

Choices, Consequences

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Choices, Consequences

by [AlchemyAlice](#)

Summary

After recovering from Siberia, Tony extends an olive branch.

Notes

For some reason I felt compelled to write this even though I was so dissatisfied by CA:CW that I have actively blocked a lot of it from my memory. There are therefore probably lots of things I have misremembered or have entirely neglected from the movie.

I have not in any way attempted realism in regards to trauma recovery or to the function of the UN, or indeed any of the mores of international law at large. Also, there are possibly some problematic passages about mind control, so if that's a no-go for you, you can either ask me for details or give this a skip.

TW for mind control, panic attacks.

Tony stared through the glass of the cryo-chamber, and thought he could feel a sympathetic chill in the tips of his fingers. He'd been feeling a lot of lingering cold lately, though—just one more symptom of an ongoing problem, and the window in front of him was hardly the root cause.

"How long...?"

"Nearly a year," T'Challa supplied, watching him. "Only a few weeks after you went to Siberia."

A long year, and yet one that seemed to almost disappear in Tony's mind. A long haze of contract negotiations, UN talks, arguments with Ross, and making nice, but not playing fair. Tony's good at the long game, but this was the longest he'd ever played in the name of politics, in the name of realizing the vision of something he wasn't even sure he wanted a part of any more.

Rhodey had been the voice of change, through all of it.

"We were right," he had repeated, standing upright now, in lighter braces. "We still are. We can make this happen the right way. But we've gotta fight to make it happen. Put our money where our mouths are."

So for Rhodey (and maybe a bit for his own pride), Tony had fought. Glad-handed and pushed and smiled and now the Accords were...not perfect, but decent, far better than they were, and improving all the time. Clear protocols, channels of immediate contact with relevant officials in case of emergencies, pre-prepared expedited procedures for acting on foreign soil. A non-U.S. military affiliation too, which Ross, for all his bluster about not being the World Police, became *very* precious about, particularly when that meant essentially killing the Registration Act. Tony had pried that power out of his hands in an opportunistic show of force that had been viscerally satisfying, particularly when Steve—*Rogers'* shield still sat in one of his storage rooms.

He didn't want to think about Steve right now. It was hard not to, though.

"So, Rogers left him here?" he asked, with a hint of disbelief, still studying the chamber and its contents.

"There was very little else he could do," T'Challa replied. "We were working on ways of circumventing or disabling the programming, and Captain Rogers was left waiting, watching you carry out negotiations for the others' release from the Raft."

"He only beat me by a week," Tony muttered. "I was going to get them all out."

What a mess that had been, Ross hurling accusations left and right despite the fact that he'd *illegally extradited* a bunch of superheroes to a fucking underwater black site not a month back.

(And they called *Tony* overdramatic, *Christ*, but he's got *nothing* on the U.S. military-industrial complex.)

It had turned out not okay, but passable, by sheer dumb luck: Tony ended up having the airtight alibi of actually having nothing at all to do with the Raft breakout, and then Ross had been so apoplectic that he'd started to make noticeable, public mistakes. As a result, the UN had started taking unkindly to his other suggestions, and finally Tony had brought out the big guns (aka, the Blonski files, newly unearthed from the SHIELD data-dump) and that had been that. Tony came out looking shockingly sane, to everyone's surprise, including his own.

"Any change in his condition?"

"He is entirely stable. Our technology is far superior to HYDRA's in that regard—Barnes experienced incremental aging while in their stasis chambers, whereas here, his body is entirely on hold."

"Man, I know someone who'd *love* to have a chat with your people," Tony muttered, and then winced.

"Dr. Banner, I presume?" T'Challa said, not unkindly.

"He's a real pain to get a hold of nowadays, and not for lack of trying." Tony scratched at his beard. "They didn't all come back here, did they? That would be inconsiderate, towards you, I mean."

"Most did not," T'Challa agreed.

Tony knew about some of them. Not long after the breakout, Natasha had returned to the compound under a false name and face, and he had taken one look at her and said, "Are you sticking around this time?"

"Are you going to have a temper tantrum and lose all sense of proportion this time?" she shot back, eyebrows raised under a blond wig.

"...Point." He'd let her inside. "How are the others?"

"Fine when I left them. Wanda wants to come here. She's staying in Sokovia, keeping her head down, but..."

Tony had sighed, the now-familiar exhaustion welling up. "She can't right now, she'd get arrested and sent to the Hague. The Lagos investigation is still ongoing, and until it resolves, she's in legal limbo."

Natasha nodded. "I'll tell her."

"Look," Tony said, "If after that's over, she still wants to come in? She's welcome. If she feels safe here, that is. I'd understand if..."

"Enough. You fucked up. But so did all of us. There were any number of opportunities, in retrospect, for us to have set this all right."

"Offer stands. Understanding...stands."

"Understood," Natasha intoned, with a quirk in her lips. And then, with forced lightness, she asked, "Any sign of...?"

"Sorry, no." Tony had shaken his head. "I have FRIDAY running all the usual traces, but he's not ready to be found yet. I thought it best to give him some space. Might not want anything to do with us after this latest mess."

Natasha huffed. "Fair. How's Rhodes?"

"Getting better every day. Come on in and see him, he's sick of my face by now."

She had smiled at him, crookedly. "Well, I haven't had pizza in six months," she had said. "So...please save me?"

Tony held many knots inside of him, pulling him in all directions. In that moment, though, it had felt like she had cut right through one, leaving more room for him to breathe. "I am your knight in very dingy armor," he had proclaimed. "FRIDAY?"

"Garlic and extra cheese with mushrooms. Right away, boss."

"Clint must have left here a while back, right? I can't imagine him leaving Laura for too long." Tony's gaze got caught by the absence behind the glass, where the metal arm should be. Something else to fix, maybe, if he's allowed.

"Correct," T'Challa confirmed. "No one begrudged him that. Mr. Lang as well."

"That's a bit surprising."

"He has family, too."

"Maybe should have thought of that before this whole thing went down," Tony murmured.

"Hero-worship is a very hard siren call to ignore."

"You're telling me."

T'Challa looked between Tony and the cryo-chamber. "You've forgiven him, have you not? He is an innocent in this."

Tony exhaled. "Yeah, no, I..."

He just couldn't stop staring.

James Buchanan Barnes, cold and in the flesh. Still unshaven, still not looking remotely like the old film reels, still looking exactly like the Winter Soldier. Bile had risen in Tony's throat when he first set eyes on him, but that had faded fast. He was so still, almost like a sculpture.

"There's nothing to forgive. Obviously."

"Obviously," T'Challa agreed. "And yet."

"And yet," Tony nodded. He clenched his hands, then straightened them. "So why'd you even let me in here?"

He and T'Challa had come a long way since their initial meeting, but Tony had been very careful since then to maintain respectful boundaries, for both the sake of politics and to not drive T'Challa away altogether. Still, T'Challa seemed not to mind him; Tony likened it to living through an earthquake with someone, or maybe a terrorist attack—some alliances get forged in fire, and after that, they're there for life whether you want them to be or not. Tony didn't know if he'd count T'Challa as a friend, and was fairly certain that T'Challa didn't count him as one, but regardless, he was pretty sure he'd step in front of a bullet for the guy (sans suit), and that was more than enough to be going on with for now.

"Because Steve Rogers is not the boss of me," T'Challa answered, raising an eyebrow slightly. "And though I have extended to him my hospitality and resources, my duty is ultimately not to him, it is to the one who suffered most in this conflict." He nodded at the chamber. "If you can help him, then I will allow you to do so."

"I think I can," Tony said. "I want to try. But we won't know until we wake him up."

"Then let us wake him," T'Challa said. "And find out."

The cryo-chamber took a while to deactivate—all of the careful calibrations designed to keep the cells alive and yet inactive had to be slowly adjusted and equalized, and that meant sitting awkwardly in the medical ward with the king of Wakanda, trying to make small talk.

"You're very bad at this," T'Challa observed, after Tony commented on the weather.

"I'm actually excellent, you've just got me really off my game," Tony admitted.

"It has been a while since you've had a conversation without an agenda."

Tony tilted his head. "You're not wrong."

"It helps, I have found, to have colleagues who are not cowed by the fact of my position," T'Challa said, sitting back. It seemed that, no matter how relaxed he appeared, he never seemed not regal. Tony admitted to a bit of jealousy on that front.

"Oh, I've got plenty of those," Tony said. "Just not many who aren't tired of me all the time." He looked at T'Challa. "How is Wakanda doing under all the new scrutiny? I haven't seen you at the most recent UN meetings."

"We've held firm under far worse pressures," T'Challa replied. He folded his hands. "My people have put their faith in me. I will not fail them. After the ground began to settle, it was time to attend to their needs first, the world's second."

Tony nodded. "When there's time, when we have...breathing room. I wouldn't mind—"

"Talking shop?" T'Challa smiled. "I would not mind either." A faint beep came from the cryo-chamber. "He's ready," he said, standing. "Are you?"

"Probably not, but here we go," Tony muttered, and straightened his suit.

T'Challa attended to the control pad next to the chamber. Slowly, the stabilizing gas that had been keeping Barnes unconscious through the temperature change siphoned off, and the glass came down.

Tony held his breath.

Barnes opened his eyes. They widened fast; first with recognition, then fear, then resignation.

"Are you going to kill me?" he rasped.

Tony pursed his lips, and ignored the second surge of nausea, this time tinged with regret. "I deserve that," he said. "But no, I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to give you a choice."

Barnes' gaze flicked from Tony's face to T'Challa's, and seemed to take a moment to reorient himself. "Where's Steve?"

"On a mission with Mr. Wilson," T'Challa said, after a small pause. It wasn't a lie, if you counted going after endless HYDRA caches, unsanctioned and off the grid, a mission. Tony wasn't privy to the details, but he could fill in the blanks from Natasha's reports easily enough.

Barnes's gaze darted over Tony's face. "He doesn't know you're here, does he?"

"No." Tony crossed his arms, and then uncrossed them. "We haven't really spoken."

"We left you," Barnes said, giving him a long look. "We shouldn't have done that."

Cold pulled at Tony's insides. "I gave you good reason to."

Barnes shook his head. He had none of the solemn sincerity of Rogers, only a weary sort of regret, and somehow, that managed to grate less on Tony. It was comprehensible to him, if nothing else. He thought back to Natasha's return, their conversation, what she had said.

"Sam and Steve are making plans," Natasha had told him, several pizza slices and glasses of vodka in, that first night she was back. Tony had draped himself across the couch next to her; Rhodey lay on the floor because the cool stone *feels awesome on my back, no, fuck off, I don't*

want a cushion, Tones. "They heard about the incident in Taipei, wanted to help. They're going the vigilante route."

"Idiots." Taipei had been a mess, and would have gone a lot better with a full roster. But Falcon and...whatever Rogers was choosing to become, couldn't have done the job alone either. And if they thought they could just swoop in and out of sensitive situations without consequences, well. They probably could, but Tony would really hate them for it. It wouldn't take much to undo all of his hard work.

"If they get caught, yes." She sighed. "Steve wants Barnes back. He's going to take as much of HYDRA out as he can, and he's hoping that somewhere, someone's going to have answers as to how to break his programming."

"Of course he does," Rhodey had said. "He wants that dude to save his life for him. Guy's put all his eggs in that one messed up, broken basket."

"He was Red Room, right?" Tony had asked, craning his head to look up at Natasha. "Barnes was, after he was first wiped."

"He was a lot more than Red Room, but that was part of it, yes," Natasha had replied.

"You broke Red Room programming."

"That was conditioning. Not physical rewiring."

"Do you think it can be done, though?"

Natasha had thought about it, swirling her vodka in its glass. "He was doing pretty well with it on his own," she allowed eventually. "The triggers are the problem. We know one set, but we don't know how to stop his reaction to it, and we have no idea what other things might set him off. The book might not even be all of it."

Tony had waved it away. "If we go back in time, to the source, when those words were first being imprinted on his brain, then we don't need the book, or anything else."

Natasha had cocked an eyebrow at him. "You've got a time-turner lying around, Tony? If so, I have some requests."

"Hilarious, Miss Granger. No. But I have something. Let me think about it."

"You'd do that?" she had asked, cocking her head. "For him?"

Rhodey had turned to look up at her. "Of course he will," he had said, with a hint of gentle scorn. "He's Tony."

"None of us were making very good decisions during that time," Tony said to Barnes now, making sure to maintain eye contact. "I won't say that you weren't a part of that, but of the people involved who were able to make decisions, you weren't one of the movers and

shakers. So if anyone owes apologies, I'm thinking it's Rogers and I. This," he gestured between the two of them, "Is just my particular olive branch."

Barnes stared at him steadily, and then nodded.

"What choice?" he asked.

"Do you want to come out of there?" Tony asked, stepping back from the chamber. "Sit down?"

"No," Barnes said sharply, and Tony winced.

"Bad choice of words. No sitting necessary. Or if you want to sit, it can be, I don't know, on a bench, help me out here, Your Majesty."

"You seem to be doing fine, Stark," T'Challa said, with ill-hidden amusement.

"Fine, hang me out to dry, why don't you. Barn—" He stopped at Barnes' flinch, and cocked his head. "What would you like me to call you? Bucky?"

Barnes shook his head almost as vehemently as before. "I'm not him. I don't...just don't call me that."

That that name wasn't for Tony's use went unsaid, but Tony heard it all the same. "No problem," he said. "We'll come up with something. But, I mean, do you want to come out here? You look...confined."

Barnes's eyes darted to the glass casing, and after another pause, he sat forward, and took a step out of the chamber.

His knees buckled almost immediately; Tony stepped forward to steady him, as did T'Challa, and though Barnes cringed at the contact, they managed to get his feet under him enough that he could walk to the nearest hospital bed and sit down.

When he was stable, Tony let go and retreated to the bed opposite, where he lowered himself slowly and rested his elbows on his knees.

Barnes seemed...less vacant than he had been. Even back in Siberia, when he admitted to remembering everything, there had been an emptiness behind it, a sense of only barely having begun to process the full weight of what those memories entailed. That much was understandable. Now, Tony was caught up in wondering whether processing still happened in cryo-sleep, whether consciousness persisted in some form or another, and all of the horrible implications that would have about Barnes's last half-century of life.

"So," he said, "A choice. You were hoping that when you next woke up, there'd be a way to undo your programming, make you safe. Is that right?"

Barnes nodded, slowly, and then a bit more firmly.

"Right. So, I think I've come up with such a way. Thing is, it comes at a cost."

Finally, Barnes seemed to focus fully. "Tell me."

"You're going to have to remember."

"Remember what?"

"A lot of things," Tony said, as lightly as possible. "But specifically, you're going to have to remember the process of how you were programmed. If we're able to reconstruct it in enough detail—virtually!" he added quickly, when he saw Barnes's face go dark with horror, "*Virtually* reconstruct it, we can begin to change parts of that memory, pull it apart and maybe help you learn how to fight the programming in real time."

Barnes shakes his head. "Do you know how dangerous that could be? You could trigger—"

"Yes, we could. But uh, given your current lack of ar—er, enhancement?—I figure now's a time we could maybe have a chance of controlling you, if things got out of hand."

Barnes thought on this for a moment, and then said, bone dry, "You were going to say *armaments*, weren't you."

T'Challa choked on very unkingly laughter.

Tony opened his hands, trying very hard not to be utterly surprised and delighted. "Listen, the pun was *right there*, I avoided being insensitive by the skin of my teeth, give me some credit."

Barnes snorted. "I'll give you *something*." His slight smile faded fast, turning crooked. "Bit of poetic justice, huh?" he said, lifting the shoulder that now held only a metal stump. "You taking this, after what I took from you."

Tony sighed, the moment gone. "You didn't take anything from me. HYDRA took it, and took a hell of a lot more from you in the process." One day, he'd say it and believe it. One day. He rubbed at his beard. "Does it hurt?"

"All the time," Barnes replied, matter-of-fact. "A bit less now, actually. I think part of it was the weight, before."

Tony nodded. "So that's just a dampener, right?" he said, pointing at the black pad strapped around what was left of Barnes's arm. "Just blocking all the torn electricals?"

"It seemed the least disruptive route, since he was going into cryo-sleep," T'Challa explained. "If he's going to be awake for a longer period, we can arrange for something less passive." He met Tony's meaningful gaze, and tilted his head in agreement. A project for another day, perhaps.

Tony nodded again. "'If', indeed. So, B—uh...James. James?" He raised his eyebrows in question.

Barnes shrugged. Not a no.

“James,” Tony settled. “How about it?”

Barnes stared at him. “Why would you do this?”

“What, take you through a highly experimental and potentially traumatizing series of treatments in order to make you safe for the rest of the world?”

He blinked. “Well, when you put it like that.”

Tony leaned further forward, his knees almost touching Barnes’s. “Don’t take it lightly. You say you remember a lot about what you’ve done—”

“Everything,” Barnes cut in, eyes momentarily dark and hollow. “I remember everything.”

“Everything, then,” Tony allowed. “It won’t be like it is now, though. Remembering is one thing, re-experiencing quite another. We’ll be taking apart the memories of probably one of the worst times of your life and we’re going to reconstruct and reproduce them, integrating the real faces and places with your memories of those moments to make them sharper, more accurate. Now, we’ve tested a part of this system a few times in the past year, mostly on vets with PTSD, and the results have been good—great, in fact—but the process is, and I cannot stress this enough James, it is *very painful*. You will not enjoy this. None of us will. But it might undo the triggers, and it might help you cope.”

Barnes looked at him, then at his hand, which he moved to tuck into his sleeve, and then found he couldn’t without the missing one to help. He tucked it in between his thighs instead, shoulders hunching down.

Tony swallowed down a jagged feeling in his throat, and waited.

“And I can say no,” Barnes murmured.

“You can absolutely say no,” Tony agreed. “You say no, we put you back in cryo-freeze, I was never here, we never speak of it again, all of the original agreements with King T’Challa stand. You’ll be safe until Rogers or someone else comes up with something better, something easier.”

Barnes nodded, more to himself than either of them. “I don’t want Steve to know,” he said. “I don’t want to get his hopes up.”

Tony sucked in a breath through his teeth, but T’Challa nodded. “We can ensure that.” He shot a look at Tony. “The Captain and Sergeant Wilson are wanted fugitives now. It is no longer safe to grant them asylum here. As I said, I must attend to my people’s needs first. They will understand.”

“If you say so. James?”

“I want...” Barnes drifted off, and then found himself again. He looked straight at Tony, and said, “I don’t want to be in cryo anymore.”

Slowly, Tony nodded. “Then we’ll start tomorrow. For today, just rest, get your bearings. I need to make some calls.”

Tony couldn’t be in Wakanda all the time, could barely schedule in this weekend to include a trip out, but with Pepper on his side, he made it work. Quits or not, she was there for him, and he’d never be able to thank her adequately for it.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” she had asked, when he’d first floated the idea. “After what he did?”

“If we can help him with the tech we already have, not only will the value of that tech go up, but we’ll be prepared for any number of problem children HYDRA might throw at us,” Tony had answered. He had been sitting in the client chair in Pepper’s office, which never failed to amuse them both, nowadays. “I think it’s a good investment, at the very least.”

