Clan (of the Stranger and the Outcast)

by greymantledlady

Summary

The Stranger holds out his huge hand towards Tony, palm outwards and upwards.

Tony watches him warily, baring his teeth a little, not yet a snarl but a warning. But the Stranger simply holds his hand there, waiting, waiting; and his knife is lying on the ground between them, and there is no threat in the lines of his body.

Tony lets out a little breath he’s been holding. And he’s trembling, but he slowly reaches his own hand out, tentative and uncertain, and brushes the fingertips against the Stranger’s calloused palm. And the Stranger smiles a little, his eyes soft, and wraps his fingers around Tony’s.

~

(The one where Neanderthal!Steve and Homo Sapiens!Tony imprint on each other like baby ducklings.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The Stranger is very, very big.

Tony huddles quietly behind a tree to watch him, shivering a little and hugging his arms around himself. The wound at the centre of his chest throbs and burns, thin trails of yellowish discharge leaking out of the sodden moss-pack he’d bound there to stop the blood. He’s so – he’s so tired, and he’s been running so long, and now – now there is another danger, and Tony is very much afraid.

Because the Stranger is different from any Two-Legger that Tony has seen before. He’s so very tall, and he has a broad, broad chest and great muscled arms, and his hair is an odd bright yellow colour like honey. He has a fire, good and strong and red, built close by a little hollowed cave in the craggy rock face, a fresh-killed deer lying nearby. A haunch is cooking, propped neatly on three sticks, sizzling and dripping fresh juices into the embers, the savoury smell wafting through the crisp cold air and reaching Tony’s hiding place.

He’s so hungry. Tony’s small, he’s always been small, and he’d run and run and run, desperate and hunted, away from his tribe, away from the altar of sacrifice and the stone knife cutting into his chest. And when he had finally fallen into a grassy hollow, sobbing with exhaustion, he’d had nothing to stay his hunger, just his deerskin and his amulet and the round, bleeding wound in his chest, carved deeply in the symbol of a god-gift, a sacrifice.

The throbbing pain of the wound spikes suddenly as he shifts the wrong way, and Tony lets out a soundless hiss and claws at it. And oh, it hurts, it hurts, and he just wants to lie down and rest because he feels too hot and too cold and dizzy all at the same time, but the Stranger is too close and too large.

And then Tony’s knees buckle and fold beneath him, and he falls to the ground with a little stumbling thud.

Everything is hazy and painful and growing darker, darker, and as Tony’s eyes close he sees the Stranger turn towards him, his teeth bared, a great stone axe gripped in his hand.

Tony is warm.

He’s wonderfully warm and comfortable, and something soft is wrapped around him. His eyelids struggle open and he sees warm red fire-sparks dancing in the darkness – and for a moment, a lovely moment, he thinks he is a child again, wrapped in his mother’s bearskin, safe and close by her fire.

And then he remembers, the fire! The Stranger! and frantically draws himself into a tight defensive ball, letting out a terrified sobbing breath. Where is he – why is he by the fire, in the Stranger’s cave? What has the Stranger done?

‘Shh-shh,’ someone murmurs nearby, and Tony’s head jerks towards the sound, trying to see in the dusky firelight. ‘Shh-shhhh,’ and the voice is strange, deeper and more rumbling than the voices of Tony’s tribe, but quiet, gentle. And Tony needs to run, run far away – except that his head is so heavy, and he is so warm, and the fur is so soft.
And he slips back into sleep.

When he wakes next, watery dawn-light is streaking across the sky and filtering inside the cave-hollow. The fire is still burning slowly, and Tony is still warm and comfortable, still tucked in a pile of soft skins. The wound in his chest is just a dull ache, not the burning pain of before, and the pad of soiled moss is gone.

He moves his head, and there is the Stranger, sitting by the fire and stirring something in a bark container strung over the low flames. Tony huddles into the skins, watching, afraid yet fascinated.

And then the Stranger looks up, and sees him watching, and the movement of his hand stops. His eyes meet Tony’s, and Tony catches his breath in fright and huddles against the cave wall, pulling the skins with him to make a sort of cocoon, a flimsy barrier in case he is about to be attacked. He watches, unblinking, hardly daring to breathe.

