw—for them to be able to end a conversation about the Accords without exchanging heated insults and raising their voices.

He’s not going to call. It’s just going to end ugly for both of them.
Tony knows that sooner rather than later, some villain of the week will be coming for them. They will inevitably be outmatched, because as much as Tony believes in himself and what remains of the team, there’s also just him, Rhodey, and Vision right now, and that’s just not good enough. If Tony had his way, Rhodey will never be wearing the War Machine armor again—will instead remain at the Compound where he’s safe and protected—but Tony knows too well how Rhodey will react to that.

Tony has an awful habit of being friends with stubborn motherfuckers. Rhodey’s not an exception to the rule. In fact, he’s probably the reason why there is a rule.

With Natasha gone to God-knows-where and T’Challa leading an actual country, if worse comes to worst, Tony will most probably have to call Rogers and ask for help. And as much as the thought leaves a bitter taste in Tony’s mouth, there is no way in hell that Tony will risk civilian lives just because he was too proud to call for backup.

Tony throws the phone upwards and takes care to avoid catching it.

It slams on the glass table.

It does not break.

Five.

The need to call for backup comes sooner than expected. Four days after contemplating calling Rogers, a team of supervillains from an alternate universe somehow appear in Queens at noon.

Tony and Vision are hopelessly—laughably—outnumbered. While they’re both awesome in their own right, there’s also only the two of them against five more-than-capable supervillains, and it’s not long before Tony has a brief thought about how this would have been over in half an hour if only the rest of the team were here.

How’s Rogers and the rest doing? Tony thinks as he gets slammed against pavement, FRIDAY’s voice calm, cool, and collected as she informs him of a possible concussion.

With just the two of them, Tony can’t really delegate someone to make sure civilians are being escorted away from the center of the fight. He doesn’t even have SHIELD to coordinate with—all he has is FRIDAY, Vision, and the hope that law enforcement will take care of getting civilians out of here for him.

Tony rolls away as the man with acid streaming through his fingers reaches out for him, clear fluid flowing out of the tips of his fingers. A repulsor blast sends the man flying, but then there’s someone else coming for Tony’s ass. This time it’s a woman with magenta hair and a trigger-happy attitude.

Tony takes to the skies, neatly avoiding bullets. He swoops below and aims at a man who somehow has Vision in a chokehold. He’s about to activate his repulsors when he hears a voice, welcome and entirely unexpected, go on the team comms.

“Stark, you’re aiming for the wrong guy. He’s just the muscle. There’s a woman at 3 o’clock with long blonde hair who has the ability to block off Vision’s abilities.”

“Nat?” he asks, disbelieving even as he follows her instructions and flies toward the woman hiding
behind an upturned Honda Civic. “Where are you?”

“On my way to where you are,” she says without gasping for breath. “How many are we dealing with?”

The woman turns around and focuses on Tony, her violet eyes turning black as she whispers something. Suddenly, vines start to grow out of solid rock, reaching up, up, up, just barely catching Tony as he flies upwards.

“Five,” Tony replies, firing at Violet Eyes and just barely avoiding the rocks she’s been conjuring out of thin air. “Violet Eyes has magic and is trying to stone me to death.”

_Fucking magic_, he thinks as he breaks a boulder with a repulsor blast. _Why the fuck is it always magic?_

“We need to disarm her first,” Nat says, and over the comms Tony can hear the thump of her fists making contact with someone, can hear the swish of her blades.

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” he says, firing at Violet Eyes and sighing when she blocks his bullets with a thick, conjured slab of concrete. While a repulsor blast will break that concrete, it will also give her enough time to conjure another, and Tony’s too tired to let this fight last longer than it should.

He spots his saving grace about a minute into playing dodgeball with Violet Eyes’ rocks. A well-timed shot at the gas tank, and Violet Eyes finds herself flung away from the car, barely saved by the pulse of magic she had conjured just in time to avoid getting herself killed, but not enough to avoid getting herself knocked out.