“But you *want* to do this, too?” Pepper had said, watching him carefully. “You actually want to help this man, who should be standing trial for what he’s done, and is instead frozen safely in a non-extradition country?”

“Time enough for the trial bit, should he ever want to leave Wakanda,” Tony had shrugged. “But, I mean...yeah. He’s...he’s not, I mean, okay—bottom line: like it or not, he’s been this pawn, this cipher, ever since he fell from a train in nineteen forty-fucking-five.”

Pepper had made an ambivalent sound in her throat. Her righteous anger on his behalf had kept Tony going when she and Vision had retrieved him, frostbitten and heartsick, from the bunker in Siberia. Time and distance had done most of the rest for him (along with that pathetic note from Rogers, which had turned his anger from hot to *cold as the fucking tundra*). He knew he was petty and prone to vindictiveness, but Pepper was *vicious* when truly tested, her outrage burning like embers, hidden and lingering, and he loved her for it, even now.

He had stood up to pace.

“I was so angry, when I saw that tape. Obviously, I was. I wanted to kill him, I wanted him to pay for what he did, but...look, you’ve seen the files now, the SHIELD-HYDRA bullshit. I was angry at him, but...this *system*. ”

He had stopped, and had shook his head, opening his hands helplessly.

“Look at what it’s done to us, to all of us. This huge global conspiracy that not even *Fury* was able to suss out until it was too fucking late. That managed to hook all of us, pull us all together only to tear us apart, this team that could have meant so much, could have *been* so much. And I just, if there’s a way, somehow, of fixing some part of that, some part of this that should never have been a part of it in the first place, then maybe...”

“Maybe you won’t feel so alone,” Pepper had murmured.

“I’m not alone,” Tony had said automatically, drawing in. “I have Rhodey. And you.”

Pepper had looked like she wanted to say something but thought better of it. Instead, she had tilted her head and smiled a little crookedly. “Of course,” she had agreed. “Okay. So you’re doing this. I’ll make the arrangements to get the equipment to Wakanda if he agrees. There will probably be some trade embargo problems that King T’Challa will need to negotiate with you.”

“That’s fine, anything that needs to happen on the ground, I’ll address with him.”

“I suppose you are rather friendly with him, nowadays.” She had exhaled. “All right, fine. You’re doing this. I’ll help. Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“That will be all, Miss Potts.”

So when Barnes agreed, Tony called her from Wakanda, and Pepper flew in the equipment. With T’Challa’s agreement, he set it up in a private room in the medical ward.

Barnes watched them load in like it was a gallows.

“You still don’t have to do this, you know,” Tony said to him, later in the evening. They were alone in the lab, T’Challa having gone to attend to his country, the technicians having finished their end of the job. Tony would take care of the fine tuning before he was due to leave the next day. Over the week, Barnes was meant to go through an in-depth questionnaire about the timing and circumstances of his first days with HYDRA. T’Challa promised to have various therapists on hand for support, but for a lot of this groundwork, Barnes would be stepping into his memories alone.

“I know,” Barnes said. He picked at his food. There were dark circles under his eyes, but he’d made an attempt at shaving. More than anything, the pale clean line of his jaw just made his exhaustion stand out more.

“So if you don’t want to, just say—”

“I’m going to do it,” Barnes interrupted.

“But do you want to?” Tony pressed. He didn’t quite know why he was pushing so hard, but there was something about Barnes he was only now noticing, the way every inch of him read *hunted*, even when his words were decisive. Or maybe Tony was just desperate to do this the right way, after screwing up so many times before.

Barnes put his fork down and tucked his arm around his middle, like he needed to keep his rib cage from breaking apart. “Steve—”

“Don’t do this for Rogers,” Tony cut in, too sharply. “Don’t do it for anyone’s sake but your own. You’re the one who’s gonna have the shit kicked out of you by this process, it’s gotta be

worth it *to you*.”

Barnes looked almost bemused for a moment. “Thanks,” he said, a little dryly. “I was gonna say that Steve should have left me to die.”

Tony blinked. “Okay. Not remotely what I was thinking.”

“Which surprises me, to be honest,” Barnes said. “Woulda thought that was your general feeling about this whole mess.”

“Oh, I mean, it was,” Tony replied, because if Barnes was going to be brutally honest, so was he. “Mostly when Rogers was being a stubborn ass and it turned out that half the reason why he was being so stubborn was all about *you* and not about the goddamn matter at hand, but I mean, that’s not my overwhelming thought when it comes to you. Frankly, Barnes, I’ve got more important shit to dedicate my brain cells to than resenting you.”

“That’s...surprisingly comforting.” Barnes picked up his fork again, and managed to shove a bite of stew into his mouth. “But what I’m getting at, is that this is all,” he gestured with his fork, “Borrowed time. Time I shouldn’t have, but that Stevie, hard-headed jerk that he is, chose to give me. So I’ve gotta figure out what that means now. And I can’t do that while I’m in stasis, waiting for someone to come along and fix me.”

Tony stared at him for a second. It was the longest he’d ever heard Barnes talk, and if he was honest with himself, he’d admit to his interest being significantly piqued. “You ever tell Rogers that?” he asked.

Barnes hunched his shoulders in. “Wasn’t ever really a good time for it. When we came back, it was either wait around to slip up, get caught and stand trial, or go back into the freeze. Didn’t think much beyond that. And Stevie...he’s good at standing his ground. Not always so good at knowing what to do once the ground don’t need standing for anymore.”

Tony snorted.

They ate in silence for a while. Then Barnes shot a sidelong look at him. “From what I hear, you’re pretty good at fixing things.”

Tony felt his lips twitch, a half-smile, half-grimace. “Pretty good at breaking them, too.”

“Gotta break things to understand well enough how to fix ‘em.”

“Yeah, well. It’s not worth it if all the pieces don’t fit together properly afterwards,” Tony muttered.

“Don’t think they’re gonna ever do that with me,” Barnes said. “Might as well give it a try, though.”

“All right,” Tony nodded. “Yeah, all right. I’ll finish all the calibrations tonight.”

He worked through the night, lost in the now-familiar structures of projector sequences and network coordination, and finished around dawn, which was about enough time to grab a quick nap and then head out, as he was due for a meeting with Interpol in the afternoon.

He was halfway through a bread roll in the dining room T'Challa had pointed him towards on his first day there when Barnes appeared in the doorway, looking bewildered. He startled visibly when he noticed the room was occupied.

Tony just raised eyebrows at him. "Breakfast roll?" he offered.

"ЧТо?" Barnes shook his head, hard. "No, sorry, I...um. Coffee?"

Silently, Tony pointed at the side board. With a slightly uneven gait, Barnes made his way there and poured himself a mug, before sitting heavily on the opposite side of the dining table.

"Not really used to waking up from normal sleep," he muttered. "'Specially not somewhere nice."

"You're a real piece of work," Tony replied, then winced.

Barnes just snorted into his coffee. "Got that right."

Tony watched him slurp at his mug for a second, and then said, "I've gotta head out. The questionnaire is on file with T'Challa when you want to make a start on it. Take your time, let him know if anything feels wrong."

"Anything feels wrong and he'd better have armed guards around."

"He's the Black Panther, he's done a pretty good job of handling you in the past."

Barnes tilted his head. "Point."

"Unless things go wrong, the only people who are gonna read your answers are me and FRIDAY. Or just FRIDAY, if you're uncomfortable with me seeing anything. So please don't hold back, for anyone's sakes."

Barnes looked surprised. "You won't read them?"

"Not if you don't want me to." Tony had invaded enough people's privacy to draw this line, feeble as it was.

Barnes studied him. "I don't mind," he said eventually. "Look all you want."

Surprises and more surprises. Barnes seemed to be full of them. "All right," Tony said. "FRIDAY will record and analyze as you go along, and I'll have a look when I'm back next weekend. Sound okay?"

"Sure," Barnes shrugged. "If you say so."

Suspiciously passive, but Tony would take it, for now. “Then have a good week,” he said, and stood up. “Or I guess, a tolerable one.”

“Always good to keep those expectations low,” Barnes muttered, and Tony huffed a laugh.

He had to restrain himself from patting Barnes on the shoulder as he left the room. When he identified the impulse, he shot a look down at his hand, and felt inexplicably betrayed.

The early stages of setup lasted several weekends, in which Barnes saw a very well-regarded and well-vetted pair of therapists, and retold what he remembered. FRIDAY then passed on both Barnes’s recollections and the therapists’ notes (where expressly non-confidential) to Tony. Tony, in turn, gathered the data into discrete packets of images, sensations, sounds.

The reports and Barnes’s own words were about as devastating as Tony expected. Jaw clenched against nausea, each week he verified the new list of faces and names Barnes recalled, cross-checked them with various confirmed members of HYDRA (many of them former SHIELD operatives), and assembled the sims he’d need for the reconstruction. When he came to Wakanda, he ran the sims by Barnes, who was flanked daily by the therapists, as well as several of T’Challa’s members of security.

For the most part, their interactions were purely businesslike, and always moderated by one or more other people. Tony certainly didn’t mind; he’d done enough soul-baring for a good long time, and Barnes seemed perfectly content with the arrangement as well. When they parted ways on Sunday evenings, it was always with a quiet nod.

They made progress, slowly but surely. Or at least Tony did, and Barnes never said anything to the contrary. Tony tried not to worry about that. Instead, he went home at the end of each week, and worked harder.

The schedule, of course, couldn’t stay quite so regular. By the time they were finally ready to start testing full sims and Barnes had been given as clean a bill of mental health as was possible under the circumstances, Tony hadn’t been able to come by for nearly a month. Instead, he’d been occupied with putting out political fires (Sam and Steve had hit the outskirts of Moscow, and Putin was *pissed*), which had been an exercise in both endurance and tremendous frustration. When Dr. Gish and Dr. Xiang had reported in that Barnes was ready for the exposure stage of therapy, however, he had leaped at the chance to leave the paperwork and arguing behind.

T’Challa was at the landing pad when he touched down. “Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. How have you been?”

“Mostly terrible. You?”

“Mostly tolerable. President Putin?”

“Angry as a wet cat in a sack, and one thousand times less adorable. I don’t know how you deal with this more than six months out of a year.”

“Why do you think Wakanda has been an isolationist country for so long?” T’Challa said dryly. He shook Tony’s extended hand. “Though in fairness, the average leader of a nation is not trying to install a new and completely unprecedented international peacekeeping force single-handedly.”

“Well, that’s me, go big or go home.”

T’Challa shook his head. “Come. I have only a few minutes before I must attend to other matters, and your patient is waiting.”

“How’s he doing?”

He tilted his head. “Difficult to tell. You were not lying when you said it would be painful, to remember.”

Tony grimaced. “Yeah, it’s...I mean, I have enough trouble with the stuff jangling around in my head. I’ll admit I’m impressed Barnes can even put together a coherent sentence at this point.”

“He is spare with his words, but yes, he is as well as he can be, under these circumstances.”

“Damning with faint praise there, but I’ll take it. B—James. How are you doing this weekend?”

Barnes had emerged at the end of the landing pad, arms crossed, shoulders hunched in despite the humid warmth of the Wakandan forest air. “Fine,” he rasped.

“Wow, you’re a terrible liar,” Tony said. “I guess I won’t hold it against you.”

Barnes almost managed to look offended for a moment, and then he snorted. “You’re an asshole, Stark.”

“So I’ve been told. You ready for this?”

“Don’t think I ever will be. We’re doing it anyway.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tony took the liberty of clapping a hand on Barnes’s shoulder this time, because he couldn’t help himself, and Barnes was probably resigned to Tony being a horrible person anyway, so.

As it happened, Barnes barely flinched, and then he even let himself be steered inside, leaning a little into Tony’s hand.

They went back to the med wing, where T’Challa excused himself. “You can take it from here?” he asked Tony, though he glanced at Barnes as well. “I didn’t schedule any of the other staff for this stage, per your request.”

Barnes startled. “My—?”

“My request,” Tony interrupted. “The space is small, and too many people start to interfere with the holograms. That okay with you?”

Barnes gave him an unreadable look, but eventually shrugged. “If you’re sure.”

Tony said, “Yep, sure. All set. Thanks, highness.”

T’Challa rolled his eyes, but didn’t protest the informality as he left.

For a moment, Tony and Barnes stood alone in the room, the awkward silence of their shared purpose overwhelming. Then Barnes said, “So, you’ve read my answers?”

“Yup,” Tony said. He gave him a sidelong glance. “In my professional opinion, I think I can say definitively that this is going to suck.”

For a fraction of a second, Barnes looked like he was going to cry. Then he just huffed out a breath, and say, “I think you might be right about that, doc.”

“We’ll start slow,” Tony promised. “Just environment, a few faces. No specific scenarios.”

“That’s plenty,” Barnes said.

And because Tony had maybe learned something about the value of transparency, he paused near the doorway and said, “I built a chair.”

Barnes stilled, his hand hovering over the side table next to the hospital bed.

Tony continued, almost despite himself. “Non-working, obviously, but it’ll deliver a mild static shock, enough to prompt associations, and physically its outer appearance is as accurate as I could manage, but it doesn’t do anything, brain-wise. It’ll look like it does, though. I’ll sit in it first, if you want, just to prove it doesn’t work.”

Hoarsely, Barnes said, “How did you...?”

“Rogers has left a fair amount of wreckage in his wake, while haring after your former masters. I’ve been overseeing cleanup the past few months. It’s given me access to a number of HYDRA-built pieces.”

“So you could reproduce it. If you wanted to.”

Tony met his gaze. “Yes. If I wanted to, I could. Could probably even improve it, make sure no one ever came out of it with any trace of their personality left intact. HYDRA had a lot of horrible-slash-brilliant people on staff, but I’m very, very good.”

Barnes blinked slowly. “That might solve a lot of your problems,” he said, like he was feeling out the edge of a wound. “Building one of those.”

“What, just wipe you to nothing and call it a day?” Tony said, with a thin smile. “Sure. I’ve already got the deaths of hundreds if not thousands on my conscience, what’s another burnt-out husk in my wake?”

“...I was thinking more strategic erasure of my triggers, actually.”

Tony dismissed it. “Oh no, I mean that would be great, but no. You’re comparing a magnifying glass fire with a slash-and-burn job. The chair’s a blunt instrument. I can make it the best blunt instrument it can be, but that’s the extent of my or anyone else’s powers.”

Barnes stared at him. “Not many people trust you, do they?”

“Should they?” Tony countered, waggling his eyebrows to hide his half-seriousness.

Barnes didn’t answer, just tapped his fingers on his thigh and then pointed to the private room where all the equipment was. “Is the chair in there?”

“Waiting in the jet.”

More tapping. Then, “Well, don’t just stand there, go and get it.”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Tony loaded in while Barnes hovered, watching him work. Tony wasn’t about to ask him for help.

“So, what do you think?” he said, when it was unboxed and assembled.

When the silence stretched, he turned around.

Barnes was in the doorway. His gaze was fixed on the chair.

It was an ugly thing. Tony hadn’t liked building it, even a non-working model. It reflected its purpose—brutal, utilitarian, and possessing a certain irregularity of proportion that made Tony’s gorge rise a bit. He was rarely a procrastinator when it came to synthesizing equipment, but he had taken breaks from building several times in the past week because being too long in the guts of it made his brain wander into not-good places.

Barnes was now looking very much the way Tony had felt during the build process.

“James? You okay?”

“Haven’t been okay for seventy goddamn years,” Barnes replied hoarsely. He didn’t look away from the chair.

“We don’t have to do anything with it today,” Tony said, shifting from foot to foot, adrenaline kicking up. “I’ve kind of sprung it on you, you can take the next week to get used to it. I can work on other aspects of the reconstruction, there’s all kinds of stuff we have to pin down from the questionnaire, and—”

“Would you just hold your horses for a second, doc?” Barnes drawled.

“Okay! Okay.” Tony held up his hands.

Barnes took a step forward, and then another. Reached out a steady hand to the chair. When he made contact, he shuddered, then seemed to pull himself back together. “Got the texture right,” he said.

“Thanks. I guess.”

Tony watched him. It was fascinating, in a way. Barnes’s touch was gentle, but there was a shadow across his face, pressing hollows into his cheeks, the thin skin beneath his eyes. His gaze was both fixed on the chair and focused off somewhere else completely.

“I wanted this, sometimes. I think,” Barnes murmured. “It hurt, but it just...the things I had done, they just went away. It was...it was a relief.”

“Reality was horrible,” Tony said. “I can understand wanting it gone for a while.”

“You’ll need a mouth-guard,” Barnes said. “Something tough; rubber, preferably. Always tasted foul. Where’s the headpiece?”

“Just in hologram,” Tony answered, watching him. “It’ll feel real, when you see it.”

Barnes shook his head though. “It was heavy,” he murmured. “Changed the balance of the chair when they locked it in place. That’s how I knew they were about to start.”

Tony swallowed. “Okay. I can build that, no problem. If you think you need it.”

Barnes kept rubbing his fingers over the arm of the chair. There was nothing dissociative about the motion—Tony was familiar with the look of that now, he’d seen himself wear it on multiple occasions when he played back footage from JARVIS and FRIDAY—instead, Barnes just seemed thoughtful, measuring.

“Is there anything else I should physically make, before we start?” Tony asked. “I’ve never had to use much physical stuff in the sims before since it’s mostly used for observation, not participation, so.”

Barnes shook his head. “I didn’t have much contact with...anything,” he said. “Unless it was during a mission.”

Suddenly Barnes’s behavior when Tony took the liberty of steering him made sense. He tried not to let his expression change. “All right. Well, it won’t take me very long to rig up a headpiece, but in the meantime, we can start putting together the rest of the digital environment. Slow as you like—I’ll load in one piece at a time, you can tell me what adjustments need to be made as I go, or whether you need a break, whatever. Sound okay?”

Barnes nodded. “Okay.”

The process was slow, and often tedious, but Tony wasn't about to trust anyone else with it, so he stuck with it, stuck with Barnes. Barnes hadn't been lying when he said he remembered everything—all sorts of small details, like the arrangement of the scientific equipment, the amount of damp on the walls, he was able to redraw with a sniper's eye.

Then Tony started to adjust the temperature downwards.

"They were always wearing wool coats," Barnes said. "They never took them off, but maybe that was because they never stayed long, the officers. The doctors were in sweaters beneath their lab coats, though."

"Were you cold?" Tony asked, swapping out clothing on the guards and the operators, not projecting them into the room quite yet. That would probably be the last thing to load in, and he wanted psychiatric advice before going that far.

"Yes," Barnes said. "Always."

Tony swallowed down his sympathy. "Okay. Tell me when it feels familiar."

He dialed the temperature down slowly, retrieving a jacket from his bag when he started getting uncomfortable. Barnes sat through it quietly for nearly twenty minutes, pointing out other visual features for Tony to incorporate into the hologram.

Then, a half hour in, Tony realized that Barnes had stopped talking completely. He turned to have a look at him, fearing suddenly, viscerally, what he might find.

But Barnes was just there. Quiet, unmoving, and lopsided. His eyes were empty. The turn of his mouth was deeply unhappy.

"James?" Tony asked.

Barnes didn't react. Tony stepped away from his workstation, towards him. "James?" he repeated, a little louder, but hesitant to shout.