The Stranger puts down his tool. And then, very, very slowly, he holds out his huge hand towards Tony, palm outwards and upwards. Tony watches him warily, baring his teeth a little, not yet a snarl but a warning. But the Stranger simply holds his hand there, waiting, waiting; and his knife is lying on the ground between them, and there is no threat in the lines of his body.

Tony lets out a little breath he’s been holding. And he’s trembling, but he slowly reaches his own hand out, tentative and uncertain, and brushes the fingertips against the Stranger’s calloused palm. And the Stranger smiles a little, his eyes soft, and wraps his fingers around Tony’s.

‘Steve,’ the Stranger says, and points his thumb to his own chest. ‘Steve.’ His name. He searches Tony’s eyes, and then points at him with a questioning look.

‘Tony,’ Tony whispers after a moment, pointing his own thumb at his chest. Steve smiles at him and strokes his thumb gently over the back of Tony’s fingers, as though Tony’s hand is something delicate and breakable.

‘Tony,’ he repeats, testing the name on his tongue. ‘Tony.’ His eyes crinkle at the edges, and then he slowly brings his other hand up, his eyes on Tony’s face. Tony watches, half-fearful, as Steve’s hand comes up and up and up – what is he doing? Is he going to hit Tony? Tony braces himself, just in case, for a blow.

But Steve only touches Tony’s dark hair, softly, taking a curl between two fingers and rubbing. His fingers stroke the curl behind Tony’s ear, and then move to his face. Tony holds his breath, wide-eyed, as Steve’s thumb brushes very gently over his cheek, his jaw, his chin.

‘Pretty,’ Steve says wonderingly. ‘Pretty Tony.’

_Pretty._ What does that mean? Tony tries it out on his tongue. ‘Pretty. Pretty?’ He looks back at Steve, his head cocked to one side in question.

Steve’s smile widens, but he just repeats, ‘Pretty. Now rest,’ and though his words are different to the ones Tony uses, the meaning becomes clear when he pats the bedskins again. Tony pouts.

‘No,’ he whines, and Steve sighs and rubs his chin. Then he shifts forward and puts his hand on Tony’s shoulder, careful but firm, guiding him backwards against the skins. Tony doesn’t want to, but Steve is very strong and very determined, and Tony feels weak and wobbly anyway so he stops resisting, letting himself rest back onto the skins. Steve crinkles his eyes, pleased with him.
‘Good,’ he says, and then reaches out towards Tony’s chest, towards the wound. Tony freezes and squeaks, and Steve stops, his hands splaying and spreading in the gesture that all Two-Leggers have in common. *I mean no harm.*

Tony watches him warily, fingers twisting nervously in the soft fur of the skins. But Steve stays still, hands staying where Tony can see them, his eyes fixed on Tony’s face, clear and earnest. Only when Tony untenses a little does Steve lower his hands.

He seems to want to explain something to Tony, repeating the same few words slowly and carefully, before realising that Tony doesn’t know what they mean. Tony watches Steve anxiously as he rubs a hand over his face and blows out a breath in frustration.

Then he seems to have an idea, his face lighting up, and he stretches out his hand towards Tony. Tony’s not sure what it means, but then Steve points to an area on his palm. Tony shifts a little bit, to see.

It’s a big gash, slit across the huge calloused palm of Steve’s hand, but half healed, the edges clean and scabbed over.

‘Hurt,’ Steve says softly and clearly, pointing at the gash. Tony slowly raises his eyes to look at Steve’s face, uncertain; and Steve’s eyes smile at him a little, his face and voice gentle. ‘Hurt,’ Steve repeats, still pointing at his hand, and then, holding Tony’s eyes, he slowly brings his pointing finger up towards Tony’s chest wound. ‘Hurt,’ he repeats, and oh, Tony knows what the word means now!