“Oh, so that’s four,” Tony says, watching Vision from the corner of his eye slip out of Choker Guy’s grip and incapacitate him. “Make that three, actually.”

From there, everything goes a lot smoother. While Trigger-Happy is skilled with using her guns, she’s also no match for Natasha, even though Natasha quite literally brought a knife—or, well, in her case, _knives_—to a gun fight. Vision takes care of Acid with a well-aimed blast, and Tony manages to grab the last guy before he could run.

When the authorities have finally started rounding up the team of supervillains with Vision overseeing the entire process, Natasha makes her way to Tony. Tony looks up as Natasha gestures for the EMT to leave, unsurprised to find that there’s nothing on Natasha’s face that can give him an idea about what she’s going to say or what she feels.

Tony looks back down to the gash on his right arm. “I was wondering when you’d talk to me.”

Natasha nods, but doesn’t reply. Instead, she sits down right beside him and continues taping the gauze the EMT had put around Tony’s abdomen.

For a few moments, Tony is content to stay silent. This is just like any other mission, he thinks. Thor’s going to be bantering with Barton in a few minutes, their voices too loud in the empty stillness of the battlefield, Bruce will be back to his old self with his hair in disarray, and Cap will insist on a debrief as soon as he’s finished transferring the supervillains to the authorities.

But there is no team. Thor’s in Asgard and Bruce doesn’t want to be found. Barton is gone, and Cap is not Cap anymore.

“Why are you here?” he finally asks, his voice cracked. “What are you doing here?”
She doesn’t look up. “King T’Challa dropped charges against me,” she says, looking into the first aid kit and taking out a packet of Neosporin. “Ross won’t be able to do anything about me, especially since I signed the Accords.”

Her hands are careful as they hold his face, her fingers quick as they apply ointment to various gashes and wounds. It’s comforting and terrifying at the same time, the fact that Tony knows just how much restrained strength is present there.

“You and I both know why T’Challa dropped the charges,” Natasha says when she’s finished applying ointment, her fingers glistening slightly under the sun. “Why didn’t you call for help?”

Natasha looks at him dead in the eye, and he finds that he has to look away.

Of course he knows that T’Challa dropped the charges against her, and of course he knows why. Leaders—kings—like T’Challa have their own set of ethics and morals, and no doubt T’Challa found it hypocritical of himself to continue to hold Natasha against her decision to let Rogers and Barnes go when both of them are staying in his country.

“Why would I?” he says, his voice steady and sure, defense mechanisms in place like armor. “Vision and I had it.”

She doesn’t buy it. Of course she doesn’t. Tony didn’t expect her to, anyway—it’s just reflex.

“You’re not going after him, then?” she asks, watching Vision talk to law enforcement, his cap billowing behind him.

“No,” Tony says.

“Why?”

*Because I’m starting to think Rogers sent me that phone to tell me to find him. And I don’t want to.*

“Because I’m done,” he says, glancing at Natasha before looking away once more. “He’s not willing to compromise, he’s not presenting a plan of his own, and he didn’t bother telling me about—” he breaks off, taking a few seconds to breathe, the air burning a path down his lungs as he struggles to calm himself down. “I’m not going to bother chasing him down if nothing’s going to come out of it. What’s the point?”

For a few seconds, Natasha is silent. It’s the kind of silence where it’s just shy of becoming uncomfortable, the kind of silence where it’s filled with too many words unsaid. Tony looks at her from the corner of his eye and finds her looking at nothing in particular with her head bowed down. Today, her hair’s in a sloppy ponytail, tendrils of red hair about to escape her hairband.

For the first time in a long time, Natasha looks less composed than she normally does. It’s a little disconcerting.

“I knew, you know,” she finally says, her voice quiet but commanding.

Tony shakes his head. He doesn’t want to hear about this. Denial is a river in Egypt, and he wants to drown. “Why are you here? Are you here to give me a goddamn lesson? To give me a ‘get-along’ shirt Rogers and I can wear? Are you here to make amends for him? Because that’s not your job.”