As he approached, he realized that Barnes was trembling—a fine, shivering movement starting at his shoulders and working its way down. His breathing was uneven.

Tony weighed the value of doing something stupid.

He walked forward enough to be just within arm's length of Barnes, on his empty side. Then he reached forward. "*James.*"

Metal shrieked as Barnes tried, judging by the shift of the broken plating that made up his shoulder, to strangle Tony with his missing arm. The result, however, was a sudden lunge and overbalance, sending him stumbling forward, eyes wild—

Tony caught him, and got a sharp jab to the kidney for his efforts. He gasped, but tightened his grip, and didn't let go.

“James,” he wheezed. “James, look at me. Look at where you are. It isn’t real. FRIDAY, crank the heat. *Fuck.*”

“Нет, пожалуйста, я не хочу, пожалуйста—”

“You’re okay, please, just look at me, James—”

“Я не могу, не делают меня—”

“James. Bucky. Whoever you are. Look at me.”

“Нет—”

“*Look at me.*”

Barnes’s fingers spasmed around Tony’s throat, clutched at his shirt collar. Tony stumbled back until he hit wall, holding Barnes by the shoulders; alarms were blaring, guards streaming into the room, Barnes’s eyes were going wide—

“...Stark?”

“Everyone stop!” Tony barked. “FRIDAY, cut the alarm, all of you, go back to your stations, I’ve got this!”

“He is about to strangle you,” one of the guards pointed out, with a raised eyebrow. Tony was pretty sure T’Challa’s chief of security had trained them all personally, as they seemed to have all picked up her almost preternatural ability to be unimpressed.

“Yeah, about that—James? You with me?”

Barnes blinked, mouth twisted halfway between a sob and a snarl. “I...” His grip was loosening.

Tony covered the hand on his neck with his own, pulling gently. Barnes let him, fingers going lax.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Tony said. He met the guard’s eyes and nodded. “Promise, we’re okay.”

The guard rolled her eyes, but signaled to her colleagues, and they fell back.

The room was almost uncomfortably warm now, but Barnes was still shivering. Tony exhaled slowly, and rubbed at Barnes’s shoulder a bit. “Come on, James,” he murmured. “You’re fine. It’s 2016, you’re not doing anything you don’t want to do.”

“S cold,” Barnes said, sounding scratchy.

“I know. Let’s get out of this room, okay?”

After a pause, Barnes nodded. Tony shuffled them out of the workroom and into the medical room next door. Barnes didn’t fully have his feet under him, but he followed, leaning into

Tony until his legs hit a hospital bed and he collapsed onto it. Tony was forced to follow; Barnes's fingers had closed around his wrist on the way out of the room. He lowered himself gracelessly, bumping shoulders with him. Adrenaline draining slowly away, he winced.

"Christ, you've got a swing. I really hope I'm not pissing blood tonight."

"I'm sorry."

He waved it away. "Water under the bridge." He cut a glance at Barnes. "You okay?"

Barnes shook his head. "Not really. But I know where I am. When. So."

"So," Tony agreed. "Cold is a thing. We'll put that on the back burner."

Barnes laughed harshly. "Yeah, good plan." He seemed to notice, suddenly, what he was doing with his hand, because Tony's wrist was suddenly free, and Barnes's shoulders were hunched in, hand between his knees. "Uh, sor—"

"No, don't worry about it, I get it, it's not," Tony babbled, gesticulating a bit. "It's fine."

His wrist still felt warm.

"I was okay until then," Barnes said. "That's more than I expected."

"Good you're thinking positive."

"Mm." He didn't sound particularly positive.

They were still shoulder to shoulder.

"Want dinner?" Tony asked. "I think I could eat a cow."

Barnes exhaled. "Same here."

They ended up taking the rest of the weekend off.

Tony mostly worked on SI business in the evening, teleconferencing with Pepper to discuss some new contracts and touch base with some new R&D people. While he did, however, Barnes seemed intent on shadowing him.

Tony, bizarrely, was finding that he didn't mind.

"Hey, Pep, how's it hanging?"

"It hangs," Pepper said, and then she looked to Tony's right, and the crease between her brows became pronounced. "Mr. Barnes. Hello."

"Right, sorry," Tony said, leaning back a little to let Barnes into the frame. After dinner, it had seemed only natural to head back to the med wing, as that was where he'd initially

dumped all his stuff. Somehow, Barnes had ended up reading comic books, propped up on the table next to him. “Pepper, meet Sergeant Barnes; James, meet Pepper Potts, light of my life, keeper of my keys, etcetera. Barnes, say ‘hi’ to Ms. Potts.”

Barnes gave him a hunted look, but waved his fingers vaguely at the screen. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Potts.”

“My titles are legion. Pleasure to meet you,” Pepper said automatically, and then looked at Tony in consternation. “Is this still a business call, Tony?”

“Yes, please,” Tony said, “We just finished dinner, and I figured now’s a decent hour, given the time difference. It’s okay, right? I actually remembered to calculate that, be proud of me.”

“Always proud, and yet...”

“I can go,” Barnes said, beginning to slide off the table, but Tony found himself stopping him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Not like you can give away trade secrets to anyone. Except maybe T’Challa. But frankly, any trade secrets I have, he probably doesn’t want. Man’s got technology I would willingly prostitute myself for.”

“Tony...” Pepper rolled her eyes.

“I speak only the truth! Go ahead, Pep, give us the good news.”

Pepper gave him a *very* dubious look, but after a moment, obliged, launching into the latest on SI’s acquisition negotiations. Barnes kept quiet through the whole conversation, and seemed not to pay much attention to it at all. When Pepper wrapped up, she cast another glance at him, and asked, “Things are all right otherwise?”

“Sure, fine.”

“Uh huh. And that bruise on your neck that you’ve been very carefully adjusting your collar around, that’s all a part of ‘fine’?”

Tony’s hand flew up to his throat, and Barnes sat up abruptly.

“I didn’t mean to,” he blurted.

“He had a flashback, it was fine,” Tony said equally quickly. “I dealt with it, we’re good.”

Pepper scowled. “I’m calling T’Challa to confirm that.”

“Go for it,” Tony brazened. “But I’m serious, Pep, we’re fine.”

She pressed her lips together. “I’m coming to New York to check on the office on Monday,” she said eventually. “I expect to see you there. And if you don’t show up at the office, I will come and hound you at the Tower.”

“Bossy, bossy.”

“That is literally what you hired me for. Take care, Tony.”

“You too,” Tony echoed, and she signed off.

“Is she your girl?” Barnes asked, after a long pause.

“Not anymore,” Tony said. Eventually, he figured, if he admitted it enough times, it would feel better, more part of him.

“Too bad. Seems like a spitfire.”

“Oh, she is. Deserves better than me, that’s for sure.”

Barnes watched him. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Tony gave him a dubious look. “Sure,” he said eventually.

Bucky stuck around while Tony finished his SI work, and then seemed thoughtful when Tony said goodbye to him the next day.

The next week was also shit, the acquisition having hit a snag that Tony had to show his face and do presentations for in order to fix. (Pepper had clearly seen this coming, thus the requirement for him to physically visit the New York office.)

The only bright spot was the final resolution of the Lagos investigation, finding the team not guilty due to the lack of established legislation, and under the condition of reparations (paid for by various international Stark subsidiaries) and a new draft of the Accords being signed into international law within the next three years.

Within forty-eight hours of the announcement being made, Wanda showed up.

"Ms. Maximoff."

“Stark.”

“Natasha said you might be coming by.” Tony hadn’t believed her, but that was beside the point. "I was just heading out. Meetings, etcetera.”

She nodded. "How...are you?" she tried.

"Peachy," Tony said, noncommittal. "You? I understand you were in Sokovia for a while."

She nodded. "A while, yes. After Steve—"

"Yeah," Tony nodded tightly. "Good of him. Saved me some paperwork."

She gave him a long look. "I understand that prison is no longer a secret."

Tony worked his jaw. "It's still operational. But yeah, I guess people know about it, so, less chance of people disappearing into it without a trace. I couldn't...well, never mind. My powers aren't limitless."

"So you didn't send us there."

Tony felt like he'd been slapped. "*Fucking hell*, no. I swear, no." If the others still believed that he could have...*fuck*, wonder all of his information was secondhand through Natasha, no wonder Clint was in the wind—

"Oh," Wanda said. She looked relieved. "That's good."

"What, not going to look for yourself?" Tony asked her, tilting his head and tapping his temple with one finger, pushing down the attendant bolt of fear. He had to know, though.

Wanda swallowed, and looked like she was biting the inside of her cheek. "I want to, if I am to be honest," she said in a sudden rush. "But I've been...Clint told me I shouldn't. We...he talked a lot about it, what it feels like. I hadn't thought about it, before."

Tony crossed his arms. "Haven't answered my question."

She glanced up at his face, and then away. "I won't," she said, voice smaller. "I promise. He was very...I didn't know. Maybe didn't want to know. We had a lot of time, at first, when we were in the prison. I said something about tricking the guards, to escape. He disagreed. Strongly."

Maybe Barton wasn't a weird neglectful dad after all. What a thought. Though in fairness, it made sense that he'd have some discomfort with Wanda's particular set of powers. Tony wondered briefly what Barton had said to her, whether it was enough. Whether it could have actually made her promise trustworthy here and now.

Tony worked some saliva into his mouth, forced a smile. "So...Sokovia?"

She looked relieved, but also guilty to be relieved. "Yes, for a while. Though, it did not feel as much like home as before. So much has changed."

"Sure."

She darted a glance at him, and then looked down at her hands. Quietly, she said, "When they made the announcement, I...I tried to go to Lagos."

Tony sucked in a breath through his teeth. She noticed.

"I wanted to help," she said, shoulders curving in. "With reparations. I know it is being settled with money, but. They wouldn't let me in."

"You're lucky you weren't arrested." Something flared in Tony's chest, though. "I didn't hear about this. How did I not hear about this?"

Wanda didn't look at him. "It was quiet. Just a few guards, a few words at the customs desk in the airport. They were polite. Bought my ticket home. I wasn't going to push."

She was just so goddamn young. Terrifying and brutal and *young*.

He stepped to one side in the door frame. "I guess you'd better come in."

She took a sharp, deep breath, and then suddenly she was hugging him, like he was a body of water she didn't know the depth of. He froze for a long second, and then slowly let one arm go around her shoulders. It felt like she hadn't hugged anyone in a long while. Where the fuck was Rogers when you actually needed him? He couldn't verify from personal experience, but he had it on good account that Rogers gave top-grade hugs.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm going to...Vision is here, isn't he? He could teach me better control, I could be better, I could learn."

"He's here," Tony confirmed, looking out at the lawn. "I think he'd like that."

And then, because he had begun to appreciate the value of cleared air, Barnes's brutal honesty rubbing off on him maybe, he added, "Look, I'm sorry for trying to lock you in, I'm historically a terrible decision-maker and clearly that hasn't changed—"

"I should have been locked in, if you'd just explained," she said over him. And then more quietly, "I am used to hating you. It's been...hard to unlearn."

Tony flinched. She didn't let go of him, though. "I'm sorry, also," she added. "For what I showed you, that first time."

Involuntarily, he made a small sound in his throat. "Wasn't the first time I'd seen it," he said.

"That is why I am sorry. Sometimes I think, if I hadn't made you so afraid—"

"Nope, none of that," Tony cut her off, mostly because he really didn't want to talk about his ongoing relationship with fear and all the attendant terrible choices of the past several years. "I forbid excessive guilt in this house, except when it's mine."

"That is very unfair to you."

"My house, my rules, Maximoff."

She huffed out a watery, fragile laugh and pulled back. "You are ridiculous, I had forgotten this about you. I'm going to go find Vision. Will you be around for dinner?"

"Should be, barring unforeseen terribleness."

She tilted her mouth. "Always that possibility. I will make noodles."

"I have painstakingly labeled all of the spices. Or at least, I got someone else to do it. So Vision might not be a hazard, if he wants to help you."

She smiled. “Then you will eat well when you get back.”

Tony managed a smile back, and left her to it.

Dinner, a few hours later, was delicious, but also awkward and quiet. Natasha was away, which left Rhodey asking polite, neutral questions about Sokovian culture, and Wanda answering just as politely and neutrally. Vision watched her with a sort of awed, hurt silence. (He hadn’t helped with cooking, it turned out). Tony interjected when he thought it was safe to do so, which was not particularly often.

“You heading back to Wakanda next week?” Rhodey asked Tony, when Vision offered to clear the table, and Wanda excused herself. Tony broke out the scotch, and was using it as an excuse for Rhodey to move over to the more comfortable couches in the living room. He could climb stairs now, run for a time, go about an easy day almost normally, but Tony could tell that hardbacked chairs were rough for more than an hour at a time.

(Soon, he’d be able to operate an armor, too. Tony already had compensatory designs for War Machine in his head, unshared as of yet, but ready and waiting if Rhodey ever asked for them. He would, eventually; Tony was pretty sure of it. Rhodey might play the good sense to Tony’s insanity a lot of the time, but he’s also *Rhodey*. Never mind that he’d got bitten by the hero bug just as hard as Tony had, in the end; he was the guy Tony’d blown up a lab with at MIT while overclocking an experimental flight engine, the fly guy who Tony designed for, his first and best critic. He was an Avenger, maybe in ways Tony never would be, and Tony was going to make sure he would stay one for as long as he wanted to be one, no matter whether his legs worked perfectly or not.)

“Yup,” Tony said, and fiddled with his glass. “Soon as the SI and UN stuff for this week is wrapped up. I’ve really gotta get into transporter tech, my commutes are getting unreasonable.”

“You still sure about doing this?”

“Gotta practice what we preach, isn’t that what you said? It’s the right thing to do. Hell, he could be a symbol for rehabilitation, which we’re sorely in need of after all the shit we’ve broken the past few years. So. I mean, it makes political sense.”

“*Sure*, it does.” Rhodey regarded him. “He killed your parents.”

“Killed a hell of a lot more people than that.”

“Tones.”

Tony finally met his gaze. “Yeah?”

“Right thing or not, it doesn’t have to be you that does this.”

“My tech,” Tony shrugged. “I need a project, anyway.”

“Tones, between the Accords and helping me and running a house for wayward superheroes, you’ve got about seventy goddamn projects.”

“*You’re* not a project, Jim,” Tony said sharply. “Hell, you’re rewriting half the military policy in these Accords, you’re like a—an *anti*-project.”

“Uh huh,” Rhodey nodded, cocking an eyebrow at him. “And don’t you forget it.” He sighed, sitting back in his chair. His back could accommodate a slump now, and he had been reveling in it the past week or so. “You just care too damn much.”

“Nah,” Tony drew out, shaking his head. “You know me, caring’s not—”

“Don’t you dare bullshit me, Anthony, I haven’t got the time. Which is why I’m gonna tell you know how this is gonna go down.”

Tony raised an eyebrow back at him. “Oh yeah?”

“Yup. I’m going to give you a month more of this weekender business in Wakanda. After that, if Barnes isn’t done—”

“He’s not going to be done—”

“*Then* I’m taking over Accords negotiations. And you’re going to go to Wakanda and stay there until you’re done.”

Tony stared at him. “...I’m not doubting your ability to do the job, obviously,” he said slowly, “But that could be a bit disconcerting for the public, couldn’t it?”

“I’ve been in the public eye nearly as much as you have,” Rhodey pointed out. “And I have a hell of a lot less bad press, because I somehow managed to be less of a dumbass than you over the past twenty years.”

“A *public* dumbass at least, but. Point.”

“Now let me ask you something—when’d you last put on the suit? And I don’t mean for a mission, I mean just putting on the gauntlets, feeling out the inside of one for a quick moment.”

Tony thought about it, and found he couldn’t remember. “Not as fun as it used to be,” he said lightly, shifting in his seat. “Get your rib cage nearly crushed under a giant vibranium frisbee, you lose a little of the thrill.”

Rhodey’s face darkened at that, but he just tapped his fingers on the table. “And how much time have you spent working on Barnes’s sim?”

“Those two things are totally unrelated, Dr. Fleischer would have your hide.”

“Dr. Fleischer was a mediocre statistician at best and also a stick in the mud who once called you a ‘jumped-up little shit’ to your face, his word means nothing to me.”

“Pretty sure he’s dead now, too,” Tony mused. “But he spoke the truth. I absolutely was a jumped-up little shit.”

“Stop avoiding the question. Actually, scratch that. FRIDAY, break down a percentage of the amount of time Tony’s been spending on the Barnes project versus everything else.”

“Belay tha—mmph!” Tony flailed and tried to dislodge Rhodey’s hand from his mouth.

“Boss has been spending approximately 41% of his time on Barnes’s adaptation of the BARF system, versus 27% on the Accords, 12% on miscellaneous Stark Industries projects, and 10% on the various projects concerning your recovery, Colonel Rhodes.”

Tony winced, finally extracting himself from Rhodey’s grip via the classic licking method. “Yikes, Pepper’s gonna murder me.”

“Ugh.” Rhodey wiped his palm on his trousers, despite not looking particularly disgusted at all. “She won’t if I take on the Accords and you split your time between stuff that’ll make SI millions now, and Barnes’s project, which’ll make SI millions later.”

“Jesus, honeybear, are you that bored around here?”

Rhodey looked him right in the eye. “Yes.”

Tony stilled. “Oh.”

“Don’t you dare take that personally,” Rhodey warned, wagging a finger at him. “Not allowed. I’m telling you what I want, and because you are an indulgent friend who is nonetheless really terrible at this shit sometimes, you are going to give it to me and we’re going to call it even. It’s like you said—I wrote half the damn document myself this time around, so I can defend it, make sure it goes through, change what needs changing. I’m discharged, Tones—USAF let me go the moment they saw my x-rays. So I’m going to do this, and you’re going to work on your new superhero mission.”

Tony hunched his shoulders in. “...Okay.”

Rhodey smiles at him. “Was that so hard?”

“...Yes.”

He shakes his head at Tony, and snorts. “Control freak.”

“Yeah, well.” Tony would deny it to his dying day, but his relief was acute. He’d always been overworked, since the age of twelve probably, but the ocean-wide commutes, the time zone flips, and the steep learning curve of politics had been exhausting in ways he had only been maybe 70% prepared for. The grind was getting to him, and if he didn’t slow down soon, he’d start making mistakes he couldn’t afford, not with Barnes’s brain in his hands.

“I’m getting old,” he complained.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Rhodey agreed.

So the next time Tony went out to Wakanda, it was for a whole week.

“Rhodes is doing well with the Accords,” T’Challa said, as they walked from the jet to the lab. “You’ve passed them off entirely?”

“We’re doing a gradual handover,” Tony replied. “Given the delicacy of the situation, it seemed like a good idea.”

“You look tired. I think you’re making the right decision.”

“Mm, only several hundred more and maybe I’ll be back in the black.”

T’Challa hummed. “Sergeant Barnes will be pleased you’re staying here for a more extended period.”

Tony shot him an incredulous glance. “What? Why?”

T’Challa shrugged. “You don’t tread softly around him. Our staff generally do, though they are warming to him, little by little.”

“What about Gish? He didn’t strike me as a tiptoe-ing type, pardon the alliteration.”

“He’s also one of Barnes’s appointed therapists,” T’Challa pointed out. “Not a friend.”