‘Hurt!’ he agrees delightedly, and Steve’s eyes crinkle a bit more, laughing at him a little. Then he turns and reaches behind him, and comes back with a small hollowed stone in his hand, a mortar, filled with a little mound of something.

‘Medicine,’ Steve says, dipping his finger into the substance. It’s a strange green mash of pulverised herbs, and Tony watches curiously as Steve opens his injured hand and spreads it across the wound. ‘Makes it better,’ Steve says, and then he points again at Tony’s chest.

Oh, *medicine,* Tony realises. Steve has medicine that will make his hurt chest better, and Steve is *good,* Steve is kind and his face is nice and he has a gentle voice that makes Tony feel safe. So Tony slowly lies back, letting his body go soft again, glancing shyly at Steve in invitation.

Steve’s big hands are very gentle. He cleans the wound with warm water, and Tony flinches and squeezes his eyes shut as it throbs and stings. Steve strokes his hair comfortingly.

When it’s dry, he brings back the little mortar of medicine, letting Tony see each movement as he daubs it over the angry swollen cuts. Tony braces himself, waiting for pain, but Steve’s medicine doesn’t hurt. It just feels cool and soothing.

Steve smiles at him when he’s done, putting the mortar down. ‘Good,’ he says, but then frowns when Tony reaches inquisitive fingers up to probe at his handiwork. He reaches out and takes Tony’s hands in his own, moving them away from his chest and positioning them firmly by his sides. ‘Don’t touch,’ he says sternly, and Tony doesn’t know the words, but he certainly knows the tone.

He mumbles half-heartedly in protest; Steve hums in his throat, a soothing sound, and pats Tony’s shoulder as he stands up, moving about the little hollow to fetch something from a dim corner. Tony watches him as he comes back to the fire with another birch container, pinching something out of it and sprinkling it into the larger one hung over the fire.
A soft fragrant smell of herbs drifts to Tony’s nose, and he realises all at once that he’s hungry, so terribly, desperately hungry that his stomach clenches with emptiness. He must make a sound of longing, because Steve looks over at him and says, ‘Soon,’ stirring at whatever is in the container.

It seems to take hours. Tony presses at his stomach with his hands to stave off the empty pangs, something his mother had taught him when he was a child. Food had often been short, deep in the cold winter, even for the Chieftain’s family. Press your stomach and think of other things, Mother had said, and she had shown him how to mix red earth with a little water, to draw patterns and pictures on his skin and the wall of the great cave. It helped him to forget about the hunger for a little while.

The others drew animals, deer and great boar, and hunters with spears. Tony drew ideas.

First it was a pit with sticks and earth hiding its mouth, so that a wary boar might walk across it and be plunged into the trap. Small Tony’s picture had been crudely drawn, but he got better at it, drawing ideas for traps and better tools to help the tribe. His pictures had helped, made things easier for his people, which was why it had hurt so much when they had let Obi – when they had stood together and bound him and laid him out on the altar to die…

‘Food’s ready,’ Steve says, and Tony gulps and comes abruptly out of the pictures in his head. Steve is scooping something out of the cooking container into two smaller bark bowls. The smell wafts through the small space, rich and good, and when Steve offers him one of the bowls, Tony grabs it with eager hands.

He’s weak and shaky, though, and the bowl tilts and nearly spills before Steve steadies it with a hand. Tony huffs in frustration and struggles into a more upright position, trying to bring the bowl to his mouth at the same time, because he’s hungry, so, so hungry, and the stew smells so good it’s making his head spin.

‘Easy,’ Steve says, his voice exasperated, and he moves around so he’s slotted a little behind Tony’s back, his strong warm arm bracing him. He guides the bowl to Tony’s mouth, tipping it so that warm broth touches Tony’s lips, and Tony slurps at it greedily, draining the liquid from the chunks of meat floating in it. It’s so good, hot and savoury and wonderful.

When the broth is gone, Steve feeds him the meat, holding it in his fingers for Tony to eat. It’s soft and juicy and flavoured with herbs, and Tony wolfs it down, his lips brushing Steve’s fingers in his haste.