Natasha ignores him. “I knew, and I didn’t tell you. So why am I different? Why punish him, but not me?”
Tony only just stops himself from slamming his injured hand on the hot pavement. “Because you’re not him,” he says, voice low. “Because you’re not the guy I’ve been talking to during late nights, because I didn’t confide in you about my mom, because you’re not the guy who chose to keep it a secret despite everything I’ve told you. You’re not him, Romanoff.”

This isn’t the sort of conversation they should be having in broad daylight, he thinks, but right now he cannot care less.

“You weren’t there,” Tony says, one hand absently coming up to pat the arc reactor. “You didn’t fight me despite knowing you were wrong.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tony stands up, the armor whirring softly as he does so. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?” He breathes in deep, then exhales. “Are you here to stay?”

She stays seated on the pavement. “I have some loose ends to tie up.”

He nods to himself. Of course. “So you’re going to him, then.”

It’s not a question, so she doesn’t answer him.

Tony sighs. “Before you go, head for the Compound first. He may not be Cap anymore, but I sure as hell don’t want that shield anymore either. He can have the damn thing.” He starts walking away, eager to just get back to his workshop and be left alone in peace. “Oh, by the way,” he says, stopping and turning around, looking Natasha in the eye as he starts speaking once more, “you want your punishment? Go away and leave me the fuck alone, Romanoff.”

The faceplate closes, and he takes to the skies.

He doesn’t look back.

Four.

Rhodey, stubborn motherfucker that he is, hates having to use the wheelchair. Tony hates seeing him use it too, because he knows his best friend like he knows the back of his hand, and he knows that Rhodey hates having to depend on anything.

Of course, Tony hates seeing the wheelchair for other reasons too, not least of which is the fact that every time Rhodey has to use it because of sheer exhaustion, Tony gets flashbacks of seeing his best friend free-falling in a metal coffin.

But, well. Needs must, and all that.

“No.”

Tony sighs. “Come on, Rhodey. You’re exhausted. I don’t want you to suddenly collapse in the middle of dinner.”

Rhodey shoots him a look. “Look, Tones, I know you’re trying to make me feel better, and I appreciate that. I do. I just don’t think I’m up for going anywhere.”

“Not even to that Mexican place you love so much?” Tony asks, supporting Rhodey once more when he starts to move, his feet moving in a shuffling motion.
“No,” Rhodey says, groaning as he sits down on the couch, his grip tightening on Tony’s arms as he does so. “I’m fine here.”

“But,” Tony says, helpless as he watches Rhodey grit his teeth at the pain, “don’t you feel cooped up here?”

Tony sits, watching silently as Rhodey arranges his legs with his hands. To say it isn’t at least a little bit disconcerting is a lie—it’s weird to see Rhodey having to do this now when he didn’t have to before.

Rhodey sighs, looking down at his legs. “I do.” He’s quiet as he says the words, as if he’s ashamed to be telling the truth, and it makes Tony’s heart hurt. “I mean, don’t get me wrong Tones, I appreciate all the things you’ve been doing,” he says, looking up and shooting Tony a genuinely grateful smile, “yes, that includes the newly-modified War Machine armor you’ve been working on lately that you thought I didn’t know about, by the way, but it’s different, you know? It’s awesome here, but so is outside.”

“Then why don’t you want to go out?” Tony asks, perplexed. “We can go get dinner. Hell, we can do whatever you want. You want to go shopping? Done. We can take the jet to Paris or Milan.”

Rhodey’s lips quirk into an amused smile. “I think that’s more Pepper’s style than mine.”

Tony thinks back to college with Rhodey, seeing him in generic Macy’s button-ups and khakis as he walks out their dorm to head to Communications I, and has to silently agree. Now, Rhodey’s more willing to let Tony take him to a personal stylist—more willing to wear Ralph Lauren and Penguin and other brands Rhodey doesn’t bother himself to know by heart—but he’s still not the kind of person to willingly go on shopping sprees for the sake of it.

“Okay, then what about sports? Let’s watch sports! You love sports, right?” Tony asks, knowing full well that Rhodey loves watching football.