“Barnes and I are not friends,” Tony pointed out.

T’Challa just hummed again. His zen, while admirable, was sometimes infuriating.

But in fact, Barnes seemed to relax slightly when Tony and T’Challa entered the lab. “I hear you’re sticking around this time,” he said in greeting.

“So I am. Think you can stand me that long?”

“I can take you.” Barnes winced. “Sorry. Probably not the best choice of words.”

“No problem, I’ll just interpret it as innuendo instead of a threat,” Tony waggled his eyebrows.

Barnes looked at the ceiling. “I take it back. Get outta my sight.”

“I think that’s my cue, and not yours,” T’Challa said, giving Tony a significant look that Tony didn’t know what to do with.

He covered it up with bluster, as usual.

“Ready to go, Barnes?” he asked, clapping his hands together.

Barnes stood up. He still held himself slightly crookedly, like he was missing his metal arm, but it was far better than before.

He brushed past Tony on his way to the lab. “Try not to look so excited about it, doc,” he said.

Tony tilted his head. “I’ll give it my best shot.”

It got harder, building the memories. One more weekend at home, spent mostly in UN meetings (and at home being compulsively fed by Wanda—it seemed to be her primary medium for apology), and then Tony was banished to Wakanda by Rhodey’s force of will and his own determination to get the BARF simulation right.

Barnes continued to stick around while Tony adjusted and projected and tested, and after a while Tony realized that this, too, was exposure therapy—building fed remembrance, which in turn prompted more building.

The remembrance part was tough, though.

Tony built a headpiece that fit over the chair, and when Barnes sat down and felt its weight, he lost himself without warning, his eyes emptying, body going rigid. Tony didn’t dare touch him this time; he stood several feet away and started talking about office politics, about Pepper, about rock’n’roll, anything that came into his head until finally Barnes’s breathing evened out, and he rasped, “Do you *ever* shut up, Stark?”

“Well, you’re not trying very hard to stop me, so...” Tony took a step forward and offered a hand up out of the chair. Barnes took it, and Tony could feel tremors coming off him from palm to elbow.

“I remembered more,” Barnes said, when he was standing. His gaze is still far away, but it has a focus now, like he’s trying to see a ghost. “I think...I think when they were teaching me the words...there was a *sound*.”

“Good, that’s good, that’s great,” Tony said. He rubbed his thumb on the inside of Barnes’s forearm. “Don’t push it, just...when you think you can describe it, let me know.”

“Yeah, I know how this works now,” Barnes nodded. He blinked slowly. “It felt like an itch in my brain. I think maybe I could learn to recognize it. Fight it when I feel it.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Part of the rewiring, you think?”

“Maybe.”

“If we can get you resistant to the original programming procedure with the images but without the noise, and then the noise without the images, we could build your immunity step-wise,” Tony murmured, thoughts whizzing ahead. “Break it up even further to start. Cold wasn’t really your first trigger, that was just mostly PTSD, but the other physical sensations, like the chair, any other of the five senses? You think they used smell? Eh, probably not, they’d have to subject themselves to that too...but *sound*, that’s good, that’s really good, we can use that.”

“Hey,” Barnes cut in.

Tony looked at him.

“Thanks,” he said, and then swallowed. “For doing this.”

Tony blinked, and shrugged. “Said I would.”

“Yeah,” Barnes said, studying him. “I guess you did.”

Barnes had a therapy appointment the next day, in which he must have addressed the issue of the sound, because he emerged from it with gritted teeth and a gutted expression, and said, “It was part of the electroshock. I want to try a sim and see if I can remember more about it.”

“That’s...I mean, I admire your enthusiasm, but are you sure?” Tony asked, around a mouthful of veggie goodness. Wakandan food was *incredible*, he was going to track down the chef and demand recipes. “We’re still in the building stages.”

“We’re gonna be in the building stages forever if I don’t remember more,” Barnes shot back.

Tony held up his hands. “I just want this to be safe. We usually wait longer before building a full sim, that’s all.”

“I can take it,” Barnes asserted. There was tension all around his mouth, but when he looked at Tony, he was steady. “I want to start taking this apart.”

Tony let a breath out, and then nodded. “All right. If you’re sure.”

He still asked Gish and Xiang what they thought before beginning the finalizing stages.

“I think it’s probably too soon, but that he won’t know that until he’s tried it,” Gish said. “Sometimes, getting a better handle on your limits can illustrate how best to push them in more controlled, specific ways. Barnes has remarkable control over himself, given what he’s been through. I’d posit the serum is at least partially responsible—he has levels of resilience we don’t necessarily have established metrics for, so he may know better than we do what his limits are. That being the case, it’s likely he’ll find the experience illuminating, even if it causes a setback.”

Xiang mostly concurred, with an addition of, “This is a test for you, as well as for Barnes, Mr. Stark. He wants to know if you can help him, and if not, to prepare himself for disappointment. I get the sense he wants very badly for you to succeed, and not just for his sake.”

Tony frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

Dr. Xiang tucked her hair back and then crossed her arms, regarding him over her glasses. "After Captain Rogers, you're the first person he's found a glimmer of hope in since his experience as the Winter Soldier. He doesn't want that faith disproven. He wants you to succeed so that he can start to trust you."

"Jesus. No pressure, then."

Xiang lifted one corner of her mouth. "Mr. Barnes is very careful about where he places his trust. The fact that he's even considering it with you speaks pretty well for itself."

"I'll keep that in mind," Tony muttered, and tried not to have a panic attack in the hallway.

He called Rhodey instead. "How's my favorite negotiator?"

"Wanting very badly to negotiate some of your Macallan 24 right about now," Rhodey replied. "We've hit a procedural snag again, I've been walking them through it all day. How's the ex-assassin?"

"Oh you know, ex-assassin-y," Tony quipped, and then more soberly added, "He wants to do a full sim soon."

"That's fast. You sure he doesn't want to just get himself triggered and smash his way out of custody?"

Tony snorted. "That would be the worst plan, first of all, and secondly, it doesn't work like that. Winter Soldier gets triggered, and whatever I tell him to do, he'll do. That's what happened last time, at least." It hadn't been until he'd seen the full footage that this had become clear; when it did, when he watched Barnes's animal panic suddenly dissipate into blank pliancy, he'd had to swallow down his rage and sadness and leave the room for several minutes before coming back and ordering FRIDAY to isolate as much audio and lipreading as he could.

Rhodey made a noise of dissatisfaction. "So are you going to let him do the sim?"

"Doctors have cleared it. He says he's sure."

"Didn't answer my question, Tones."

Tony sighed. "Yeah, I'm going to run it for him. It's the best way to find out what the precise steps were to the conditioning that we need to dismantle. I just...it's fucking awful to watch, Rhodey. And I really, really need to not fuck it up."

"You're not going to fuck it up," Rhodey said. "You don't fuck up when there are soldiers on the line. You never have. *Tony*?" he added, before Tony could protest, "You *never* have."

Tony sighed again. "Sure. Well, here goes nothing. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you tell me how it went."

"Sure. Say hi to the brass for me."

“Yeah, I’m gonna take a pass on that,” Rhodey scoffed, and hung up.

Tony stuffed his phone in his pocket, and made his way to the lab. Barnes was already waiting there. “Took your sweet time,” he commented.

“Weren’t you the one telling me not to look so excited before?” Tony inquired.

Barnes huffed. “Yeah, well.”

“Come along then, James,” Tony said airily, walking past him into the sim room. “Meet your terrible awful no-good fate. Again.”

“Thanks, doc.”

It was horrible, in-sim. The first full sim with the sound cues only lasted about thirty seconds, just enough for Barnes to call out before he pitched over in the corner, scrambling at the warring signals in his brain. The second went better, but only marginally.

They kept at it, though. Barnes insisted, and with cautious but growing admiration, Tony allowed it.

Slowly, slowly, with two steps forward and then another back, it got easier. They were working backwards, trying to peel back the layers of the procedure like they were the skins of an onion, thin and easily muddled. Coding and light signals and conditioning that Barnes remembered more of with every sim, and that Tony honed and recreated with painstaking detail. They’d been right to fear that the words from the Soviet handbook were just one method of control—there were all sorts of small fail-safes, diagnostic orders, hand signals that Barnes was receptive to. Barnes remembered more and more, and they peeled out pieces and added others in, looking for the pressure points, and ways to relieve them.

Another three weeks, though, and they had what Tony could call a complete sim. It would be the conclusion of the programming stages of the BARF system—the first test of its veracity as a recreation of Barnes’s memory, one that could be adjusted and manipulated to create variations, but which at its core was as close to the remembered truth as it could be.

"Should we start at the beginning?" Tony asked. "Your first official mission?"

"Gotta start somewhere," Barnes said, nodding.

“Okay. We watch, but we don’t interact with the sim,” Tony explained. “You can study it from all angles, get up close and personal, but you’re not a participant. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Barnes grumbled. “I’ve sat in the chair for real now and handled it. I’ll be fine.”

"Okay. Here goes nothing, then. FRIDAY, hit it."

The room went dark, and when it re-lit, they were in Siberia.

Barnes was fine.

But Tony wasn't.

The Winter Soldier was unstrapped from the chair, and he didn't move, not until Doctor Yemelin told him to. When he stood, it was to face a gaunt, thin admiral, dressed in winter furs, his expression covetous.

"Are you ready, Soldier?" he asked.

"I await orders," the Soldier intoned.

"Your target's name is Margaret Carter."

Her picture came up on screen in front of the Soldier—greying, stern, beautiful. Younger than Tony had ever known her to be, but not by much. There were shimmers of coding—cues, psychological prompts, color-brands, that shaped the edges of the photo.

The Soldier's pupils dilated, but there was no other sign of recognition. His face was pale and cold, a perfect facsimile of Barnes.

Tony heard static. He wondered if there's something wrong with the audio playback. It was pushing at him, distracting.

The briefing continued. He tried to watch it, couldn't hear it. There was grey gathering around the edges of his vision.

"Stark?"

No one had thought to tell him when she passed. No one was alive who had ever known about—and he had never tried, never even fucking *bothered*—

"*Stark?* Tony!"

Tony sucked in a breath, but it didn't do any good; he scrambled at a desk edge and his hand fell through.

"FRIDAY, stop the sim! Tony? It didn't work, I failed. I failed, she was okay, she fought like a tiger and never even saw my face, I'm sorry, Tony, I need you to breathe, okay?"

Tony was on the ground, didn't know how he got there, his tailbone hurt. A hand was on his shoulder, gripping tightly, almost painful.

"Breathe, okay? Just...breathe."

"What did I...?"

"Panic attack, I think," Barnes said. It took a second for Tony to actually focus on his face.

"You get those often?"

“Used to a lot more.” Tony winced, drawing his knees up to his chest. Barnes didn’t move away. “Christ. Never doesn’t suck.”

“Tell me about it,” Barnes said dryly. They breathed together for a while, Tony wheezing and feeling his years, Barnes purposely counting off his inhalations and exhalations.

“Well this was counterproductive,” Tony said eventually, staring at his knees. “Typical, really, couldn’t help but make it all about me. Sorry. I...I didn’t know this would...yeah.”

“You know Pegs,” Barnes surmised.

“Knew. She’s gone now.”

It was Barnes’s turn to pull a breath in through his teeth. “When?”

Tony snorted. “Not long. Round the time Rogers and I started to disagree.”

There was a long silence. “Steve, you idiot,” Barnes murmured. Then more loudly, “How’d you know Pegs?”

“My dad, of course. Only when I was small though, we lost touch after I went to MIT. I don’t know why I never...I guess I figured she had better things to do than look after me. I got to keep Jarvis, so, I was the lucky one, right? And when Howard and Mom...died, she came to the funeral, but I...I wasn’t handling things well, I brushed her off. She was...she was a good lady. I should’ve...I mean, I didn’t, obviously, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Sure sounds like it does.”

“No one told me, when she. I mean, no one had reason to, I hadn’t kept contact, it’s not like I was on her emergency list, and Jarvis was the only one who knew that I’d known her, and he’s...well. Anyway. Doesn’t matter. This isn’t about me.”

Barnes was looking at him funny. Tony lurched to his feet, shaking off his hand in the process. “Um. You seemed fine.”

“Yeah,” Barnes said. “I was okay. Seeing it this way, it’s...creepy, but it doesn’t really feel real. Feels like that guy wasn’t in control, but I still am.”

“It’s not meant to,” Tony nodded. “Feel real, that is. This sim, it’s about drawing that line between you and the past, processing it from a distance. When you can separate from it consistently, if you ever live something like it again, you can still take that step back, fight the programming.”

Barnes nodded. It was nothing Tony hadn’t said before. “I can, um,” Tony waved a hand vaguely, “Set up a different sim? From later on?”

“How about we take a break first?” Barnes suggested. He shrugged kind of awkwardly. “I...I don’t know whether you want to hear this, but I remember that assignment, going after Pegs.”

Tony stilled.

"It was kind of a shitshow," Barnes admitted. "I'm pretty sure I've never failed so hard at anything in my life."

It was so unexpected that Tony gave an undignified snort. "Yeah?"

"I mean, it was Pegs," Barnes said, chancing a crooked smile at him. "I never even got close. I think they thought it was a bug in the programming, that I was recognizing her or something. But it wasn't. She was just very, very good."

Tony huffed. "Maybe, tell me about it?" he asked, after a second. "We'll grab some lunch?"

"Sure," Barnes said. "You'll laugh, I think."

The next session went better. The third rocky, but not dire. Barnes had some bad days, some good, but Dr. Xiang assured him that it was the past, not the present, that was causing the setbacks.

Tony just kept working, and so did Barnes.

"Wakanda seems to be suiting you," Pepper observed one day, over video conference. "You haven't been this prolific in a long while. Should I be looking out for Suit Mark 40 at this point?"

"Har har. I know I'm technically out of retirement, but I've got other things to work on, you know."

"Uh huh. Where's Mark 40?"

Tony shifted. "It's a suitcase rig. Just for safety. I don't have a full workshop here, so I had it rendered in New York. Might pick it up next time I'm in town." Never mind the full suit he'd brought with him last time he'd stopped back in New York, which he was still testing and tinkering with. It was nice to have side projects, okay?

Pepper half-smiled. "I thought so. And how's the resident patient?"

"He's good. He's..." Tony shrugged. "Guess I didn't expect to like the guy. Rogers really lucked out in the best friend department."

"Hm." Pepper tapped her pen on her desk. "You know, he called me, the other day."

Tony jerked his head up. "What? What about? I hope you were nice to him."

"I was perfectly civil, thank you very much. He wanted to know who Jarvis was."

"Oh. Huh. What...what did you tell him?"

Pepper sat back. "I told him about Edwin. He seemed interested in his adventures with Margaret Carter back in the day, which only makes sense."

"Because of Aunt Peggy, sure."

"Well yes. But also because she's connected to *you*, Tony."

Tony peered at her. "What?"

Pepper rolled her eyes. "He's curious about you. Your past is connected to his, and now you're helping him. Of course he'd have an interest."

"I'm his ticket to freedom," Tony argued, though without much conviction. They did get along better now than just your average researcher and subject; to diminish that or hide behind it seemed cheap. And Barnes had seemed to enjoy talking about Peggy, even from the point of view of the assassin sent to kill her. It had been...nice, talking to him in that way. Not about trauma, but about the better bits, people they'd known and liked.

(They'd even managed to talk about Steve for a while. Tony had called him *a royal pain in the ass* and Barnes had retorted *you don't know the half of it, buddy*, and it hadn't been a point of agreement, not really, but it had made the air between them easier all the same.

It had prompted Tony to ask whether Barnes wanted to reach out, now that it looked like the treatment was working, and that he was staying out of cryo for good.

Barnes had looked torn between longing and guilt. "I want to tell him. Just to talk to him, but. It wouldn't be just talking. It would be promises, and I can't...I don't *want* to make promises right now."

Tony had nodded, and hadn't ask him again.)

"Believe what you like," Pepper shrugged. She shuffled some papers. "By the way, since you've been so on top of things, I had a chance to look at that reconstructive port system you sent, and the R&D guys had a couple of comments. Shall I send them over?"

"Yes, please," Tony said. "T'Challa had some input too, I'd like to aggregate everything and synth a prototype."

"Done and done. Anything else?"

"That should be all, Ms. Potts."

"Very good, Mr. Stark. Say hello to Barnes for me."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Sure."

With a sweet smile, Pepper signed off.

Now that Pepper had brought it to his attention, however, Tony couldn't help but notice how well Wakanda was, in fact, suiting him. He missed aspects of being back in the States, namely having more access to Pepper and Rhodey and his lab. Even with the latter, though,

his very favorite personal lab had been in Malibu, so that absence was already slightly dulled by having lost it to violent immersion in the Pacific. He didn't even feel particularly isolated; he checked in regularly with Natasha and Rhodey (and sometimes even Wanda, who was flighty but verbose when prompted), and he skimmed through UN reports and transcriptions, trying his best to keep his finger on the pulse of the outside world. Wakanda might be emerging onto the global stage, but while sequestered in its capital, Tony felt a bit like he was on the outside of the world looking in. Even when Rogers left another (thankfully smaller) mess to clean up in Cairo, Tony found himself more philosophical about it than actively enraged. He let Rhodey rant about it over the phone, gave his two cents on the matter, and then went back to his own work without nearly as much of a need to go destroy something.

If this was how he'd lived all his life, it was no wonder T'Challa was so even-keeled.

It was just...nice, to be in the constant company of people he trusted and respected, but who weren't directly involved with him. Even some of T'Challa's advisors were semi-friendly with him now, having seen for themselves that Tony wasn't out to disrupt the country's politics or advise their king in any capacity. He chatted with visiting civil engineers and let some of the security team throw him around the gym a couple of times a week (out of the suit for his benefit, in it for theirs), and had dinner with T'Challa when the king had the time and inclination for his company. He was at once a stranger and a colleague, an outsider and insider. It wasn't at all like having a team or a family—it was a community that asked nothing of him but his respect, and it settled him.

Ever since Siberia, he had perhaps wanted something like this, even if he hadn't had words for it. He slept longer and better, ate well, and when Barnes needed his time and his patience, it didn't feel like a hardship to give it.

In fact, as the one central intellectual challenge he was more or less solely responsible for, Barnes was somehow the origin around which Tony and the rest of his immediate community seemed to arc, his progress a reflection of their shared determination, his company a source of odd, sometimes painful but always precious camaraderie.

On good days, they ran the sims in the morning, and then Barnes went off to amuse himself while Tony crunched the newest data. On bad days, when Barnes was in no shape to do anything but attend therapy and maybe sleep, Tony worked on SI projects. Pepper hadn't been lying when she noted he was particularly prolific lately—he churned out a new UI for the Starkphones, and a set of workflow and infrastructure-planning programs that earned him a lot of pathetically grateful emails from federal civil engineers and private architecture firms alike. On better-but-not-great days, when he finally managed to venture out of his rooms, Barnes sometimes joined Tony in a social space he'd carved out of one corner of the lab, where T'Challa had provided a small seating area and flatscreen. Smothered in woolly layers and with ghosts lingering in his eyes, he spent long hours watching light fare on the television, a mix of old and new, whatever he and FRIDAY could cobble together. Occasionally, when Tony needed a break, he joined him.