The bowl is finished too quickly, but Tony knows that you can get sick from eating too much all at once after a hungry time. He feels sleepy again, warm and content and safe, and Steve’s shared his food with him and he trusts Steve. Tony curls back down into the skins and watches Steve eat, looking down shyly when Steve looks up and sees him. When Tony peeks at him again, through his eyelashes, Steve is smiling back at him. It makes Tony’s stomach feel strange and fluttery, as though it’s full of moths.

Steve finally sets his own bowl aside, and carefully lifts the cooking container away from the fire. He pokes at the fire, scraping at the piles of ash around the edge until it’s arranged to his liking, Tony sleepily looking on.

Then Steve turns around and crouches next to Tony; and he feels Steve’s hand on his shoulder, gently shifting him. Steve stretches himself out alongside him, sliding a strong arm around Tony’s waist and pulling him in to fit against his chest.

It feels good. Tony mumbles happily and nestles into the warmth of Steve’s body, and Steve
reaches up to run his fingers through Tony’s hair. Tony’s eyes droop closed at the feeling, and Steve’s fingers slide through his curls, stroking, stroking, stroking, until Tony drifts back into warm soft sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Some nerdy stuff: Steve is a Neanderthal (Homo neanderthalensis) in this AU, while Tony is Homo sapiens (modern human). Neanderthals were a highly intelligent species closely related to Homo sapiens, but with their own distinct culture. The two species coexisted in the same geographic regions, and sometimes met and intermarried/interbred. (Apparently, most modern Asians and Europeans have about 2% Neanderthal DNA in their genomes.)

There is evidence to show that Neanderthals might have cooked using birch bark containers over their fires. They didn’t have pottery or iron, but probably used bark, wood, stone and shells to make containers and implements.

Please forgive any historical inaccuracies!

I’ve marked this as 1/1 chapters because it works as a complete story, but I *ahem* may possibly have Plans for continuing this fic. Anyone interested in soft caveman bunny kisses? Steve gently licking Tony’s face?

Everyone who drops me a comment gets a CINNAMON COOKIE, because I love you all. *puts trays in oven*
Tony comes awake feeling safe and comfortable, warm arms circled around him. He blinks his eyes open and looks directly into someone else’s blue ones.

‘Tony,’ Steve says in a soft voice. He is very close, and it makes Tony’s stomach flip because it’s nice. He wants to stay lying here with Steve, so he puts his hands on Steve’s massive chest and clings, nestling closer with a little sound.

Steve chuckles. His eyes are smiling, and he leans even closer and rubs his nose softly against Tony’s. Tony’s eyes widen. This is new. What does this nose touch mean?

But Steve’s hand is rubbing reassuringly at the dip of his back, so Tony shyly presses his nose back against Steve’s and is rewarded by a smile. ‘So pretty,’ Steve murmurs, and Tony still doesn’t know what that means. He wriggles enquiringly.

‘Pretty?’

Steve touches his face again, his fingers gentle. He doesn’t seem to know how to explain the word, but that’s all right. Tony’s sleepy anyway. He snuggles his face into Steve’s shoulder with a sigh, letting his eyelids droop closed, and Steve pets his hair and strokes his back and murmurs to him softly, and it’s good, everything is good.

The next time, Tony’s woken by the sound of movement, and Steve’s not holding him anymore. Steve’s not even in the cave, and Tony feels frightened suddenly. Where is Steve? What if he’s gone?

He whimpers softly, curling into a little ball. But the next moment, Steve comes into view, dragging his deer carcase by the back legs, powerful muscles straining and bulging. He lets the legs fall to the ground and comes over to drop down by Tony’s side, brow wrinkled in concern. ‘Shhh,’ he says soothingly, and Tony reaches out to take Steve’s hand in relief, pulling it up to press against his face, closing his eyes.

Steve makes a quiet little sound and rubs a nice slow warm circle into Tony’s back with his big hand. Tony melts into the skins.

After a moment, Steve says, ‘Tony,’ gently, and motions to the deer. Tony knows he has to let go, he does; it’s just that Steve is so big and warm and kind and strong enough to fight off anyone who tried to hurt Tony, and he doesn’t want Steve to ever go anywhere again.