Rhodey looks at Tony fondly, smiling as he does so. “It’s nine in the evening, Tones. And it’s not football season. Besides,” he says, leaning further into the couch cushions, “we can watch replays here.”

Tony sighs. “Okay, give it up. Is it the wheelchair? Is there something wrong with it? Do you want me to redesign it? I’m sure I can customize it to give you better grip and to make it look more your style, I mean—”

“Stop, Tony. It’s not that, I promise,” Rhodey says, shaking his head. He’s not looking at Tony—instead, his gaze is focused on nothing, as evidenced by the faraway look in his eyes.

Tony wonders what he’s thinking about. Tony wonders if he even wants to know.

“It’s just, I don’t know,” Rhodey continues, his voice soft, barely audible. “As advanced as the wheelchair is, I just don’t think I’m ready to be out in public yet.”

Tony can hear the apology in Rhodey’s tone and he hates it. Rhodey should not sound contrite. This is not his fault.

As much as Tony wants to get Rhodey to go out more, he’s not going to do it if Rhodey’s legitimately uncomfortable with the idea. Tony knows all too well what it feels like to have to be exposed while feeling vulnerable, having grown up with his face practically always being on the news. He doesn’t want Rhodey to feel that way, to feel like he’s being rubbed raw.
“Okay. We’ll get them to deliver, then. The usual?” Tony asks, standing up and grabbing his phone from his pocket.

Rhodey nods, smiling, and if anything makes Tony feel better about staying at home with Rhodey instead of going out with him like he had originally planned, it’s that. It’s the relief in Rhodey’s eyes, the gratefulness in his smile, the way his whole body relaxes.

Tony nods, and he knows he made the right choice.

It’s not long before their food is finally on the low glass table in front of the couch, the television before them playing a replay of a football game. Tony doesn’t even know which teams are playing, and yet he feels so incredibly happy, it’s ridiculous. Rhodey’s beside him, the cheese dripping from the quesadilla in his hand being ignored as he shouts at the TV screen.

Rhodey’s here, Tony thinks, content to munch on his burrito as he watches his best friend rage at the TV. He’s here. He’s safe.

He’s alive.

Three.

“You’ve got an incoming call, sir.”

Tony doesn’t look up from the holograms he’s inspecting. “Who is it?”

“It’s from a Mister Peter Parker.”

Tony looks up then, dismissing the holograms for later with a flick of his wrist. “Yeah okay, put him through,” he says, walking across the floor to get a bottle of water from a mini-fridge.

“How’s it going, kid?” he asks, taking a quick swig of his water. He caps the bottle and brings it with him as he walks to the couch and sits.

“Uh, nothing much, Mister Stark,” Peter says, his voice wobbly in that way when someone’s excited but is trying to tamp it down.

Ah, Tony thinks, smiling as he looks down. “So you got it, then?” he asks, not bothering to keep the smile off his face.

“You know you don’t have to do this, right?”

Tony thinks about Peter, the way he reminds him of a younger version of himself—an eager-to-please boy-wonder with an appreciation for Science—and chuckles. He sounds so young that Tony kind of wants to keep him far away from himself, but he has to trust that Peter knows what he wants. Right now, Peter wants to make use of his abilities to help people. It’s an admirable thing to do, certainly, but he is still young. If Tony’s not going to stop him, then he might as well upgrade his tech and lessen the chances of Peter being harmed.

At this point, Tony doesn’t think he can handle more of people he cares about being hurt. It doesn’t matter that he’s only just met Peter—the kid has somehow wormed his way under Tony’s skin, and now he knows that he would do anything he could to keep this kid safe.

“You know you don’t have to do this, right?”
Tony rolls his eyes. Trust this kid to ask him if he’s sure even when it’s clear that the kid’s in love with the tech Tony provided him. “Yes,” he says anyway, humoring Peter. “I’m sure. I wouldn’t have made it if I didn’t want to, kid.”