There was a rhythm to their daily movements that seemed naturally to develop, a way of navigating each others' sharp edges, that seemed to Tony both strange and domestic, familiar in the way the house in Miami had been, when his work had been steady and his schedule

well-managed and maintained. Amidst the sea of easy, professional acquaintances, Barnes was a friend, valuable in myriad ways, and Tony found himself bizarrely grateful that circumstances had, however traumatically and painfully, conspired to give him this opportunity to know him.

During one of his check-in calls, Rhodey said, "Wanda took me aside today. She said she wanted to read the Accords again, and sign on if she liked them and was allowed. What do you think?"

Tony could feel his eyebrows go up into his hairline. "I mean, we could definitely use her, power-wise. And you've trained with her pretty extensively in the past, so you'd be a better judge of how she'd work with a team."

"She's still green, but she's getting better all the time," Rhodey agreed. "She's spending more time with Vision again, so that bridge seems on the mend."

"Then sure. But I mean, I'm hardly team leader, my word shouldn't be the final one."

"But Rogers left *you* in charge," Rhodey protested, dripping with sarcasm.

"Har har. Ask Natasha if she wants the group. If she says yes, have her sign off on Wanda, and then bring it to the UN. They've been more generous lately with the developments of metaforces, right? I assume that's your doing?"

"Not just mine, but yeah, given the increase in threats they're seeing the potential usefulness. I'll pass the word on to Natasha, but she won't thank you for it. You don't want to come home and talk to her before we make any decisions?"

"No," Tony said, without thinking. "I'm good, actually."

Rhodey's silence was marked. "...Seriously?" he said.

"Yeah," Tony said, more deliberately. "I mean. Natasha has signed the most recent Accords, she's authorized to create a team. She's smart, capable, and way better at politics than I am. So why not let her deal with this? I'm still doing stuff here, you're doing the diplomacy thing. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"It makes perfect sense," Rhodey said. "What shocks me is that you're willing to delegate without freaking out first."

"Well, I mean," Tony argued, shifting with discomfort now. "Barnes is doing well, but I want to keep an eye on--"

"i was paying you a goddamn compliment, Tones," Rhodey interrupted. "Stop. Don't fucking come home until you're called for. You sound happy and enthusiastic and *good*. Stay that way until my blood pressure can't take it. Okay?"

"Okay," Tony said, voice small, "Thanks, Jim."

When he hung up, he stared at the phone for a long while, and couldn't quite put a single thought together. He couldn't deny that he'd told Rhodey the truth, every step of the way. What it meant, though.

Well, he could avoid thinking about it, at least for a while.

Weeks passed, the world turned.

Then one afternoon, Barnes said, "I'm bored. Full sim, and put me in the chair."

Tony coughed into his coffee. "Bet you never thought you'd say that," he managed, when death was not quite so imminent.

Barnes looked at him straight on. "You're right," he said, that strange look on his face again.

Tony bought time by sipping more slowly from his mug. Barnes was getting good at dealing with the sims from afar. They'd started running resistance sims, where the digital Winter Soldier hesitated at key moments, allowing Barnes to step in and study the programming that made him pliant. Barnes had the eye of a sniper, and picked the moments well. The Winter Soldier was getting less and less susceptible to orders every day. Putting Barnes fully in the driver's seat was the next logical step.

Tony was pretty sure he was more concerned about this than Barnes was.

"I've practiced, you know," Barnes said, when Tony was quiet for too long.

"Practiced what?"

"Full-on combat. With the Black Panther."

Tony stopped halfway through a bite of eggs. "What...I mean, why?"

"So that we'd be sure he could beat me," Barnes replied.

"How do you know your skills are the same?" Tony asked, with more than a little curiosity. "You and the Soldier, I mean?"

"I do remember everything, you know," Barnes reminded him. "It was good, being able to tell T'Challa all of my weaknesses. Knowing it'll keep people safe."

"You trust him with that."

Barnes looked at Tony. "He's an stand-up guy. I know what those look like."

Tony let out a breath through his nose. "Yeah," he says, before shoving more eggs into his mouth. "I guess you do." He hoped the eggs would disguise his bitterness.

They sat in silence for a while, and then Barnes added, "That included you, doc."

Tony choked, and tried very hard to hide it. Barnes slapped him on the back.

"Get your eyes checked," Tony croaked. "You haven't imprinted on me like a duckling or anything, right?"

"Pretty sure that hasn't happened," Barnes replied, raising an eyebrow. "And my eyes are just fine."

Tony didn't have an answer to that, so he circumvented it entirely and said, "I'm not hesitating because I'm afraid of you relapsing to the Winter Soldier."

"That's...that doesn't make any sense," Barnes said, frowning. "What other reason would you have?"

"I dunno," Tony mumbled. "Maybe not having to directly subject you to the most heinous time of your life. Just saying."

Barnes stared at him. "Kinda late to be getting cold feet about that, doc."

"Look, I know I've been acting like every bit of this thing has been procedure as usual, but the BARF system hasn't ever been used that way before," Tony said, more forcefully than he intended. He put his palm flat on the table, studied the back of his hand. "It's only ever been third-person, a way of reprocessing events. That's how I first conceived it, because people shouldn't have to directly relive their worst memories in order to overcome them. That's basically a violation of the Geneva Convention masquerading as therapy, it's a serious no-go."

"But for me, it's what has to be done," Barnes said quietly. "If I want to fix the brainwashing, not just the PTSD. That's why you built the chair. I know that, you've told me that before."

Tony made a vague gesture of agreement.

"Are you doubting the build?" Barnes asked. "Because I've been watching you make this thing every step of the way, I can't see how it could possibly be any better than how you've done it."

"I can't either, but I'm human, there are limits to even my ingenuity. And I don't want to screw you over."

"You won't," Barnes said, with a casual confidence that staggered Tony. "I've agreed to everything you've suggested so far. You've never been anything but up-front about the process; third-person, first-person, whatever." He sat back in his seat. "I've been feeling so much clearer lately, have I told you that? Running the sims are the worst parts of my day, but afterwards I feel like I'm actually alive."

Tony opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Barnes seemed to find that amusing, his mouth tilting up at one corner.

"Your treatment's working, doc. So don't stop now just because you want to spare me a little pain."

Tony shook his head and huffed. "You're the bravest son of a bitch I've ever met, Barnes. How about tomorrow?"

Barnes nodded, and his gaze was warm. "Tomorrow suits just fine."

Then he frowned.

"Did you say 'BARF system'? Is that what you called this thing? What the heck's wrong with you?"

Tomorrow, however, there was an Avengers-shaped emergency.

Tony wouldn't care, except for how it was apparently serious enough for T'Challa to get involved.

"You make any war brides jokes, Tony," Barnes said, as they watched T'Challa board his jet, "And I'm gonna have to actually kill you."

"Did I say anything?" Tony asks, raising his hands. "I said nothing."

"You were thinking real loud."

Without T'Challa around as backup, Tony didn't trust himself (and Barnes by association) with a first-person sim. He suggested instead that they watch a movie.

Barnes shrugged agreement, and so they sat down to watch *Stardust*, because that seemed pretty harmless, unlike Tony's first impulses of *Jumanji* and *Terminator*, which...no, those were both cinematic minefields with Barnes's name scrawled all over them, they were not going there for funsies.

For a while, it was fine. Tony only checked his phone for updates, like, twice.

Okay, maybe five times.

"You're jumping out of your skin," Barnes observed.

Tony twitched, halfway to unlocking his phone for the sixth time. "No," he denied, unconvincingly.

Barnes peered at him with suspicion. "What's the situation out there, did they say?"

"Pretty sure it's Blue Cube of Death-adjacent," Tony said, checking satellite images of the site. If Rogers knew how much he actually could keep track of, he'd probably be pissed, but whatever, FRIDAY enjoyed getting the exercise, and at least it helped Tony to know what happened when he was placating the masses after the fact. "If it was just the usual HYDRA hangout, Rogers wouldn't have called in so much backup."

“So he calls in T’Challa, but not you?” Barnes said, with surprising skepticism. His knuckles had gone white in his lap.

Tony sighed. “He’s still not UN-sanctioned, and he won’t be until he stops haring off without signing the Accords and following regulations,” he replied. “T’Challa can do what he likes—politically, he’s in a far less difficult position than I am, and it’s not like he’s going to get deposed or anything. Serious or not, this isn’t an official Avengers mission, and therefore, it’s not my jurisdiction.”

“So who’s out there with him?” Barnes demanded, sitting forward.

“Falcon, Ant-Man, probably. Hawkeye, maybe, if he’s not in the doghouse with Laura. Natasha might help, but only if she can keep a low profile—officially, she’s with me, manning the party line. Same with Wanda, now that she’s signed the Accords. She could show up, but it would be bad for her. We’ll see if she can avoid temptation, I guess.”

“And he’s after the Baron’s fucking cube? That’s not enough people, he needs help!”

“It’s not the cube,” Tony said, waving it away. He grimaced at his phone, triangulating the site with other known intel. It didn’t bode well.

“It *is* probably something like it, though,” he admitted, after a second. “There’s been evidence...well, never mind. You’re right, it’s bad, it’s probably really bad.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “And you know what? He should have *thought* about that before running headlong into the situation without giving me a chance at least to clear him!” He slammed his phone down on the coffee table. “Fuck!” He exhaled. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Barnes said, watching him steadily. His hand twitched on his thigh. “But.” He licked his lips. “Tony, I’m gonna have to ask you a favor.”

Tony frowned. “Okay? Name it.”

Barnes looked him in the eye, and said, “I need you to let me borrow Project Pun and your jet.”

Tony gaped for a moment before he blinked several times and then finally rallied. “How the hell do you know about Project Pun?”

“Cracked your tablet,” Barnes shrugged. “Well, not really, you just fell asleep with it unlocked on the couch once. And really, ‘Project Pun’? You couldn’t think of anything better for it than your stupid *armaments* joke?”

The fact that Tony had apparently been comfortable enough in Barnes’s presence to fall asleep? Both shocking and not shocking at all. “May I remind you,” Tony said carefully, “That the jet I flew over here has my name on it? People will ask questions.”

“May I remind you,” Barnes retorted, though with equal care, “That the jet you bring over here is the most discreet one you have, because you haven’t wanted anyone knowing that you’re working on a secret project here?”

They stared at each other. "Jesus fucking Christ, Barnes," Tony breathed. "I know you're friends with Rogers for a reason, but you know you don't have to subscribe to his brand of crazy if you don't want to, right?"

"I don't," Barnes snorted. "I'm just the one who always catches him." He smiled a little crookedly at Tony, but his gaze is deadly serious.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked more about him," Tony said, feeling out the edges of the conversation. "What he's up to, at least. I've been sort of expecting it, to be honest."

"I've wanted to," Barnes said readily. "But the way we left things...I've been really fucking thankful you've done what you have for me, Tony, but I've never been under any illusions that you'd give Steve leniency where you've given it to me."

"I've known him for only slightly longer than I have you," Tony admitted. "But I'd trust you miles more. He's...what he did. People lie to me by omission all the time, but I expected better of him. Maybe that was unfair, but."

"Damage was done," Barnes said. "I get it. But I've never...I guess I figured, if he ever needed my help, the only thing he'd ever have to do was call. But he can't even do that now. So I guess, I'm asking. I'm asking now, who's got his back, Tony?"

Tony looked him in the eye, and said, "Not nearly enough people. Not nearly enough. He's refused to follow any approximation of protocol or even recognized global requests to move on the current situation, so he's out there on the whims of whoever doesn't care about international law. Frankly, bad blood aside, I'd like nothing better than to give him some backup, but I can't without him at least signing onto the bare minimum of the Accords."

Barnes shut his eyes for a second, and then drew himself up.

"Okay," he said. "Here's the deal: If you don't think I can do it, I won't go. If you think it's too dangerous, politically or whatever, I won't go. But you know what things like that damn cube can do, you know he needs all the help they can get. I don't blame you for staying here—you're doing the right thing, you're doing what needs to be done—but I can help, and I know how not to be seen."

Tony could tell him no. It would, politically, be the smart thing to do. If any trace of the Winter Soldier showed up anywhere, every single one of the the regulations Tony's been working for could get jeopardized.

"You can't let any of them see you," he said. "You'd need to be a ghost again."

Barnes nodded. "I know. I'd prefer that, actually." He looked away. "I'm not ready to...to have that conversation."

Tony lets out a long breath. "We haven't run your first-person sim yet."

"I know."

"You've been doing well for almost a year now, though."

“I know, doc.”

“Jesus,” he said again. “Okay. Um. Let’s get you set up, then.”

Barnes stood, and made to move towards the lab. When Tony stood as well, however, he paused, and then raised his hand to grasp Tony’s forearm, gripping it tight for a brief moment.

“Thanks, Tony,” he murmured.

Tony let out a breath and tipped his head down. “Don’t thank me yet.”

In the field, Barnes was more than a ghost. He was *untraceable*.

It made Tony incredibly nervous. For the next six hours, he drained the battery of every mobile device he’d brought with him and then had to suffer the indignity of tying himself to his lab monitors while he tried to track the mission, hacking into every intelligence organization he could to glean something of what was going on. It was a covert op of course, and Rogers was good, but he wasn’t perfect, so there were scraps to go on, but that was all they were.

He called Rhodey to pass the time, but carefully didn’t mention anything about letting Barnes out of the country. That, he was quite sure, would earn him a solid ten minutes of yelling that he wasn’t sure he could withstand at this point. And Rhodey would be totally justified, obviously.

But, Barnes had been putting all his trust in Tony for nine months straight. He deserved some trust in return. And anyway, Rogers was a *dumbass* not to use the goddamn insult of a flip phone he’d given Tony for this very purpose, so really it was his fault.

(Rhodey could clearly tell something was up, but showed surprising restraint in not asking. Maybe Tony had earned some trust back, not fucking up so monumentally for this sustained period of time. He could hope.)

It was dark in Wakanda when Tony’s jet returned. Tony found himself jittering just off the landing pad, tapping his tablet against his thigh.

Barnes, when he emerged, looked ruffled and surprisingly well-kept, the dark fatigues Tony had slapped together last minute lightly dusted with cement dust, no other signs of wear. He’d presumably discarded his mask on the ride back—not a muzzle or anything like it, just a set of extended goggles with some sniper tech in the lenses. There was a crust of dirt on one side of his face, a smear of gun oil along his jaw. His gun was slung over his shoulder, and he moved like he’d been carrying it all his life.

Tony tried to look casual and probably failed. “How’d it go?” he asked.

Barnes took a moment to answer, seeming to gather his thoughts. “Rough on the ground,” he said finally, taking off his gloves. “They were pinned when I got there, some HYDRA splinter cell, I’m pretty sure, though not one I’m familiar with.”

“That can’t be good.”

“It wasn’t. They didn’t know what they had, though—that pretty much saved the op in the end.”

“So we got a hold of whatever it was?”

Barnes nodded. “It looked to me like they were going to pass it on to someone else, so it’s a good thing we managed to intercept it. Steve’s taking it somewhere safe I guess, though I think he and T’Challa were discussing it for a while.”

“Is he coming here?”

“Don’t know.” Barnes shook his head. “Maybe. T’Challa played it cool. I wasn’t about to stick around to hear more, though.”

“Good. Didn’t get a single glimpse of you the whole time. It was kind of amazing, but it scared the crap out of me.”

Barnes smiled at him, but it was fleeting. “Tony, what the hell’s going on out there? I know Steve’s going after HYDRA, but this felt like a lot more than that.”

Tony worked his jaw for a second. “I don’t really know, to be honest. It’s all theoretical. But the things that have been going on these past few years...there’s a pattern in it, somewhere. I don’t have the full picture yet.”

“HYDRA?”

“Pretty sure HYDRA’s the tip of the iceberg. Hell, maybe even a red herring.”

“Shit.”

“This is why we need the Accords, and we need everyone on board with them,” Tony said. “If something’s coming for us, we need a united front, the people and us, every city and country committed. Divided, we fall. It’s already happened to us before, we have to learn from our history.”

“Does Steve know that?”

Tony tilted his head. “You’d know better, you’ve seen him, and you know him. I’d like to think part of him knows—he’s been the one raiding these caches, turning over rocks. He flushed out HYDRA from SHIELD; I’d like to think he can spot a pattern when he sees one.”

“But he’s on the ground. You’re the one with the big picture,” Barnes observed.

Tony ticked a humorless smile up at him. “I’ve missed a lot of trees, looking at this forest.”

Barnes nodded, but looked like he was holding something back.

Tony let out a breath.

“Anyway. A problem for another day. Let’s get you unpacked before T’Challa gets here and flips his shit over you going out.”

Barnes acquiesced, and they headed back towards the lab.

After a few paces, Barnes shot him a look. “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

Tony finally let his gaze stray to the arm. “Sure. What’d you think of Project Pun?”

Barnes raised his arm and wiggled his fingers. It was both like and unlike the one Hydra had given him: where it had gleamed, this one was matte, brushed gunmetal, its plating less regimented, more organic. It had had to bond with the broken bits of what was left of the original, which wasn’t ideal, but the reconstructive port system Pepper had looked at would fix that in a flash. This was Mark 3, the first prototype worthy of testing, and Barnes...well, he wore it well, Tony could admit that.

“It’s so much lighter,” Barnes said, looking at it. “Threw me off a bit, to be honest. Thought I was back in the war or something.”

“But it worked all right? No pain?” Tony pressed.

“No, no pain,” Barnes said. They were wandering slowly back into the compound, Tony walking backwards and forwards at intervals so he could study the arm, the way Barnes moved with it.

“It’s good, Tony,” Barnes said, handing his rifle off to him and then taking off his jacket. “It’s real good. But you can have a closer look if you want, now that we have more time.”

“Yes, please,” Tony said absently, assessing the shift of plating. “Looks like there’s a catch at the elbow happening. That bothering you?”

“Helped, actually, when I was trying to take a shot. Practically a bipod all on its own.”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “Enough to want to keep it around? Because honestly, it’s bothering me, I’m getting all OCD up in this joint.”

“Give it a lock setting I can adjust on and off,” Barnes suggested. “Best of both worlds.”

“Like a seatbelt or something, yeah, I can do that, it’s just a mechanical catch,” Tony mumbled. “Great, awesome. Anything else?”

“...Yeah.” They were in the lab now, a space of both familiarity and horror, with the sim setup on one side of a thin dividing wall, and all of Tony’s ersatz equipment on the other. Barnes stopped in the doorway and stopped Tony along with him with his flesh hand on Tony’s wrist.

“Tony,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for trusting me,” Barnes said, and then his face ran through about three different and conflicting expressions before it smoothed out and he leaned forward to brush his lips against the corner of Tony’s mouth, right at the border of his beard.

Tony froze, suddenly hyper-aware of the stubble around Barnes’s mouth, and the warmth of his hand around his wrist.

Barnes drew back, looked at him, and nodded. “It was maybe a dumb thing to do,” he said. “But you did it anyway, because you trusted I was good enough, recovered enough, to carry it off. You’re more like Steve than you think.”

“Please don’t kiss me then insult me,” Tony said automatically, grasping at straws.

