The Prize
by sabrecmc

Summary

Steve ends up as a concubine in the royal harem.

Notes

So...yeah. This happened. Basically, I saw this inspirational photo on tumblr
(https://sabrecmc.tumblr.com/post/162298524373/the-prize-steve-rogerstony-stark),
complained how there weren't enough truly trashy Stony fics, so ended up starting one.

Let me say at the outset that this work is full of terrible tropes and gratuitous fetishization.
Sorry, Steve. I know that. You don't have to tell me. It is a work of fiction, written as pure
self-indulgence for myself and a gift for a friend, who thankfully doesn't find my occasional
need for this type of thing to be a sign that I need some serious couch time.
This fic features a world where sexual slavery and slavery in general is a common practice, but that is not to say that it will be treated as an okay thing even within the world. Still, it is there, obviously, b/c that's the premise, so you know if that is something you are interested in or not. Also rather obviously, I have tagged this fic as non-con for that reason, since Steve can't really give true consent. It is pretty hard on Steve, particularly at the beginning. Tony isn't such a great guy and has no issues with the way things are in this world, at least at the beginning. Assuming I continue this, that would eventually change due to the occurrence of what is probably a very predictable event in dear Tony's life.

With all those caveats out of the way, if you do decide to read this, thank you. I'm not sure if "hope you enjoy" is the right way to put it, but I do appreciate it. This is a bit outside my usual bag of tricks, but it was the plot bunny that wouldn't leave me alone.
Chapter 1

“That one’s more trouble than he’s worth, my Lord, I assure you. We have far finer available. Well-trained. Docile. From the finest pleasure houses in the East. More suited to someone of your stature,” the loud voice of one of the overseers—Rumlow, his mind supplied with a surge of hate—snapped, punctuated by a light crack of the ever-present leather whip the man carried across Steve’s chest, more a warning than anything. They wouldn’t mark him, not now, anyway. Despite his words, Rumlow slithered over to stand next to the finely-robed man whose eyes were roaming up and down Steve’s body with a speculative gaze.

“Unfortunate,” the buyer remarked, seemingly without interest, though Steve watched as the man’s head cocked to one side, eyes narrowing as he examined Steve. The man had a smooth head, tan skin that wasn’t from working outdoors and spoke with a mealy-mouthed precision that sounded practiced. The man moved behind him. Steve kept his eyes straight ahead. Every once in a while, someone would open the warehouse’s wooden door, and he could get a glimpse of sand and a small, bright strip of blue beyond it, where the sea lapped against the grey rocks along the shore and seabirds danced in and out of the waves, looking for fish and crabs caught on the boulders.

No one opened the door.

His arms hurt. They would hurt more when they undid the chains stringing them up. This was an aching soreness that rippled through him when he moved, even just to breathe. It would be worse later, though. When they let him down. He knew that much. It wasn’t his first time being presented for a potential buyer, though he suspected he was fast approaching his last.

If this one didn’t take him, Rumlow would put him in the hot box again, because he knew Steve hated it more than almost anything else. It was tiny and cramped and so hot, he thought his skin would melt off his body from the heat. The thirst, though. That was the worst of it. Thirst was like nothing else in the world, he thought. Hunger was gnawing and then numb and weak. Familiar enough from when he was young, but thirst was all-consuming, like a bright beacon inside his head that wouldn’t stop.

He tried to get as much of his weight on the balls of his feet as he could. The shackles at his ankles kept his legs splayed and the way they wrapped the chain around the metal rung in the ceiling kept him just far enough off the ground so he couldn’t quite get flat-footed. Couldn’t move, other than to barely sway, not that it did anything except make his muscles burn. Couldn’t quite stand. He could get his toes under him, sometimes, but he had learned that made it worse, when his calves buckled and he couldn’t hold it, pulling his arms taut while he swung. He was naked, save for the thin metal collar that circled his throat and marked his status. Lines of sweat trailed down his neck and back.

The warehouse, with its sturdy walls of stone and packed clay, was like an oven in the heat of the day, though it turned cold at night, when the sun left and the ground underneath him cooled. He tried to think of that. The way the stone wall felt against his forehead as he curled against it at night. How the grains of sand that covered the floor chilled as the sun waned. Back home, it snowed. Drifts so deep they swallowed your leg when you stepped out into them. It would be snowing now, he thought, though there was no one left there to curse the cold and pray for spring. They were all gone. But, Shmidt was dead. Shmidt was dead, and that was worth Steve’s life. That was worth even this. He stopped thinking about that and looked toward the door.

“I’m not actually buying for myself, though I did see you had some lovely stock from the plains, if I’m not mistaken,” the man observed.
“You have a good eye,” Rumlow replied, oily and smooth, watching Steve with a careful, considering look. Rumlow loathed him, Steve knew. The feeling was mutual. He wanted to get rid of Steve, even if they had to take a loss on the deal, but their own, strange code required the slavers to divulge issues with their wares, lest they find themselves suddenly without buyers. “We just had a ship in not two days ago. Fine lot. Laborers, mostly, but I’m told there are a few who might be worth our efforts.”