He throws the water bottle into the air and expertly catches it with one hand. “Besides, consider it a ‘welcome to the team’ kind of thing. Your old suit was woefully out of date and it was basically begging to be upgraded, so I did.” Tony looks at the space where the holograms for the sedative darts-containing wristbands were and shakes his head, thinking about how much better it would be if it were actually integrated into the suit. “Actually, I think your new suit needs to be upgraded as well. What do you think about sedative darts?”

“They’re, uh, pretty cool,” Peter says, and Tony can hear the grudging awe in the tone of his voice. Tony grins. “Just ‘pretty cool’?” Tony asks, putting the water bottle on his lap and making finger quotes even though he knows Peter can’t see him.

“Okay, it’s awesome. It’s great. I just—you don’t have to keep doing this, Mister Stark. You’ve done so much already, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay you—”

“Stop,” Tony interrupts, sitting up straight. “Listen to me, okay? You don’t owe me anything. I want to do this for you. Just do your job and do your job well. Also, stay in school.”

“I—okay,” Peter says, still sounding a little lost. “Okay. Thank you so much.”


Two.

Natasha, being the kind of person she is, comes back to the Compound. She didn’t take the shield with her on her little field trip to Wakanda—to where Rogers and the rest are—and for a few seconds, Tony allows himself to breathe a sigh of relief.

It’s not that he wasn’t telling her the truth, because he was. Having to look at the shield sickens him, giving him that awful roiling feeling in the bottom of his stomach, and he wants it gone from his office. That much is true.

The other part of what he told her? Not true. As much as he wants to just make the damn thing disappear, he doesn’t actually want it back in Roger’s hands. The shield belongs to someone worthy, someone who actually fits the part of Captain America, and right now, that’s not Rogers.

Tony thinks back to a childhood spent trailing after his own father, practically begging for his father to notice him at least once, just please, and he has to sigh. The shield, just one of the many things Howard had created for Rogers, is an important reminder of the past. The shield is Howard paying more attention to looking for Rogers instead of looking after his own son, is Captain America being the gold standard in the house, is Tony being young and naïve as he looked up to Captain America, the kind, patriotic superhero who fought bullies and who would be so proud of Tony and his creations if they met.

The shield being back in Roger’s hand even after all that he did to Tony just seems wrong. For him to have something that Tony’s father made after he hid the truth about Tony’s parents’ deaths from him is so unthinkable, Tony actually wants to yell at himself for even telling Natasha to give the shield to Rogers. He owes it to Howard and his mom not to give the shield to Rogers. Hell, he owes
it to younger-him, who believed in the goodness of Captain America and his willingness to help the most people he could.

So no, it’s not just pettiness that’s keeping Tony from giving Rogers the shield.

He ignores the fact that giving back the shield to Rogers feels a little like his father siding with Rogers one more time, approving more of the super-soldier he helped create than his own son even in death. He also ignores the fact that giving back the shield to Rogers feels a little like betraying younger-Tony’s vision of Captain America, the superhero who would have helped Tony fight off all the bullies who both taunted and ignored him.

Maybe Natasha knows this. Tony wouldn’t put it past her to have figured all this out on her own. Maybe Natasha also knows that Tony craves company, which is why she walks into the Compound one day without fanfare, completely disregarding what Tony told her that day in Queens.

Still, because that’s who he is, he gives her shit for it.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave me the fuck alone?” Tony asks, not even bothering to look up from the documents on his office table.

She doesn’t respond. Instead, she sits down on one of the chairs across his desk, crossing her legs as she puts her arms on the wooden armrests on either side of her.

For a few seconds, everything is silent except for the rustling of the documents Tony’s looking over. If it were any other person in the room with Tony and if the last time he saw Natasha was less fraught with tension than it was, the silence would have been comforting. Peaceful, even. As it is, however, the silence is filled with tension so thick, he could have fired a repulsor blast and he still wouldn’t have been able to cut through it.