“S’not a insult,” Barnes replied, brushing past him towards the infirmary where he slept. “Not from me, anyway.”

“Is this an adrenaline thing?” Tony asked. “Help me understand, here.”

“Timing-wise, probably,” Barnes answered, lifting one shoulder. “But if we’re being up-front, I’ve been wanting to do that for a while.”

“Wrong answer, very wrong answer.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re apparently Stockholm Syndrome’d all to hell and shouldn’t be allowed near a BB gun, let alone this fucking thing I foolishly armed you with,” Tony said, gesturing a little more wildly than should be done with an top-of-the-line Stark-manufactured sniper rifle.

“Uh huh,” Barnes blithely agreed. “I thought we’d already gone over the Stockholm whatever.”

“Imprinting, we went over imprinting,” Tony said, finally scraping together the wherewithal to at least put down the gun in the lab and follow Barnes into the infirmary. “We have not gone over potentially serious psychological issues caused by my basically being your only source of hope and/or future in this cruel, cruel world, which seems to be a real concern right now.”

Barnes tilted his head. “I do spend time with people other than you, you know. It’s not like you’ve locked me in a basement somewhere. And anyway, I feel like Gish or Xiang would have maybe warned me of that, if it’d started happening.”

“Gish and Xiang didn’t know that you’re apparently picking up all of the dysfunctional shit I’m putting down,” Tony protested.

“Pretty sure they’re aware,” Barnes said, sitting on his bed and pulling off his boots.

“Considering I said specifically, at one point, ‘Dr. Xiang, should I be worried that I unequivocally trust Tony Stark with my life even though he tried to kill me not that long ago?’” He raised his eyebrows at Tony. “By the way, she said no, I shouldn’t be worried. She

added that you were one of the few gearheads who actually respect the field of psychology, and that she'd trust you with her life, too. So."

"That...that's not, I mean, apples and oranges," Tony said, opening his hands a little helplessly and sitting across from him. "Trust comes in lots of flavors, and I mean, I've been a *superhero*, that kind of inspires trust, but there's an ocean between *you'll save me if I'm in mortal danger* and *I want to tap that*, okay, that's just a fact."

"I don't need to be saved if I'm in mortal danger," Barnes shrugged. "Pretty sure that's a problem I haven't had since '45."

"Yeah, *so*?" Tony said, hunching his shoulders up. "That's not...this isn't..."

"If you didn't want me to kiss you, you can just say so, doc," Barnes said. His careful study of Tony felt familiar by now. Tony didn't really know what to do with that.

"Uh. Well," he tries. "You're gorgeous, obviously, and wonderful and brave and great, but you're also kind of my patient and also kind of twenty years younger than me, at least cumulatively, which makes me very nervous." Never mind that Tony had in the past slept with plenty of people half his age with no qualms whatsoever; this was somehow different, and he wasn't willing at this point to examine exactly why.

Barnes made a weird frowny face that didn't seem particularly upset. "Okay. That's...not a no. Or if it is, it's a pretty complimentary no."

"That's an *oh god, you just made this very complicated*," Tony countered. "Because, uh, you have."

Barnes put his two hands up. "Fair enough. Can you help me get this off?" He gestured with the Mark 3.

"Yeah, of course, why do you think I'm here?"

"I dunno, to wave your arms at me?"

"Well, give it here then," Tony said, a little helplessly, but this way he at least he had an outlet for all of this nervous energy.

Barnes seemed perfectly content with letting himself be manhandled out of the arm. Tony eased it off the stump of the old arm, undoing the supportive strapping as he went, distracting himself from their close proximity with quick questions. "Did this chafe? Do you like the idea of permanent installation or is that awful?"

"No, and removeable sounds real good, to be honest," Barnes answered. "I was just starting to get used to the unevenness. I'd rather have something that can be changed out if something better comes around."

"I mean, it'll always be interchangeable, it's just the matter of difficulty involved in that process," Tony said, examining the ports for any issues, weighing the Mark 3 in his hands.

“Either you’d need my help exchanging one for another, or you’re able to pop one off at night if you don’t feel like sleeping with it on or something.”

“I like the latter,” Barnes said. “Though I wouldn’t mind the former if you were at my beck and call.”

“Stop that.”

Barnes snorted.

“I am entirely serious,” Tony said.

Barnes quieted. “Okay,” he said, eventually.

“Thank you.” Tony put the arm aside to be scanned. Mark 4 would be better.

Without the arm, Barnes looked no less substantial, but somehow more real. He looked at Tony.

“So, are we gonna pretend I didn’t get fresh with you?” he asked. “Is that the deal? Because I can handle that, I’d just like some clarity on the subject.”

Tony let out a long breath. He didn’t know what the fuck he was doing, and after Pepper, after everything else, every possibility looked fragile and impossible. “You’ve caught me at a bad time,” he said, as truthfully as he could. “I.” He raised his hand, paused, and then tentatively caught the long line of Barnes’s neck where it met his shoulder. His skin was warm, pulse kicking up under his hand, and Tony had to resist the urge to pull him in. “You’re a whole lot of appealing things, James Barnes,” he said, “Wrapped up in a real problematic package for me, all right?”

“Because of what I’ve done?” Barnes asked, and if he’d been plaintive about it, Tony would have told him *yes* and also *fuck off*, but instead it was matter-of-fact, accepting of the possibility.

“It might have been that, if you’d asked earlier,” Tony said. “It’s not anymore.”

The tension around Barnes’s eyes eased. “Okay.”

Tony continued. “Right. So. It’s not a no, but it’s definitely not a yes, because I’ve gotta sort some things out on my end, and you need to...I don’t know, maybe talk more to Xiang about this, because I’m still not dismissing the possibility that this isn’t some bad psychological juju that I’ve accidentally wrought upon you. Is that...is that acceptable, at all?”

Barnes leaned into his hand. “Take all the time you need,” he said. “But what I talk to Xiang about is none of your business. I know what I want. I know it’s...maybe weird. Hell, I liked men back in the day, but I definitely never liked anyone remotely like you. But I’m not who I was, so I guess that isn’t so surprising. And it doesn’t make it any less true.”

“I...really hate that logic, but I’ll take it all the same,” Tony admitted. “Just. Don’t feel like you’ve gotta wait or anything. Or that you don’t have other options. Once all this is done,

believe me, you're gonna have options."

"Pretty sure I want to. Wait, that is."

"Well, that's...flattering. But, uh, no pressure."

"I got it, Tony."

"Okay," Tony took a breath. "Okay."

"Good night, Tony," Barnes said, a smile playing along his lips.

"Yeah. Uh. Sleep well. Thanks for...well, thanks."

"Any time."

What a fucking mess, Tony thought.

He could still feels Barnes's lips on his own.

T'Challa arrived back at the compound close to dawn. His demeanor was anything but sunny.

"Stark."

In the lab, Tony turned around from where he tinkering with the Mark 4. "Yes? Welcome back, by the way."

T'Challa crossed his arms. "I could not help but notice that your jet was refueled some time during the night."

"...Why do you even check the refueling manifests at four A.M., who *does* that?"

"*Stark*."

"What?"

"Did you deploy the Winter Soldier?"

"No," Tony said, with complete honesty.

"Did you let him leave?"

"Who?"

"Barnes."

"I mean...not as such."

T'Challa stared at him. "Did you court an international incident," he said slowly, "Because he asked you to?"

Tony shrugged. "He said I could tell him no. But seriously, do you see him as a threat, as he is now?"

T'Challa sighed. "No. I have not believed him a threat for quite some time now. But exoneration or not, you took an idiotic risk."

"I know." Tony rubbed at his mouth. "I guess...I wanted to see if he'd screw us over." *To see if Tony Stark is still making all the wrong calls*, he doesn't add.

"And he didn't."

"He didn't."

"He could have, and it might not have been his fault," T'Challa pointed out.

Tony opened his hands. "Yeah. But he wanted to help, and it looked like you guys were in over your heads."

"We were," T'Challa admitted. "And the evidence they are taking apart at the scene is disturbing."

"Who's taking it in?"

"It's being turned over to the UN."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "That your doing?"

"Captain Rogers is not unreasonable," T'Challa reminded him. "And this was clearly a concern of international importance."

"But he still won't sign."

T'Challa gave him a look. "You haven't asked, recently."

There were a lot of spiteful things Tony wouldn't mind saying to that, but he kept his mouth shut.

T'Challa continued to watch him. "You know," he said, "If Barnes continues to go into the field, the Captain will eventually notice. He will want explanations. I could bar him from this country, but I cannot bar him from trying to confront Barnes outside these borders. I also cannot bar him from confronting you."

"I'm not worried about me," Tony said, though his chest twinged in remembered agony. "But Barnes isn't ready yet."

"Then he needs to weigh that, as well as his recovery, against the value of providing backup to his friend."

“Yeah.” Tony sighed. “I’ll tell him. But I’m pretty sure he already knows.”

Barnes did. “I have to,” he said, a little helplessly.

“You told me, before, that Steve had given you a chance you didn’t want,” Tony said. He was sitting carefully on the far end of the couch, a gulf of cushions between them. “That you had to figure out what to do with that, now that you had this time. You don’t have to fight, if you don’t want to.”

“But I can,” Barnes said. “So I have to.”

Tony nodded, unsurprised. “Then we’re running full, first-person sims,” he said. “Every other day. We have to make your case airtight, because no matter how good you are, you’re going to get found out, and you’re going to have to prove you’re no longer a danger to society.”

Barnes hunched his shoulders in. It had been a long time since he’d last done that. “I would want to do that anyway,” he said. “Was bored, remember?”

“Right, of course. Can’t have that.”

Every other day after that, Barnes spent three hours in the chair, fighting with himself.

Gish and Xiang had to be informed of his outing, and Tony was pretty sure that if they could have set Tony on fire with their minds, they would have. They couldn’t argue the results, though—Barnes had a will of iron, and now that Tony had let him in on what was going on outside Wakanda, he was dead-set on becoming a useful operative.

“He’s...I mean, obviously, we know he’s good,” Tony said, on the phone to Rhodey a month or so after the fact. “But, and I hesitate to say this, counting chickens and all, but he might end up even better than the Winter Soldier ever was. Now that he’s got his whole brain back, it’s...it’s pretty amazing.” Barnes had been serious about training with T’Challa—they were now pretty evenly matched, and watching them spar was a sight to behold.

“I feel the need to remind you that you started this project with the goal of Barnes’s recovery, not his return to the field,” Rhodey said, though he sounded unsurprised.

“I didn’t suggest it, he did,” Tony defended.

“And that didn’t seem like a trap to you?”

“No,” Tony said, startled. “Not at all, actually. Mostly seemed like he was asking me a favor he expected me not to give him.”

“Huh.”

“He’s a soldier, Rhodey. What do you expect?”

“I don’t know what the hell to expect. He’s a brainwashed super-soldier from a bygone era. There aren’t a lot of metrics on his type.”

“Even if there was one, he would probably be an outlier,” Tony muttered.

“Well, I’ve started the ball rolling at the Hague,” Rhodey said, after a judgemental pause. “Just feelers, nothing exact, but if he wants to show his face for real, stand trial, he’ll get a fair one. Now that Lagos has been settled, the ground’s a little more even for something like that to happen without it being a disaster. Trial by media’ll be a shitshow, but—”

“I’ll take care of that, if that’s where we end up,” Tony interrupted. “But that’s good, that’s great. He’ll want that, I think. Gish said it might give him some closure.”

“You coming back to New York any time soon?” Rhodey asked abruptly.

“Not sure,” Tony replied. “Why, you need me for something?”

“Just miss your idiot face, man.”

“Aw, honeybear. Miss yours, too.” Tony mentally reviewed his calendar. “I’ve been called in to review the evidence Rogers brought in from that cache in Montenegro, though the date hasn’t been set yet. When’s your next meeting with the UN?”

“Next week, I think? Yeah, Wednesday.”

“Perfect, let’s hit up downtown afterwards.”

He hung up and turned around to find Barnes hovering in the doorway. “James. What’s up?”

“You’re leaving?”

“Only for a few days,” Tony said, not entirely sure why he was going the reassurance route. “Gotta look at what you guys brought in from Montenegro.”

Barnes nodded, but there was something dissatisfied in his expression. Tony was getting good at reading him, nowadays.

“What?” he asked.

Barnes shrugged a bit, looking away. “I want to go with you, and I know I can’t.”

“It’s not going to be dangerous,” Tony said, a little cautiously, because Barnes had never expressed any sort of anxiety before about his coming in and out of Wakanda before. Then again, he hadn’t really left for the past few months. But still.

“You’re investigating mysterious tech related to the Tesseract, and it’s *not dangerous*?” Barnes said, raising his eyebrows.

“It’s just an assessment.”

“Are you bringing the suit?”

“I bring the suit everywhere,” Tony dismisses. “That is the lowest personal security setting I have, keeping the suit around.”

Barnes gave him a hard look. “Where the hell was it when Zemo was interrogating me, then?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “You really wanna bring that up? That time you fired a gun at me at point blank range?”

Barnes swallowed, gaze sliding away. “It’s the kind of shit that terrifies me every time I remember it. So yeah, I guess I do.”

Tony stared at him. “I guess we haven’t even touched on the most recent traumas, huh?” he said, a little weakly. “Besides my parents, obviously, but even that was in the past. Didn’t think the stuff after Zemo tapped you would register so much.”

“I talk about it a lot with Xiang,” Barnes muttered. “What you looked like when you were holding the gun, and I pulled the trigger.”

Tony stepped towards him cautiously. “What did I look like?”

“Scared shitless,” James said, meeting his eyes. “But you barely flinched.”

“If I’d flinched, you would’ve hit me,” Tony said. “I’m a survivor.”

Barnes snorted, and nodded, more to himself, it seemed, than to Tony.

“Jesus Christ, you’re a sad case,” Tony said, snagging Barnes by the sleeve. “Come here.”

Barnes, while increasingly competent at casual touch, was apparently rusty on hugs. He more or less conked his head into Tony’s collarbone first, his arm way behind on the whole process. Tony tried to pick up the slack, trying to remember how Pepper had done it. Pepper was good at hugs. Tony hadn’t anticipated that he’d be called upon for hugs this often.

“You’re really not helping things,” Barnes mumbled into Tony’s shirt. “Stockholm Syndrome-wise, since that’s a thing you’re worried about.” His arm seemed to finally to get with the program, wrapping around the small of Tony’s back and squeezing hard.

“Yeah well, neither are you, standing around baring your soul and looking like someone shot your dog,” Tony replied. “Guess we both suck.”

“You smell good.”

“Thanks, it’s the smell of money.”

“Jackass.”

“Come on, I’m not leaving until next week, you have plenty of time to get sick of my face before then.”

“Don’t think I will,” James muttered.

Tony thought darkly that the more likely scenario would be Tony himself not managing more than twenty-four hours before he started missing James like a lost limb (*har har*). He’d been in Wakanda mostly non-stop for a long while now, and the routine he’d fallen into with James was both uncomplicated and focused, unlike most chapters of his life up until now. It somehow had planted itself as a safe time and place inside him, a way of escaping the goddamn civil war, all of the political and historical horrors of the outside world. Every time he stepped outside it, he felt heavier, and this time would be no different.

“You’ll be fine,” he said, but the smile he offered was weak.

New York was astonishingly loud in contrast to the muffled sanctuary of T’Challa’s kingdom; a part of Tony drank it up, relished the chaos and the five languages of chatter within a twenty-foot radius. The other half of him cringed internally, and made sure his sunglasses were firm on his nose as he exited his car and then made his way through UN security.

“Just through here, Mr. Stark.”

The UN building had renovations done not long after the battle of New York. Mostly underground. Tony appreciated the improvements, particularly in regards to keeping a good deal of the more sensitive materials brought in from outside agencies far away from the political bodies involved.

Looking through the data on the tablet he just synced with their systems, however, he found that he was definitely missing Bruce. A second pair of eyes familiar with the Tesseract and all its hazards could have really done him some good. Plus, the whole glowy green thing—maybe there was some sort of link?

“Tell me more about these sympathetic resonances,” he said to the room at large, once he got in sight of both the artifact and some lab coats.

One of the braver lab coats came forward. “As you know, the Tesseract has been on Asgard since the battle,” she said. “However, some of its radiant signature has hung around where it was used most recently.”

“New York,” Tony nodded. Specifically for him, the landing pad on the Tower. JARVIS had noted traces of it some months after the fact, and in the guise of re-doing the lettering on the outside, Tony had ripped the whole thing up tile-by-slab, replacing every inch of it until there wasn’t a trace left.

Of course, he’d taken measurements from the thing first, though. “Gonna push some extra data on that to you, if that’s cool.”

“Please do,” the lab coat said.

Lab coat turned out to be a Dr. Gina Barton (“No relation, thank Christ” “...Did you work for SHIELD back in the day?” “Five years. More than enough.”), who had a lot to say on the artifact’s resonance with the Cube.

“I hesitate to say it’s like the Tesseract,” she said. “Its properties appear to be very different—the green luminescence versus the blue, for a start—though there are clearly similar molecular structures at its core. It’s as if they were forged in the same fire, but for totally different purposes.”

“That sounds ominous,” Tony observed.

“It should,” Dr. Barton agreed. “Because when we cracked the casing a fraction open, it killed three people.”

“...Um,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Dr. Barton agreed. She showed him a picture on her tablet. Two lab coats and a military type, all sprawled on the floor, no sign of a cause of death, peace on their faces.

“They look...kinda okay with it,” Tony tried.

“Captain Rogers reported that when they were liberating it from the HYDRA splinter, they all felt, well, *impelled*, I suppose, to give themselves up to it. ‘Body and soul’ was what he said, to be exact.”

“And this thing has resonance with the Tesseract?”

“They have a cross-resonance, yes. I think, were they in the same space at the same time, they would increase each other’s powers exponentially.” Dr. Barton paused. “And that’s not the worst news.”

Tony huffed. “Hit me.”

“It seems to be looking for other resonances.”

“Wait. Are you saying this thing’s *alive*?”

“Well...maybe? It’s hard to be sure without opening the casing again, which...no one really wants to do that.”

“Understandable.”

“We’ve got more than enough to work with through the casing, anyway. But what I was saying was, from the readings it’s giving out, there’s an implication that the Tesseract isn’t the only thing it resonates with. Which implies that there are other things like them out in the universe somewhere, waiting to be combined into something—”

“—*Fucking unholy*. Gotcha.” Tony exhaled. “We’ve gotta get this off-world. Where the hell is Thor when you need him?”

“Dr. Foster is looking into it, but hasn’t had much luck. I would suggest looking for alternatives.”

“All of our alien encounters have either been overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative, nothing in between, and super in favor of the negative,” Tony said. “If you’ve got ideas on that, I’d love to hear them. In the meantime, I’d love a corner I can carve out here for the rest of the afternoon.”

“We were prepared for that,” Dr. Barton said, with a studiously straight face. “You’re over by Dr. Lovell. He’s a fan.”

A gangly kid in a too-big lab coat waved a little too enthusiastically at him from the far side of the room. Tony sighed.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Heard you got along with Spider-Man, and he’s what, twelve?” Dr. Barton said.

Tony peered at her. “I think you are related to Hawkeye. Secretly.”

“How dare you,” said Dr. Barton.