He releases Steve’s hand reluctantly and watches as Steve goes to drag the deer closer. Then Steve looks up and smiles at him, and sits down next to Tony in the skins, close enough that his thigh touches Tony’s cheek – and oh, that’s better, that’s much better. Tony sighs in relief and turns his face to nestle against Steve’s leg, sleepily watching what Steve’s doing until he dozes off again.
The days pass, moon following sun and back again, and Tony rests and sleeps and eats, the sick fever-tiredness slowly seeping out of his body. Steve tends the wound in his chest and brings him food and cares for him, and at night he curls up around Tony and cuddles him, close and warm. Steve is wonderful, huge and kind and strong, and Tony sometimes wonders if Steve is the Sun god himself, come down to save Tony from the sacrifice, except that a god wouldn’t eat or laugh or growl when they burnt their finger on a hot stick.

When he feels strong enough, one warm day, Tony crawls out to sit next to Steve in the sunlight, dragging a big soft deerskin with him. Steve looks up, smiling, and says, ‘Tony!’ , and for the first time, Tony smiles back, hesitant, a little questioning tweak at the corner of his mouth. Steve’s smile brightens, his eyes crinkling, and Tony shifts closer and curls softly into his side, wanting to be close.

Steve is stripping the flesh from the underside of his new hide, using a faceted flint knife. Tony nestles into Steve’s warmth, watching the sunlight glint off the dark shining surfaces of the tool.

After a while, he touches Steve’s knee softly, to get his attention, and points to the knife. He knows some of Steve’s words, now, for ‘medicine’ and ‘food’ and ‘fire’ and ‘rest’, and he wants to learn Steve’s word for the tool.

Steve says ‘Knife,’ and offers it for Tony to look at. It’s a good flint, like the ones used by Tony’s tribe, but Tony thinks he could make a better handle grip. He would bind it around with leather straps, so that it would be more comfortable for Steve to use. He really, really wants to do nice things for Steve.

But right now, he still feels sleepy and wobbly, and his hands are shaky when he tries to hold things. So he just yawns contentedly and hands the knife back, basking in the safety and sunshine. After a bit, Steve puts the hide down and curls an arm around Tony, and Tony rests his head trustingly on Steve’s broad shoulder.

It’s a game they play, the different words. Tony will point to something and say, ‘This?’ and Steve will tell him his word for it. And Tony will give Steve his own word for the thing, sometimes, and he never forgets any of Steve’s words, so after a while they can understand each other a little.

One evening Tony asks Steve again what the ‘pretty’ word means. He crawls over to where Steve’s sitting grinding herbs, and rubs his head against Steve’s shoulder. ‘Pretty,’ he says insistently. ‘Steve, what’s pretty?’

Steve laughs aloud. He puts down his mortar and stone and twists about to face Tony, his face soft and fond. ‘You,’ he says, playful, and cups his hands around Tony’s shoulders, stroking his thumbs over the skin. Tony shivers in pleasure. Then Steve leans forward and touches their noses together, and Tony grins wide and bright and presses back eagerly.

Steve pulls away, and brings his hand up to Tony’s face, stroking it. ‘Pretty,’ he says, with another soft look, and then glances around around the room, considering. ‘Ah!’ he says, and gently turns Tony’s face towards the fire, where the sparks are leaping and showering in the dusky half-light. ‘Pretty,’ he repeats, seriously, and points to the fire.

Tony tips his head to one side in confusion. How are the fire and Tony the same, both pretty? But Steve is crinkling his eyes at him, and Steve gets to his feet, drawing himself up to his magnificent height and offering his hands to Tony to help him up. When he’s standing, Steve wraps the softest deerskin snug around Tony’s shoulders and then simply lifts him up like a little baby, tucking Tony
into the crook of his arm.

Tony gasps in surprise, and Steve looks down with a concerned furrow between his brows. But Steve is very strong and it’s comfortable and warm in his arms, and Tony nestles in contentedly, smiling up at Steve in consent.