Tony steals a glance at Natasha and is frustrated to see her calmly waiting for him to finish doing whatever it is he’s doing. He’s lost his sense of focus the moment FRIDAY notified him that Natasha was stepping into the Compound, and at this point, he’s struggling to make sense of a single sentence. He has no doubt that Natasha, the spy that she is, knows that he’s been reading the same paragraph for ages. He refuses to blush or back down—it’s Natasha who willingly sought him, not the other way around. She could wait for him to finish pretending to get work done.

“What can I do to help you?” Tony finally asks after a few more minutes, his voice as bland as he can make it. He puts the documents aside—he’s going to have to read those over again much, much later. He has the feeling that his talk with Natasha will leave him unable to focus on anything for a few hours, at the very least.

“He asked about you,” Natasha says, completely disregarding Tony’s question.

Tony nods. “Okay, and?”

Suddenly, Natasha looks unsure. Unsteady. As if with two words, Tony managed to pull the rug from under her feet, so to speak.

“I—you don’t care?”

Tony sighs. He badly wants to tell her that he doesn’t care, not at all, now can she leave please? But it’s not the truth. Fight or no fight, Rogers, as well as the people he took with him, were once people he considered friends and family. They were never just teammates to Tony. Somewhere between late-night take-outs and movie nights at the Tower, between visiting Clint’s farm every now and then to give his kids gifts on their birthdays and driving to the Compound to make sure everyone’s been
settling in well, the term *teammates* became inadequate to describe the group of people Tony felt so thankful to have in his life.

The truth, however, is hard to say out loud. It’s exactly the sort of thing that would leave a bitter taste in Tony’s mouth, because telling Natasha the truth is almost the same as outright admitting that he cared for these people and they left him behind anyway.

He breathes in deep, says, “no, I don’t,” and feels a smidge of guilt bury itself in his ribcage, right against his heart. The lie comes easier to him than he had expected.

Maybe it isn’t a lie. Maybe it’s the truth.

He doesn’t really know. All he knows is that he’s been lying his entire life, and never did he ever tell a lie without it leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You’re lying,” Natasha says, but she’s uncertain. Tony can see it in her eyes, the way she’s just slightly doubting herself. Then again, it could be another trick of hers—Tony’s good at reading people, but Natasha has been trained practically her entire life to deceive.

Tony shrugs. “What does it matter if I am or if I’m not?”

Natasha tilts her head to the right and looks at him like she’s reading him, like she’s a scientist observing an experiment that yielded unexpected results.

Natasha seems to find whatever it is she’s looking for, because after a few seconds, she nods to herself and puts her arms back on the armrests, relaxing further into the chair. She looks out the floor-to-ceiling windows—whether it’s because she doesn’t want to look at Tony anymore, he doesn’t know.

“Clint misses his wife and kids,” Natasha begins. Tony watches as she thinks over her next words. When it doesn’t look like Natasha’s going to be saying anything else, Tony shrugs and looks out the glass as well, seeing what she’s seeing—an empty Compound, less busy than before.

“I’m not keeping him from them,” Tony says, not looking at Natasha. “That’s not my fault.”

Natasha nods, agreeing with him. “He seems to think it is.”

Tony’s eyebrows rise. “He was in retirement. He wasn’t even supposed to be caught up in this mess.”

“I know.”

“He’s an adult. He made his own decisions.”

“I know.” Natasha looks away from the window to look back at Tony. She had never been one to shy from confrontations, and she isn’t about to start now. “He’s starting to realize that, I think. Clint’s stubborn, but he’s used to making decisions for himself, and he’s used to facing the consequences.”

Tony nods, not knowing what else to say.

Natasha continues. “Sam’s—” she hesitates, “—loyal. Almost to a fault. So is Lang, I believe. I think, at the time, he was just happy to be a part of Cap’s team.”

Shaking his head, Tony asks, “why are you telling me this?”

Natasha purses her lips, as if preparing herself. “They’re not happy.”
“With me?” Tony asks, despite already knowing the answer.

“With Steve.”

Tony feels his eyes widen. He thought he knew the answer, but apparently not. “Why?”