Tony worked for the rest of the afternoon with what he’d started calling The Sphere of Death, cross-checking his and Bruce’s data on the Cube with that the lab coats were pulling up. More than once, he gave himself a pat on the back for not having a complete anxiety meltdown in the middle of it. He actually found himself grateful for Dr. Lovell’s starstruck patter—it was a welcome distraction from the cosmic horror sitting in the middle of the room.

That evening, he went downtown for dinner and drinks with Rhodey.

“How’s it look?” Rhodey said.

“Fucking horrible. Let’s not talk about it. Tell me how the Accords are going.”

Rhodey snorted, but complied. “They’re good, actually. We’ve got almost every country in the UN on board with the newer regulations, and the emergency contact infrastructure has the funding structure it needs to get underway. Ad hoc committees are overseeing in the meantime.”

“Any signs of Registration making a comeback?”

“It’s always on the table in one way or another, but it’s mostly presented as opt-in rather than opt-out nowadays, with caveats regarding criminal records.”

Tony took a bite of steak and then washed it down with cabernet. “Daredevil won’t like that.”

Rhodey gave him a flat look. “Daredevil throws people down flights of stairs and then claims he doesn’t kill people. I don’t really care what he thinks. Vigilantes will continue to be vigilantes, I think we’ve established that, and there’s not a lot we can do about it except continue to turn a blind eye when it suits us and prosecute when it doesn’t. It’s not fair and ethically it’s gray as hell, but we’ve already pushed the boundaries of legislation just about as far as we can; eventually, it becomes a human issue, a matter of individual judges and peers, and that’s all we’ve got—all we *should* get. More important is the fact that we’ve facilitated ways for people to be a part of a justice and/or defense system without necessarily a part of a governmental one. That’s what we set out to do, and it’s what’s happening now. It will never be perfect, but it’s what’s in our power to do without taking over the world.”

Tony smiled at him. “This work suits you. Think you’ll stick with it for a while?”

Rhodey gave a modest shrug. “They seem to like me. And I get a driver, so.”

“Well, if there’s a *driver*... ”

They caught up on other matters—the kickass pilot Rhodey may or may not be dating, the weather in Wakanda, and then they wandered over to a hole-in-the-wall scotch bar after dinner. Once settled, Tony stuck his nose in the heavy Old Fashioned glass into which the bartender had poured the most recent distiller’s edition of Lagavulin and breathed deeply.

“My god, that’s the stuff,” he said into the bar-top. “T’Challa’s a good man, but he does not have a palate for scotch.”

“Well good, at least I know my place as your bestie is secure,” Rhodey said dryly.

“Honeybear, there was never any doubt.”

“You gonna actually drink that, or just huff it like glue?”

“The peat. The *peat*.”

“You’re a child with an 80-year-old’s tastebuds.”

Tony finally got around to taking a sip, and made an orgasmic sound. Rhodey rolled his eyes, but visibly enjoyed his own glass for a moment as well.

“So,” he asked, once they’d both mellowed under the influence. “How’s Barnes?”

“Good,” Tony said more easily, sitting up. “I’ve told you before on the phone, he’s...he’s doing really well, all considered.”

“So you’ve said, yeah. But you’re not telling me something.”

Tony frowned. “You’ve never wanted the clinical details before.”

“Uh huh. Try again.”

Tony opened his hands. “We’re covering our asses. He’s doing sims every other day, full ones, recreating the whole brainwashing process step by step, but for each step, he has to figure out how to resist it, take it apart in his mind, and break the system. When he does it right, the sim keeps going, but he gets to walk out of the room. When he starts to exhibit signs of panic or succumbing, we peel back some of the simulation, or pull him out, if necessary. In the past six weeks, we haven’t needed to do that once. Gish and Xiang are both incredibly surprised and incredibly optimistic. Once he’s done with the intensive stuff, he’ll probably need to revisit the whole thing every few months, but I think we can call the whole thing a success.”

“You don’t sound as excited as you should be,” Rhodey said.

Tony shrugged. “It’ll be amazing press, if we can swing it our way, and it presents tons of new possibilities for uses of the BARF system. But I think a lot of it will be like any other therapy—it’s not a cure-all. Not everyone’s going to tolerate this kind of exposure treatment, in fact I’d bet that less than 1% of the population could stand it, at least at the levels we’ve been running it. Barnes is and will continue to be a unique case, and it’s a blessing and a curse.”

Rhodey nodded, watching him over his own glass. “That’s fair. There’s no such thing as a cure-all, though. So failing to produce one of those doesn’t take away from your accomplishment. And Barnes’s, for that matter.”

Tony shrugged. “Sure.”

“You’re still evading,” Rhodey said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Tony said, too defensively. Damn.

Rhodey raised an eyebrow. “Uh *huh*. I knew it, I knew you sounded weird on the phone. Tones, what happened?”

Tony sighed, and drummed his fingers on the bar. Then he took a long swallow of scotch, put the glass down, and gestured to the bartender for a top-up. “Look, I’ve been working closely with Barnes, all right?” he said. “We’ve basically been around each other most hours out of the day every day for the past five months, and for, I don’t know, *intensely fraught experiences* on and off for the past year.”

“Sure,” Rhodey nodded. “And?”

“And I think it’s gotten Barnes’s wires a bit...crossed.”

Rhodey...did not look surprised at all. “Oh?”

Tony threw up his hands. “He kissed me, okay? He came back, got off the jet, and goddamn kissed me like a knight errant returned from battle, okay, and it was really goddamn confusing!”

Rhodey stared hard at him, then sat back and crossed his arms. “Came back? From where, exactly?”

“...Fuck. Um. Not the point I was trying to make. Can we concentrate on that first admission and table the second?”

“I’m really not concerned about the fact that Barnes is in love with you,” Rhodey waved a hand. “Pepper said months ago that he looked at you like you’d hung the moon. But you let him out of Wakanda? To do what, exactly, and how the hell am I supposed to explain that if it comes up at the next meeting?”

“He’s not in love with me, he’s a brainwashing victim clinging to the nearest avatar of recovery!” Tony exclaimed.

“If that were true, he would’ve run off with Rogers ages ago,” Rhodey dismissed. “I was pretty sure that was gonna happen right up until Pepper gave me the lowdown.”

“He’s my patient!”

“He is, which is why I’m glad you’re saying he’s the one who made a move, and not you. But let me reiterate: I’m more concerned that a) you let him out of Wakanda, and b) you assessed the situation as *confusing* and not *alarming* and/or *unwanted*.” He raised an eyebrow at Tony. “Was it, by the way? Unwanted?”

Tony fiddled with a bar napkin. “...Not exactly. I hadn’t given it a whole lot of thought, before.”

Rhodey looked increasingly skeptical. “Even knowing who he is? What he did?”

Tony quirked a humorless smile at him. “I think I still win, if we’re going by body count alone.”

Rhodey exhaled and put his drink down on the bar. “You’re deliberately misinterpreting me, please stop.”

“He didn’t kill them,” Tony said, turning to face him. It was the first time he’d said it in a long time, and the very first time at all that he believed it fully. “HYDRA killed my parents. I’ve accepted that. When I look at Barnes, I don’t see a murderer. I see a guy who’s been unmade over and over and still knows how to crack a joke and care about people. And I let him out of Wakanda because otherwise Rogers was going to get himself killed in Montenegro because he still refuses to take the measures needed to receive backup from anyone who ever sided with me during the whole,” he makes an all-encompassing gesture. “Except for Natasha, obviously, because Natasha.”

Rhodey sighed. “I’m assuming he managed to get in and out without anyone sighting him, considering this is the first I’m hearing about it.”

“T’Challa knows,” Tony said. “But only because he’s neurotic about fueling records. But yeah, he stayed off the radar. If we keep it between us, it’ll stay there.”

“Rogers is going to find out, and when he does, he’ll kill you.”

“I’d like to see him fucking try,” Tony snarled, a little too vehemently.

“Oh right, that’s where all your righteous anger’s gone,” Rhodey nodded. “Fair enough.” He finished his drink, and contemplated the empty glass. “You know,” he said slowly, “This could work for us.”

“What could?”

“Barnes’s success. The Accords. You think he’d sign them?”

Tony sat back. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think he’d read them, at least.”

“Do you think, if he was up to it, he could bring Rogers in from the cold?”

Tony shrugged. “If anyone could, it’d be him.” He paused. “But I’m putting his well-being before that, okay? If he says no, he says no. I’m not making him do anything he doesn’t want to be a part of.”

“Yeah, Tones,” Rhodey said, watching him steadily, half a smile on his face. “I get that. He’s one of yours now.”

“That’s not what I said,” Tony said quickly.

Rhodey just shook his head. “You didn’t have to. I remember that look on your face from when you were sixteen and decided to take on the entire engineering department over that A-minus I got on my propulsion model.” He thumped his fist on his chest and put on an insipid, nostalgic expression. “Really got me, right here.”

Tony grumbled into his drink. The peat was getting a little overpowering now, but it was a good way of drowning out the embarrassment.

“Yep,” Rhodey said with alacrity, waving the bartender down. “Didn’t have to say a thing, Mr. Stank. Your actions speak for themselves.”

“That’s *Dr.* Stank to you, you fucker.”

They were both getting too old to drink the night away, and in any case Rhodey needed to be at the office early (and so did Tony, for that matter), so they ended up cabbing it to their respective abodes.

The next morning, Tony poured himself into his clothes while still only half awake, the rest of his attention occupied with how best to phrase *get this thing the hell away from us as quickly as possible* in a diplomatic fashion that wouldn’t disappoint Dr. Barton & Co. too badly.

He scrolled through his emails while his coffee brewed. Halfway down his inbox, he frowned.

To: stark@starkindustries.com
From: g.barton@mit.alumni.edu
Subject: STAY AWAY

No text in the body of the email. Cc'd were...a whole lot of people at the UN. Tony frowned. Dr. Barton had definitely gone to MIT— they'd chatted about it off and on yesterday, prodding at their east campus versus west alliances.

"FRIDAY, spam check?"

"The email appears to be genuinely sourced, boss."

"Huh."

He pressed the emergency call chip on his bluetooth earpiece.

"Tony, what's going on?" Pepper said within the space of a single ring.

"I'm having a problem with my current project," Tony said. "I think you should make the usual beratement calls. I'll be downstairs seeing to things."

"Should I include R&D?" Pepper asked sweetly, a hint of steel underneath.

He really shouldn't. There was no need to alarm him. But he had a feeling Barnes would kill him if he didn't tell him something was up. "Yeah I guess you'd better cc him in. He shouldn't come over though, I've got enough backup closer by."

Pepper hummed skeptically, but answered, "Right away, Mr. Stark."

The line went dead. Tony poured himself a mug of coffee, downed it, and then poured a second, lost in thought.

He should probably wait for backup.

But surely someone else would have gone to investigate, or at least called Dr. Barton, if something were amiss? Maybe he was just out of the loop? If he sounded some sort of citywide alarm, and Dr. Barton's email turned out to be a mistake, or something sensitive, that would also be bad.

"FRIDAY, anything on the news that might explain this?"

A pause, and then, "Nothing so far, boss."

"All right. I'm giving everyone another hour to get here, and then we're going."

“Sure thing, boss.” Her easy agreement made him miss JARVIS intensely for a moment. He never thought he’d miss his disapproval, but here he was.

He finished his coffee, kept his eye on the news, and at 9:30, took a leisurely drive to UN headquarters.

It looked normal. No familiar faces. It could be a false alarm anyway.

Tony sighed, straightened his tie, and went in.

He stepped into the lobby and felt his skin crawl.

Security was too quiet as he passed through. There were a few people milling around, but their eyes seemed glazed, far away.

Too many halls were empty.

The air didn’t smell quite right.

Tony got into the elevator, thankfully alone. The suitcase suit was a bit spiky at the get-go if you were standing too close.

“Boss,” FRIDAY said within the HUD. “What a pleasure to have you back.”

“Pleasure’s all mine, my girl,” Tony replied. “What’ve we got?”

“Not a lot, boss. I’m looking at security logs now, and it looks like business as usual up until about eight this morning.”

“And what happened then?”

“Not a lot, and that is the abnormality. While many more people should have been entering the building, the night staff should have been exiting. There is no sign that anyone has left at all since last night.”

“And yet I’m not seeing many people at all right now,” Tony said. “Where the hell are they?”

“Scanning now. The night staff seem to be in the security breakroom. All of them. Most everyone else seems to be holed up in their offices.”

“Tied up or something?”

“Not sure. They aren’t moving. And I’m getting strange readings from the vital signs across the building.”

“‘Strange’. You mean *magical*,” Tony assessed. “Great. I love magic. Who doesn’t love magic?”

The elevator stopped on the first secure evidence level. Tony felt his stomach lurch with it.

FRIDAY took a scan of the immediate vicinity. “Dr. Barton is here, but she appears to be the only one on this floor, and she’s sealed off access to the lab, locking herself inside.”

“Well, I guess we know what whoever-it-is is coming for,” Tony murmured. “Any other signatures, recognizable or otherwise?”

“Nothing recognizable, sir. Currently scanning for unknowns.”

Tony made his way down the hall, lifting just slightly off the ground with the boot repulsors to keep his movement as quiet as possible. The lab was just beyond a security checkpoint at the end of the hall and off to the left, and the entire passageway appeared to be empty.

“I’m getting energy readings around the the checkpoint,” FRIDAY reported, throwing them up on screen. Tony glanced at them.

“Huh. Not Loki, thank Christ, but definitely not our world. Much as I hate to admit it, Strange might be of use right about now.”

“Perish the thought,” FRIDAY said.

Tony reached the checkpoint. Usually, there was a guard behind a desk with a computer hooked up to a card sensor, a camera mounted in the upper corner of the ceiling, and a retinal scanner at the door.

The guard was indeed sitting behind the desk. His head, however, was nowhere to be found.

Tony gagged slightly. Somewhere in his hind brain, alarms started blaring. “Time of death, FRIDAY?” he asked.

“Less than an hour, judging by the temperature of the body, boss.” FRIDAY paused.

“What else?” Tony prompted.

“I think I have identified the signature of the energy readings,” FRIDAY said.

“Well, let’s have ‘em.”

“They are consistent with those we took yesterday.”

“*Yester*—oh shit. FRIDAY, brain scan, now. Anything unusual?”

“High levels of adrenaline, boss, but so far so good.”

“Keep an eye on that.” He keyed into the lab, retracting the mask briefly to allow the retinal scan. The air down here smelled worse—like jet fuel and plasma. As soon as the doors started opening, Tony shut the face mask down fast, double-checking the air-filtration systems as he did so.

The lab was filled with a green, noxious glow. A feeling of intense, *invasive* certainty wrapped around Tony’s ribs and *pulled*.

He stumbled one step and then pulled himself up forcibly. This didn't feel like Wanda, nor like any other mind-warping experiences Tony had ever had. It felt organic, like whale song, and like a solar flare.

He became dimly aware of a crackle of static in his ear. He could only keep his attention on two things: his own autonomy, and Dr. Barton.

She was standing in front of the stone. Her hands were white-knuckled around the railing separating her from the containment glass. Her eyes were filled with green.

Tony couldn't tell whether it would be the right or the *very wrong* thing to break her concentration. His heart was thumping very hard in his chest.

He approached the stone.

"Detecting high amounts of radiant energy," FRIDAY murmured.

"Insulation holding up okay?" he asked her.

"So far so good, boss."

Tony adjusted his course just slightly, so he came right up close to Dr. Barton.

She didn't look at him.

"What does it want you to do?" Tony asked, vocalizer as quiet as he could make it through the helmet.

Dr. Barton shuddered. Her eyes never left the stone. Nevertheless, she said, "Create an amplifier. Enhance the signal." She swallowed. "I...I tried to send everyone home, but it wouldn't let me. When I resisted, it made me...I killed Harry, outside, before I." She swallowed, her eyes shifting to him for half a second. "I can't...I can't stop much longer."

"Hold on," Tony said. "If you can't, I'll stop you. That's a promise. But hold on. There's gotta be some way of shielding this thing. Just. Hold on, okay?"

Dr. Barton nodded, but she was biting her lip now, hard enough to break skin. Blood seeped down her chin.

"FRIDAY, give me all the schematics of the containment, stat."

Data streamed down the HUD. Tony could feel his concentration being muddled with, and fought to focus. Results of the brain scan flickered in his left peripheral vision.

He muttered half to keep himself going. "There has to have been a breach somewhere, something we can seal..." He went to Barton's workstation and hacked in with impunity, scanning the logged readings from the past twelve hours.

"Fuck," he said aloud.

It seemed that the stone had been working hard all night, burrowing into the flaws of its container, clawing like some sort of caged animal. *God*, Tony thought, *It can't just think—it can plan.*

He could feel it now, as more than just a grasping presence, a stink in the room. It didn't even feel particularly malicious; just *hungry*. Tony was beginning to suspect what for, too.

"Boss, your scan is beginning to reflect high levels of alpha-wave disturbance."

"Yeah, I noticed," Tony said. He'd had to retract the gauntlets to work with Dr. Barton's computer—fucking touchscreens, why were there no *ports*, what was this, some sort of Mac monstrosity? — his hands were trembling hard.

"Boss, what are you doing?"

"I'm trying to stop this thing, what's it look like?" he snapped.

"Doesn't look like *that*, Boss."

"What the hell are you—" He stopped. His heart was beating out of his chest. The containment field screens on the monitor were bending in front of his eyes.

"I'm..." He stared at the screen. "I'm building an amplifier, aren't I?"

FRIDAY's anxious silence was answer enough.

"Shit. Shit, okay. Scrap all that. FRIDAY, if alpha-wave levels go any higher than this, zap my brain. Not quite electroshock levels, but get real close." Something lurched in his stomach. He squeezed his eyes shut, numbers streaming against the inside of his eyes.

There was a crackle in his ear again. This time, he listened.

"Stark! Stark, come in! We're sweeping the building, and yours is the only floor locked down, report now!"

Ah. The cavalry. Not the cavalry he'd called for, but beggars, choosers, etcetera. Maybe Natasha called him.

The inside of the helmet was starting to smell like blood. Tony couldn't tell if it was his ears or his nose.

"Hi Cap. Fancy meeting you here. We've got something like Loki's mind control cube only it has its own brain and really, really wants me to give it a chance to pull everyone's soul out through their eyeballs so if you could maybe *shut up and let me concentrate* that'd be great."

He coughed and gasped against the HUD. Then he blinked hard.

"Wait. Don't scrap it. *Reverse it.*"

This wasn't even a design he knew, the stone had to have planted it in him, like everything else. But to build it he had to know how, and now he could see the mechanisms inside, the way it manipulated the settings of the container to turn it into something else, reconfiguring its focus and magnetic poles. He could turn it inside out. Maybe even...

His hands flew over the keyboard before the stone could regain purchase, resetting the wave functions, the radiation levels, the angles of the field generators. The machinery around him hummed and whined.

"Boss, look out!"

Tony turned just in time to deflect the screaming, empty rage of Dr. Barton, who flung herself at him with a pen in her fist, stabbing at his un-armored hands, her eyes flooded with green. She couldn't hurt him, not really, not with the armor's strength behind him, but it pulled his attention, and within the seconds it took to dislodge her, the calibrations were all fucked again, and he could feel himself itching to continue, turn the whole thing out again—

Dr. Barton snarled, scrambling back onto her feet.