Steve carries him outside, and oh! The sky is big and wide and streaked with colours, eggshell blue and flower pink and violet purple, the sun just disappearing beyond the wooded line of the sky. The ground gradually drops away into a little valley below them, and everything is lit with soft dappling colours, and Tony doesn’t know why but it makes him happy.

There’s a soft patch of grass a little way ahead, looking over the valley, and Steve sits down, lowering Tony carefully into his lap and settling him against his chest. ‘Look, Tony,’ he says, and sweeps his hand in a gesture that takes in the sky and the valley. ‘Pretty,’ he says softly, and rests his chin in Tony’s hair.

Tony looks around in wonder. He has seen the sun die before, of course, but Tony’s people are of the flatlands, the sheltered caves, and here – here there is just so much, so much sky and colour, and it makes him feel warm inside.

‘Pretty,’ he says softly, questioning. Tony is pretty, the fire is pretty, the sky is pretty…

He twists his head up to look at Steve, and – and the light is glimmering on Steve’s face, off Steve’s eyelashes, and Tony thinks he knows what ‘pretty’ means, now. He reaches up to shyly touch Steve’s chin, and says, ‘Pretty Steve,’ and Steve opens his eyes wide and looks down with a surprised face. Tony face feels suddenly hot, even in the cooling evening air, and it seems like Steve’s neck is a good place to hide it. He buries his face in Steve’s warm skin.

He can feel the strong rise and fall of Steve’s breath, the life beating steadily in Steve’s chest. Then Steve’s arms tighten around him and Steve nuzzles Tony’s hair.

‘So pretty, Tony,’ Steve says quietly, and he holds Tony close against him.

Chapter End Notes

I think I really should write more of this, because Soft!Prehistoric!Stony ftw. ;)

I'm really sorry if I take a long time to reply to your comment. I have read and loved every one, thank you so, SO much, and I will thank you personally as soon as I can. But, ugh, my life is incredibly busy and scary and stressful sometimes, and, well, sometimes I can't keep up as well as I'd like to. I love all of you. *opens arms really wide for a big group hug* <3
That night, Tony sits nestled between Steve’s thighs, Steve’s chest warm and massive at his back. Steve has cooked meat over the fire, roasted in the flames, and he’s feeding the softest pieces to Tony with his fingers. Tony snaps softly at his hand with little pretending growls, because it makes Steve chuckle.

Steve’s quiet laughter vibrates against Tony’s back, and Tony leans back and turns his head so he can grin brightly up at him. ‘Gnap!’ he says again, ‘gnap, gnap!’ like a wolf pup, and this time Steve lets his fingers be caught.

And – oh. This is – this is different. Tony’s eyes widen, laughter falling away, because Steve’s fingertip is between his lips, and Steve’s thumb runs along Tony’s jaw, stroking, and Steve is looking down at him with his soft eyes. ‘Little Tony pup,’ he murmurs.

Steve wriggles his fingertip gently inside Tony’s mouth, brushing against Tony’s lips, and Tony shivers all over. Steve is watching his face intently, and Tony’s face is going hot, hot, hot, like he has a fire burning inside of him. He breathes in quickly, and then Steve’s leaning down to press their foreheads together.

His hand is splayed warmly across Tony’s shoulder, and his thumb starts moving in slow soothing circles over Tony’s skin. ‘Shh,’ Steve says in a soft voice, and Tony is suddenly overcome by how wonderful Steve is, how kind and strong and – and gentle, the way he touches Tony and never harms him, even though he’s so much bigger and Tony’s hurt and useless and not good for anything. He loves Steve, and he feels like he has to hide his face because of – everything, so he ducks his head down into the warm pillow of Steve’s chest and wraps his arms around him as far as they’ll go, hugging him fiercely.

Steve makes a small surprised sound, which turns into a quiet rumble in his chest. Tony can feel it all the way through him, and then Steve wraps his arms around Tony’s smaller body and it feels like he’s surrounded by Steve’s warmth and scent on all sides.