“Well,” Natasha begins, sitting up straight, “they were never really happy, to begin with. Barnes decided to put himself back in cryo, so the mission to keep him safe was a success.”

Tony resolutely does not think about watching that video of Barnes killing his mother. He doesn’t. That way lies madness.

“After that, well, turns out Steve didn’t really have a plan. They found themselves unable to go back to their lives, and I think it wasn’t until then when they realized the consequences of their actions.” Natasha takes a deep breath. “When they found out you did your best to negotiate with Steve—to reach a compromise, somehow—they were even more displeased.”

Tony feels his leg start to jump up and down and forces himself to stop. “How’d they find out?”

Natasha gives him a look, and Tony closes his eyes and sighs. Almost immediately, his hands find their way to the sides of his face, his fingers steady as they try to massage the pain away from his temples.

“Nat,” he says, voice low, “what are you trying to do? What are you trying to achieve here? You need to stop. Whatever it is, just stop it.”

Natasha shakes her head. “They had to find out sooner or later. I just sped up the process.” When Tony doesn’t respond, she sighs. “Look, Tony, I think you’re right. There are things out there that are coming for us, and they’re going to be so much worse than what we’ve fought before. We have a better chance of beating them if we’re in a team.”

“So, what, are you trying to turn them against him? Is that what you’re doing?” Tony asks, tilting his head to the side as he tries to make sense of what Natasha’s telling him.

“You know that’s not what I’m doing,” she says, her voice deathly low.

Tony throws his hands up in the air and stands up from his seat, too much pent-up energy making him pace back and forth. “Enlighten me, then,” he says, his voice just a little shy from being loud enough to be considered a shout. “What are you doing? Because from my standpoint, that’s what it looks like you’re doing.” He stops, runs his fingers through his hair in an attempt to steady himself.

He’s not quite sure if it’s anger or fear running through his veins. At this point, he wouldn’t be surprised if it’s a little bit of both.

“You can’t turn them against Cap,” he says, and he doesn’t even hesitate to call him Cap anymore, because deep inside, he’s still Captain America. It’s not the costume that makes him so, nor is it the shield that Howard made for him. It’s him, the person he is, that made him Captain America.

Tony breathes out slowly. “They need him,” he says, voice soft.

Natasha shrugs. “They need you too.”

Tony shakes his head. “Not as much as they need him. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not exactly swimming in super soldiers right now, Nat.”
Natasha grits her teeth, annoyed. “We’re not exactly swimming in geniuses in metal suits either, are we?” she asks, her eyebrows raised, looking ready to counter every single argument Tony might make. “Look,” she says, sighing when she realizes that Tony will not let this matter go, “I’m sorry. I let the stress get to my head and I took your comment at face value when I shouldn’t have.”

Tony doesn’t respond. He doesn’t know what to say—as sad as it is, it isn’t often for him to be the one apologized to. Usually, he’s the one apologizing, or the one people are apologizing for. Not to, though—never to.

“I’m not turning them against Cap,” Natasha finally says, her voice softer than before. “I’m trying to make them see that there’s another way. They never got to hear your side, so now they’re getting that opportunity.”

Sighing, Tony reaches for his forehead, trying to ease the headache that’s threatening to make itself known. “The fact that they were on Cap’s side means they don’t believe in the Accords, Nat. There’s nothing you or I can do about that.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Does it? Does it really mean that they believe in the Accords? That you can’t persuade them? You can’t persuade Steve or Sam, but what about Clint? Clint knows what he’s capable of. He still thinks he should be held accountable for all the things he did while he was brainwashed by Loki. What about Wanda? Wanda helped Ultron because she thought she would be able to hold you accountable for your weapons. Until now, she’s expecting some sort of punishment for helping Ultron destroy Sokovia.” Natasha pauses, thinking over her words. “These people are superheroes because they believe in holding supervillains accountable for their actions, because they believe in making supervillains face the consequences. It seems to me that they were only on Cap’s side out of loyalty now, don’t you think?”

For a few moments, the room was quiet. Tony couldn’t find the proper words to say, couldn’t even begin to acknowledge everything that Natasha said.