Tony swore, and tasted blood between his teeth. A shot of electricity scorched him from the inside of the helmet—alpha-waves must have surged.

"Tony, what's going on?"

And then the com crackled again as someone else came online, and Tony fought between relief and alarm. He recognized this voice.

"Fuck this. I'm going in, and you're not fucking stopping me, Stevie. Tony, hang tight."

"Barnes, no," he shouted. "Get the hell out of here, this thing is a fucking mind control engine—"

The ceiling exploded.

"Shit. FRIDAY, infrared vision." Dust clouded up everywhere. Dr. Barton was blessedly thrown off her feet again, but she was regaining her footing fast.

"Why the hell you think I'm here?" the infrared outline of Barnes snapped, climbing out of the wreckage of the ceiling. "Who's been fighting mind control for the past year?" He lunged forward and grabbed Dr. Barton around the middle, pinning her arms down and lifting her, kicking and screaming, away from Tony. "What d'you need, Tony?"

"Time and the ability to concentrate," Tony said, wincing at Dr. Barton's shrieks of outrage.

James nodded. "You got it. I'm getting this one out of the line of fire—they've got interference tech running outside, I think, maybe it'll help. Then I'll come back."

Tony waved him off, checking and double-checking that he wasn't working against himself. The machines began to hum again, the right frequency now, that jolt from FRIDAY keeping his head on straight, at least for now.

Calibrations set, he jetted over to the containment console and adjusted some of the mechanics.

From inside the chamber, the stone spat radiant jets of plasma that licked at the glass surrounding it.

Tony looked at it.

And he couldn't look away.

"Tony?"

He raised his hand, gauntlet extending back into place. Maybe his hand raised itself, repulsor whining as it charged.

"Tony, look at me. Don't look at it."

From somewhere in his hindbrain, Tony clawed his way back, and turned his head.

James looked back at him, white visible all around his eyes, his mouth set. "Tony," he said. "Finish it."

Tony exhaled. Reached for the last component, and flipped it on.

The air rippled. Tony's ears popped.

The stone *screamed*.

As Tony swam up towards consciousness, it was to a faint ringing in his ears, and distant voices.

"How long, Buck? When—when were you going to tell me?"

"...A while, okay. Long enough to get my head together. And it's not like you're easy to get a hold of nowadays."

"Bullshit. If you were with Stark, you have—"

"That emergency line? Yeah, I heard about that."

"So help me understand. I'm just...it's so good to see you, you look...better. But I could've ___"

"Endangered yourself and Wakanda by showing up at T'Challa's palace, demanding to see me? Come on, Steve. I know you've gone off-grid. And I had to piece myself together, in a place that was safe."

"I get that, but. You could have just told me."

“And what would you have done? When I said that the treatment was experimental, that Tony Stark built it and was working on it for me?” A pause, filled with ever-clearer ambient sounds of camera flashes, footsteps, murmuring. “I didn’t need saving, Stevie. I just needed time.”

“...Did Stark tell you not to—?”

“Jesus, Steve, no. He asked me if I wanted to call you, several times, in fact. I told him no.”

“Because you didn’t want me there.”

“Because you wouldn’t have *just* been there. Look, I’ve given you the sitrep,” James cut him off. “I don’t know what else you want me to do.” There was something both gentle and tired in the way he said it that made Tony bristle.

This was not a conversation Tony should be hearing.

“Eurgh,” he said loudly. “FRIDAY, pop the faceplate, I taste like death.”

From his crouch just above him, James turned back around on the balls of his feet to look at Tony and quirk a crooked smile. “You look like shit, doc.”

“You don’t look so hot yourself, Barnes.” Tony focused enough to look at his arm. “What is that, still Mark 3? Fuck, I never did give you 4, my bad. Fixed the locking mechanism on this one, but still.”

“It worked fine for my purposes,” James shrugged.

Tony craned his head back a bit more to look around. They were still in the lab, but there were people milling around now, what looked like some of the familiar lab techs from before, including Dr. Lovell, whose face was ashen with shock.

“Where’s Dr. Barton?”

“Under observation,” Rogers said, clearly swallowing down a myriad of other things. “We’ll need to make sure she’s safe before we bring her in.”

“She’ll be safe,” Tony dismissed. “This stone’s not about programming brains, it’s about eating them. Control’s just the means to the end. Where is it now?”

“Still here,” James said, nodding up at the container. “They’re trying to figure out what the hell you did to it.”

“Reverse amplifier,” Tony said, re-identifying the hum of strained machinery all around them. “Thought at least I could make it turn in on itself. Hoped it would start regurgitating all the stuff it was eating, too. Did that happen?”

Rogers dipped his head slightly, the tips of his ears turning red. “The night security team is grateful.”

Tony exhaled in relief. “Good. That’s good. FRIDAY, full release.”

The armor gave way, and automatically James straightened and offered him a hand up. “Never actually seen one of your suits up close when I wasn’t terrified out of my head,” he commented. “It’s a real hotrod.”

Rogers made a distressed noise.

“Damn straight,” Tony said, ignoring him. He looked back at the container.

The glass was still humming with the reversed energy fields, giving off faint pulses. Inside, the stone sat in its original casing, looking like a molten husk, its facets just slightly dulled.

“They’re calling it the Soul Gem,” Natasha said, walking up. “Pretty corny, right?” She looked Tony up and down. “You’ve got red on you,” she commented.

Tony snorted. His whole face felt crusty with it. Definitely both nose and ears had been leaking. “Thanks, would never have known. You bring the whole group?”

“Considering how vague Pepper was, I brought whoever was in close range. T’Challa’s upstairs dealing with the officials, you’re lucky he was in town. Wanda came to help, she’s checking over the lab techs who have had the most contact with the gem. Vision’s figuring out how to mobilize your box of doom.”

“Good, good. Rhodey?”

“With T’Challa. They’re hashing out the press conference.”

“Excellent, awesome.” Tony peered at Rogers, and then at Sam Wilson, who was hovering in the background with his arms crossed. “So, uh. Didn’t exactly expect you guys on the comms.”

“Winter Soldier shows up out of nowhere in a Wakandan stealth jet?” Sam Wilson said flatly. “We notice.”

Tony widened his eyes at James. “You stole a plane from T’Challa? I told Pepper to tell you not to come, and you *steal a plane*?”

“You needed backup,” James said simply. He glared at Wilson. “And I’m not the Soldier anymore.”

Wilson snorted.

“Man, he must be pissed,” Tony said. “I told him we’d keep you on the DL.”

“It’s in a secure hangar. I stayed out of sight. He has nothing to worry about. You, on the other hand, are gonna get chewed out by Rhodes. He was not happy to see me.”

“Not happy, but not surprised, either,” Rogers pointed out, through gritted teeth. “I couldn’t help but notice that.”

“I trust Rhodey with information about my work,” Tony said simply.

“Did anyone *not* know?”

“I didn’t,” Natasha volunteered. At Rogers’s look, she shrugged. “I just inferred. Wanda and Vision didn’t know either. Wanda wants you to come over for dinner, by the way,” she added to Tony. She cast Barnes a look. “You took a big risk, coming here.”

“Ms. Potts said that Tony might be entering a potentially serious situation,” James said. “I decided I could face the consequences of coming to help, if it came to it.”

“I’m glad you did,” Tony said. “All considered.”

“Gonna be a headache,” James observed.

“We’ve taken measures,” Tony assured him. “Rhodey and I. It’s nothing we haven’t considered. This just moves up the timeline.”

“Timeline for what?” Rogers asked sharply.

“Trial,” James said, looking at Tony, expression calm.

Rogers raised his chin, jaw working. He growled, “After all he’s been through, you would put him—”

“I’m not putting him anywhere he doesn’t want to be,” Tony interrupted. “Never have, never will.”

“It’ll be good,” James said, nodding. “For me, and for everyone else. Tie up some loose ends.”

“And if they find you guilty?” Rogers demanded.

James shrugged. “I am guilty. My hands have killed. I’m never gonna be free of that.” He quirked a small smile at Tony. “I’m living on borrowed time, anyway.”

“But—”

“Why are you trying to talk over your friend, Cap?” Tony said, loudly.

“Maybe because he’s making unilateral decisions that’ll affect all of—” Rogers broke off, and flushed.

“‘Us’?” Tony finished, crossing his arms. “Funny, I didn’t think there was an ‘us’ anymore.”

Rogers looked at him, and then back at James. Several expressions crossed his face, and then his throat worked for a moment. “I can’t talk about this right now,” he said, low and rough. “Buck, it’s...it’s good to see you, no matter the circumstances. I’m glad...anyway. Will you...?”

“I’ll be in touch when I’m ready,” James said. “Until then, you do what you think is right.”

Rogers exhaled. "That's how we're gonna play this?"

"I've followed you to the ends of the earth," James said, swallowing. "Still will, if you ask me to. So right now, I'm asking you not to ask for a while."

Rogers turned to Sam, who gave James a long look, but then nodded.

"Then I guess we'll be on our way," Rogers said finally.

He retreated fast. He was dressed only in a leather jacket and jeans. He looked lopsided without the shield.

"Pleasure working with you," Sam said, with a thoughtful glance at Tony, and turned to follow.

"Wait!" Tony said, on impulse. "Uh."

They both turned. Tony swallowed.

"Look, maybe you've heard. We've changed the Accords. Like, a lot. So, um. Maybe you could read them sometime? What they're like now? Rhodey could give you the full pitch, since I know you probably don't want to talk to me more than is absolutely necessary, but. I mean. Maybe read them. Maybe you won't mind them so much this time, and we can," he opened his hands a little helplessly, "Work something out."

"You should read them," Wanda said, walking up and startling all of them but Natasha. She gave Steve a small smile. "They are not so bad now. And there are still reserved sections that have yet to be filled out. I have been giving Colonel Rhodes my opinions about it."

"You signed?" Sam asked, raising his eyebrows. Rogers looked surprised too.

She nodded. "It allowed me to be here, to help Dr. Barton. She's doing well, by the way. What the stone did to her won't go away, but she will be okay, in time."

"That's good to hear," James said.

Rogers looked at Tony, then at James, then back at Tony like the view hurt him. "You still have the phone," he suggested.

"It's a two-way street, Rogers," Tony replied, with an edge. "And this is me, reaching out. Use your own damn phone next time, don't send me some aughties piece of shit and expect me to take it like a dog begging for goddamn scraps."

Rogers flinched. James tapped Tony lightly on the arm, and Tony forcibly took a longer breath.

"What happened here today," he tried again, more evenly, "Is indication of trouble to come. We could use a united front. I know you're doing good work out there, but we could use your help back here, too."

“On your terms,” Rogers said, though he sounded more curious than accusatory.

Tony exhaled. “Well no, actually, not really. On the terms of the Ad Hoc Committee for International Extreme Emergency Assistance, to be exact. I’m not a part of that committee, for the record. Accountability doesn’t have to mean dictatorship.”

“I know that,” Rogers said. “That was never—“ He cut himself off. Took a breath. “This is about trust.”

“Yes, it is,” Tony agreed, looking at him steadily.

“I think we’ve both done things that have undermined it.”

“Yes, we have,” Tony nodded. “I’ve tried to atone for that.”

Rogers swallowed, and looked at James. “I wanted to protect you,” he said quietly.

“And you did, as much as you could,” James replied. “But I wasn’t the only thing at stake. If I’d been in a better state at the time, i would’ve told you that. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“I think you tried,” Rogers admitted. “I wasn’t much in a mood for listening.”

“You never are,” James said. “Punk.”

Rogers smiled crookedly, shook his head, and took a step back. “I’ll think about it,” he said, “The Accords. Send me a copy sometime.”

But then he was out of sight, Sam with him, retreating down the hall.

“I feel like I missed a lot, whatever conversation you two had there,” Tony said.

“We talked for a while,” James said, “Before you woke up.”

Tony was extremely glad he only caught the tail end, then. “Awkward.”

James snorted, melancholy. “Very.”

Tony studied him. “Are you...okay?”

James turned and smiled slightly. “I stress-tested the BARP system with a cosmic soul-sucking stone and came out on top,” he said. “I think I’m peachy.”

It was mayhem topside, of course.

“Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark! What can you tell us about the evidence of intergalactic conflict stored within the UN’s building?”

“Mr. Stark! Who decided a potentially world-threatening weapon should be housed at UN headquarters?”

Tony dodged and smiled and said absolutely nothing before slipping into a car (care of Pepper) and getting shuttled, along with James, to the nearest hotel where he had a running tab.

“Sorry, did you have things to finish up with Nat and the gang?” Tony asked, halfway to the hotel. “I didn’t mean to steal your thunder.”

“Pretty sure you stole my thunder the moment I made a daring through-the-ceiling rescue and you told me to fuck off and deal with the hostage,” James replied.

“Right. Sorry.”

“Not a problem. Was the right call.”

“Seems like the press haven’t got wind of you yet, that’s good.”

“I kept out of sight until we were in the building. Natasha was expecting me, I think.”

“I saw her every time I came back from Wakanda,” Tony nodded. “She doesn’t miss anything.”

“So what now?” James asked.

Tony sighed. “Well, crisis averted, but I really wasn’t intending for there to be a crisis at all on this trip, so that’s a wash. I’ll have to make a statement at some point—Pepper’s gonna meet us at the hotel to talk it over. As for you? I mean, I guess cat’s partially out of the bag, but we can manage the situation however you want, we still have control over the narrative at this point.”

“Narrative,” James snorted. “No wonder Steve gets frustrated with you.”

Tony looked sharply at him. “If you don’t like the way I’m—”

“I didn’t say that,” James interrupted.

Tony clenched and unclenched his hands. “Right, sorry.”

“I get why he frustrates you, too, for the record,” James added. He sighed. “This is going to be hard, isn’t it.”

“Mm.” Tony looked sidelong at him. “You’ve been through worse.”

James looked back at him. “So’ve you.”

The car pulled up at the service entrance of the hotel, and they slipped in without any fuss. As they got into the elevator, Tony said, “Thanks for coming after me. I don’t think I could have done that alone.”

“I’m glad Pepper called me,” James replied. “I know you said not to, but given what you’d said before, about what you were working on...I couldn’t not come.”

“I’m grateful,” said Tony. He breathed out. “Really fucking...god, I hate mind-control.”

James leaned into him in the elevator, their shoulders pressing tight together. When the elevator dinged and the door slid open, Tony laced their fingers together to pull James into the suite.

“...Right, I keep forgetting you’re filthy rich,” James said, looking around.

“Yeah, that’s a thing,” Tony agreed, with some surprise. “You’ve never really seen my life, I guess, since we’ve been abroad all this time.” He hadn’t even considered before how that might have skewed their interactions, Barnes seeing him with all of his context stripped away. It was...nice to think about.

“We’ll go back, right?” James asked. “To Wakanda.”

“Without a doubt,” Tony nodded. “It seems pretty clear to me that the bulk of your treatment is over, but once things start coming out into the open, we’ll have to release documentation and meet with Gish and Xiang about how to keep you stable and in good mental health while the circus is happening. We should extend our hospitality to T’Challa some time, though, considering how much he’s put up with us.”

He didn’t bother to mention how a part of him wouldn’t mind just holing up out there for a little bit longer, holding onto that last thread of calm before the storm. James was clearly thinking the same thing.

Tony paused, and then added, “Speaking of the future though, um.”

James stilled, not tense, but attentive. His hand was very warm in Tony’s, his grip loose, undemanding.

“I think,” Tony said, “At some point, I’d really like to rescind my role as your doctor, and downgrade myself to technician. Would that—not now, but later, when things have settled—would that be okay?”

James looked down at their hands, and then up at Tony’s face. “Yes, please,” he said.

“Great. That’s...yeah.”

James tugged a little at Tony’s hand. “Come on, doc. We’ll talk about it later. For now, we can sleep. It’s been a long day.”

“It’s barely noon,” Tony protested, even as he allowed himself to be led towards the bedroom.

“Yeah. And when I have a shitty morning filled with brainwashing awfulness, I go and sleep it off afterwards.” James shot a smile at him. “Who’s the expert now?”

“...Lead the way, then. I’ll follow.”

Tony woke up to warm sheets and Pepper looking extremely tired at him.

“Time is it?” he asked. Sun was coming in lazily through the windows, filtered by gray clouds.

“Barely past two,” Pepper said. “And I want a raise.”

“...It’s not what it looks like?”

“It looks like you both passed out with your clothes half on,” Pepper said. “I want a raise purely in anticipation of future events.”

“Fair enough.” Tony turned over to look at James, who had one eye slitted up at him from where his face was smashed into the pillow. “Hey. You should probably be a part of this upcoming conversation. Unfortunately, that involves pants for both of us. Pepper requires pants for business.”

“Ugh. Fuck pants,” mumbled James.

“You’re a terrible influence, Mr. Stark,” Pepper said. “I’ll just be in the living room. Do not keep me waiting. Either of you.”

The click of her heels as she exited the bedroom was decidedly judgmental.

“Another thing out of the bag?” James suggested, with a raised eyebrow. He still hadn’t lifted his face out of the pillow, but he’d reached over to snake his arm over Tony’s hip.

“Well, no. We’d definitely have to tell her about us no matter what,” Tony said. “This is less a *whoops* moment and more a *well at least that’s done with* moment. I’ve had a lot of those with Pepper over the years. This is not the worst of them by far.”

“Kay.” James stretched under the sheets. “So we’re an ‘us’? Or will be at some point?”

“I’m not very good at it,” Tony warned. “I’m very easily distracted.”

“Not in my experience,” James replied, shrugging easily. Then he frowned. “Where’s my arm?”

“You dropped it on the floor somewhere,” Tony tsked. “No respect for my work.”

“You said you were gonna make a better one for me anyway. You a liar, Stark?”

“I am a paragon of truth,” Tony said indignantly. “*Oof.*”

“Got it,” James said, his head and shoulders off Tony’s side of the bed, his stomach crushing the air out of Tony’s chest. “It’s a lot easier, putting on pants when you’ve got two arms.”

“So glad,” Tony wheezed. “To hear. God you’re heavy. We haven’t even had sex, and already the romance is dead.”

James rolled back over to his side of the bed and shrugged on the prosthetic, checking the contact points and tightening the straps. The ease with which he handled the work of Tony's hands made something turn over in Tony's chest.

"Rhodey's going to want to meet you properly," Tony said, watching the prosthetic click into place and begin to move with James's intent. "You guys were never really introduced."

"No, we were a little busy at the time," James said dryly. Then more seriously, he added, "I owe him a thank you, don't I? He's doing all the UN work, freeing you up for me."

"More or less. In fairness, that stuff suits him better. He's made the Accords far better than I could have managed."

"I'd like to read them, some time. Never got a chance to, last time around."

"Whenever. No rush."

"You want me to sign them."

"I'd like you to sign them," Tony said, watching him, "If you think they're fair."

James met his gaze and nodded. Then he slipped off the bed and grabbed his clothes off the floor. As he came round the other side to where Tony was sitting up, he leaned down and kissed him, firm and warm.

"Come on, doc, put your pants on. Sounds like we've got work to do."

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