Drowsiness washes over him in the sudden way it’s had since he’s been sick; Steve is holding him so close and he feels so safe. Tony snuggles into him, making happy, sleepy sounds, and Steve nuzzles his hair. He loves Steve.

‘Knife?’ Tony asks Steve. He’s sitting cross-legged in a patch of warm sunshine, basking like lizards do; Steve looks up from the flint he’s chipping at. There’s two piles in front of him, one of waste chips, too small to be used, and the other of good, large, sharp ones, that Steve can use for hunting and skinning and preparing food. Tony reaches forward and points questioningly at the good pile, turning his palm up in a beseeching gesture.

Steve smiles at him, reaching out to smooth a curl of hair away from Tony’s eyes. ‘Here,’ he says agreeably, and picks up the best piece, putting it in Tony’s hand. Tony brightens; Steve’s hand is still lingering in his hair and he turns his face a little, leaning into it, before Steve goes back to his work.

Tony’s very busy, then, because he finally has something to do, and at last he’s not feeling drowsy
all the time. He crawls over to the pile in the corner, where Steve throws the scraps of his skins and bits of wood, and starts sorting through them, humming happily. He needs just the right kind.

Once he looks up, and catches Steve watching him with amusement, and that’s not good, no! Steve mustn’t laugh at him, and Steve mustn’t see what he’s making. Tony play-growls at him, and Steve chuckles; Tony flaps his hand at him, stay away.

His hands are still a little unsteady, but he goes slowly, carefully, and manages well enough. Split wooden sticks, to hold the blunt end of the flint; and then three long strips of skin, threaded across and over each other to make a stronger braided strap. Tony fastens the strap tightly around the wooden sticks and the base of the flint, winding it around and through itself so it makes a solid padded grip.

When it’s finished, the shadows are growing long and cool, and Tony’s hands are red and sore from pulling and coaxing the skin, but he feels warm inside, satisfied with his work. He carves a small pattern into the solid packed earth of the cave floor; the grip makes the knife steady and sure in his hand. It’s a beautiful tool, now, something useful and strong that Tony has made better and more sure, and he hopes and hopes that it will be a worthy gift for Steve, who has given Tony so much.

Steve ducks back in through the entrance with an armful of branches and a rush of cool air, and Tony grins up at him, eager. ‘Steve!’ he says, ‘Steve, look – ’ and he wriggles over towards Steve.

Steve lays the branches down in a neat pile and lowers himself onto the ground with a satisfied sigh, smiling at Tony and reaching out towards him with his hand. Tony shivers happily, crawling into the warm crook of Steve’s arm; Steve draws him in close to his side, rubbing his cheek against Tony’s head.

‘Look,’ Tony says proudly, holding the knife out towards Steve. ‘For you,’ he explains, touching Steve’s chest gently with his finger. He watches Steve’s face hopefully.

Steve turns the knife over in his hands, running his finger over the handle and then closing his hand around the grip, testing the feel of it. Tony holds his breath, because he wants very, very badly for Steve to accept his gift, for Steve to smile at him, and – and touch Tony’s face, and gather Tony up in his arms and hold him and stroke his hair. He likes it a lot when Steve does those things.

And Steve looks back at Tony’s face, and Tony breathes in fast, because Steve’s face, his face is soft, wondering, and Tony thinks, pretty. He doesn’t think he has ever seen anything as pretty as Steve’s face. It’s prettier than the dying sun, prettier than the fire-sparks, prettier than a new flower.

‘You made it,’ Steve says softly. ‘For me.’ He’s still looking at Tony, and there’s a smile starting behind his eyes, bright and tender, spreading across his face. He puts the knife carefully on the skins, and then reaches his hand up to slip over the back of Tony’s neck, cupping it. He draws their heads together until their foreheads touch, and Tony closes his eyes, basking in the closeness. He feels very warm, very aware of the places where Steve’s skin is touching his; of Steve’s arm around his body, the way Steve’s hand is low on his waist.

Steve draws back just a little, then, looking down with a furrow between his brows, and Tony follows his gaze. Steve is looking at Tony’s hands, taking them gently in his own and turning them over to look at the reddened palms. ‘Poor hands,’ he says softly.