He doesn’t know if it hurts more now, knowing that these people he cares about were on Cap’s side just because they liked him more. It feels like he’s nine years old again, being ignored by his father for Captain America.

“Cap’s the leader,” he tries to protest, but even before the words leave his mouth, he already knows it’s half-hearted.

“And you’re not?” Natasha stands up, heading to the door. Before leaving, she turns around and looks at Tony, her eyes soft and sincere. “Tony, listen. You’re worth more than Steve’s approval. He may have been Captain America, but underneath all that, he’s still Steve. You don’t have to keep fighting for him or making excuses for him. He doesn’t deserve it. Any of it.” She tilts her head. “All of it.”

And then she’s gone, leaving a stunned Tony in her wake.

One.

It’s not often for Tony to have the sense of clarity he has now.

“Hey, Tony.”

Tony turns away from the glass window and looks at Rogers. Rogers, who looks as tired as Tony feels, who looks defeated even though he’s won everything that matters, who looks desperate, and
Tony—

Tony knows where this is going. Tony knows what’s going to happen.

Tony doesn’t know what he’s going to do.

“Hey,” he croaks out.

Tony watches as Rogers makes his way across the room, pausing for a few moments to look at the shield propped up against the glass wall before continuing on his way towards Tony. Hesitation is written all over his face, mixed with that good old determination he’s famous for, and for a few moments, Tony can pretend that everything’s going to be okay.

He stops in front of Tony and takes a deep, shuddering breath. He closes his eyes, steeling himself.

Tony knows what's going to happen.

“I’m sorry,” he finally says, voice soft like he’s uttering a prayer and Tony is the god he’s asking forgiveness from. Even without the Cap uniform and the shield, Rogers’ apology sounds like the very foundation of the earth laced with sincerity that cannot be shaken by anyone.

This is what Tony has been waiting for.

He’s not shocked to see that he feels nothing.

Tony watches, unseeing, as Rogers’ shoulders begin to shake. He bites his lip, hard enough for him to be able to feel the pain, and doesn’t do anything when Rogers collapses to his knees, his eyes closed as his face transforms into one filled with pure anguish.

“I’m sorry,” Rogers whispers, eyelids opening to reveal watery blue orbs. His hands are curled into fists on his thighs. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“I—” Tony begins, then pauses.

He can’t do this.

“Tony, I never meant to hurt you. I’m sor—”

Tony rips off the BARF glasses and brings a hand to his face, breath coming out in shaky sobs.

He can’t do this.

Zero.

Alcohol doesn’t affect him.

Sometimes, he wishes it does. Then maybe, just maybe, he would be able to comfort himself with the knowledge that he’s doing this because he’s not entirely himself, but no. This—this is all him.

Steve looks at the phone in his hand and waits.

He’s not entirely sure what he’s waiting for. He thinks he’s waiting for the phone to ring, but he knows Tony. Tony would never call him unless there’s an actual emergency. Tony’s pride and stubbornness—once aspects of Tony that Steve adored, now working against him.
Sighing, Steve dials the number and presses the phone against his ear. *Just once*, he thinks. *Just once and never again.*

He’s weak, he knows. He should be able to stand his ground like he’s been doing for the last couple of weeks, should be able to rest easy knowing what he did was the right thing.

Now, he’s not so sure. He’s not even sure if he did the best he could.

All he wants to do is make sure Tony is safe. He wants to know if Tony’s been taking care of himself, if he’s been sleeping well, and if he’s been getting better. He wants to hear answers straight from Tony’s mouth and stop speculating on whether or not leaving Tony to die in the cold wilderness of Siberia would have been kinder than leaving him all alone to pick up the pieces. He wants to make sure Tony knows he regrets it, wants to make sure Tony knows he’s so unbelievably sorry, wants to—

*We’re sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.*

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**End Notes**

This is a fic I wrote about half a year ago. I was swimming in all the Tony Stark Feels™. Figured I might as well post it. (Yes, I am still bitter.)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!