‘Not sore!’ Tony tells him quickly, and smiles shyly up at Steve. Steve crinkles his eyes, and then
his hands are smoothing up Tony’s arms, slow and sure, moving up to his forearms and cupping them, stroking back and forth.

Steve’s hands always feel good, Tony thinks dreamily. He’s still very warm, but he feels safe and good and happy, and it would be nice if Steve could touch him more, all over his body. Maybe Steve would like to be touched too, that would be nice. Tony would like to stroke Steve’s chest – and his arms! He likes Steve’s arms very much, and it would be nice to run his hands over them.

He brings his hands up shyly, and places them on Steve’s chest. It’s very warm and smooth, and it feels so strong under his hands that it makes him shiver, but in a good way that Tony doesn’t quite understand. Steve is breathing faster, and he’s looking at Tony in that soft wondering way he has sometimes. Tony looks up at him through his lashes, questioning, and Steve smiles at him (so pretty, Tony thinks) and brings both of his hands to rest warmly on Tony’s back, holding him steady as he gently explores Steve’s chest with his fingers.

He touches Steve’s chest like that for some time, and after a while Steve begins to smooth his big hands up and down Tony’s back, then round to his stomach, his chest, thumbing his nipples a little. That feels so good that Tony arches his back and whimpers, and Steve’s face is flushed pink and his eyes are big and blue and he’s looking at Tony as though he can’t quite believe it.

Tony likes it very, very much. He likes the way Steve’s hands feel and the way Steve looks at him and the way his whole body feels warm and ready and trembly, as though he wants to press up against Steve and feel Steve’s skin against his own, everywhere. ‘Yes,’ he whispers, ‘yes, yes, Steve, yes,’ so that Steve knows how good it feels; and Steve says ‘Tony, Tony,’ in a voice that cracks in the middle.

Steve scoops him up and carries him over to the place where they sleep, setting him gently down on the skins and laying beside him, pressing his face against Tony’s neck and breathing shudderingly for a moment. Tony wriggles closer to him, fitting himself eagerly to the shape of Steve’s body, trembling and excited and waiting; Steve’s heart is slamming hard and fast against him.

And soon – soon Steve is looking back at him with his lips parted, panting a little, and he shifts a little against Tony. It’s like Tony’s body flares like a new flame, bright and shining and lovely, so that he bucks and lets out a sharp eager little cry, and then another – ah-ah-ah, like that. Steve’s eyes are big and bright, watching Tony’s face, and he touches them both and everything is warmth and Steve’s touch and the wonderful way it feels as Tony writhes into Steve’s hands.

‘Tony,’ Steve whispers again, against his cheek; and then his mouth is suckling Tony’s skin, damp and warm on his cheek, his throat, his chin; they’re mating bites, and Tony yelps and shudders and presses into them. And then Steve’s mouth is at Tony’s own, and he draws Tony’s lip between his own and bites, very gently.

It’s so unexpected and it feels so good that all the heat and sensation spins together and wraps into a sharp shining thread, stretching his body taut for an instant. And then he slips over the edge, shuddering and panting and clutching Steve’s chest, and Steve makes a surprised grunt and climaxes after him.

Everything is deliciously warm and hazy and content, after that. Steve brushes Tony’s hair away from his face and cradles him gently; he’s laughing softly, happily, and Tony smiles dreamily up at his face. ‘Steve,’ he murmurs, and Steve gives his cheek an affectionate lick, nudging Tony’s face with his nose. Tony nuzzles back.

Mate, he thinks, mate.
Chapter End Notes

I’m slightly unsure about this last sex scene, being a little out of my lane – which is why it’s kind of vague. I hope it’s okay! (If anyone wants to write an explicit version, go right ahead.)

End Notes

This is very distantly inspired by ‘The Clan of the Cave Bear’ because it’s an interesting idea (even though I thought that book was kind of boring tbh.) It’s also an expansion of this ficlet I wrote on my tumblr - come follow me if you want more fluffy SteveTony ficlets! Comment, please?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!