“Hmm,” the man said. “Perhaps some other time. And this one? How was he acquired?” He took Steve’s cock in his hand. Held it. Stroked the underside, then lifted, looking for flaws. Hefted Steve’s balls into his hands and rolled them, giving them a slight squeeze. “He seems unusually fit for a plainsman.”

“I’m told he was a soldier. In some war across the dark sea. Guess he picked the wrong side. If we’d known, we’d never have taken him, of course. Those raider scum would tell you the sky was orange with a straight face if it got them a few more pieces of gold,” Rumlow told him with a grimace. “He was practically savage when he first arrived. Of course, there are ways of dealing with that, though, as you can see, there is little damage. We’re very careful.”

“A soldier? Interesting. Different,” the man said, the word seeming to slide off his tongue.

“Supposedly. Wanted to fight in the pits when he first got here. Too pretty for that though, aren’t you?” Rumlow demanded with a sneer, gripping Steve’s chin and forcing his head around.

“Yes, definitely far better uses for him than fodder for the fighting rings,” the Lord said, running a hand over Steve’s back, between his shoulder blades, then down his spine. Then lower, spreading him and holding him open for a long moment before continuing. “Far better uses, I would say.”

The man wasn’t particularly rough. Not like Rumlow, who knew how to make these examinations hurt and seemed to revel in that. The man was perfunctory, more than anything. Steve thought that might be worse somehow, though he wasn’t sure why that might be so. His arms stung. He concentrated on that. No one opened the door. It was better when it did. It didn’t, but he stared at it anyway. Counted the wooden slats, then counted them again. Breathed out. Tried not to move. It would be over soon. Still. He wished he could see the sea. That one, bright strip of it. The burning pressure left him, then, and the man moved back around to stand next to Rumlow.

“He’s tight. Unused you say?” the man asked. “I’ve no need for raider leftovers.”

“So they claim,” Rumlow replied. “Though, that is one lie the raiders can’t get away with, I will say. I’ve seen their work more times than I care to. It isn’t pretty. Or easy to miss.”

“Hmmm. Well, be that the case, it so happens that the party for whom I’m buying is in need of something different. Our…patron…is very…particular, I suppose you might say,” the man continued. “Uninterested in the usual offerings, which is of concern to my buyer who rather relies on his continued patronage. So, something different happens to be what I’m looking for.”

“We have a number of very deviants from all over, my Lord—halfings, those who are at once both male and female, deformities and grotesques for all manner of tastes, should you—“ Rumlow began.

“No, no, nothing like that. Just…different. And this one…this one, I believe just might catch our patron’s attention. For a night,” the man snorted, lips curling into a sneer of distaste. “Sadly, he rarely enjoys their company for longer than that, but, our situation requires that a good selection be maintained for his household and guests. Has this one had any formal training?”
“Some, my Lord, though he lacks the finesse and accomplishments we strive to provide our buyers,” Rumlow explained. “Some buyers prefer that, though. To train them themselves, to their own preferences, or,” Rumlow finished with a slight shrug, twitching the whip in the air.

“Or to enjoy breaking them, when they can’t be trained,” the man said, exchanging a knowing look with Rumlow. “Yes, well, I believe that could be accommodated as well, should it be necessary.”

“You might find that it is, with this one,” Rumlow stated, tossing out the whip far enough for its tails to ghost across Steve’s chest in a quick swipe.

“If he proves too unmanageable, there are plenty of houses in the city that are always buying our leftovers. And if he’s really that much of a problem, we’ll take him down to the low road where the dockside whorehouses line up like beetles on dung. They’ll lay him out on the stocks and let the sailors fuck him raw for a copper. There are always ways to recoup our losses,” the man said with a shrug. “I’ll take him. Him and the other three we already discussed. See that they are prepared and loaded in my wagon.”

Steve watched the man leave. When he opened the door, Rumlow stepped into Steve’s line of vision, as if he knew. Maybe he did. Steve thought he might never have hated anyone more in that moment. Rumlow clapped his hands together, twice, and guards came in from one of the back rooms.

“I know you will be sorry to see our favorite troublemaker leave us, but it seems he is to provide an evening of entertainment to a particularly…discerning…patron of one of our esteemed customers. Be sure he is secured for the trip. Have a care, though. Wouldn’t want their new purchase to show up with bruises. At least, not ones they didn’t want there,” Rumlow informed the guards, who nodded and started the process of removing the chains that held Steve’s arms above his head. “Don’t have too much of a care, though. Some damage in transit is to be expected, after all.”

As soon as his arms were free, Steve’s knees buckled, his whole body screaming with pain as thousands of needles pricked his skin from the inside. He hit the ground. Hard. Panting, he lay there for a moment before the guards untethered the chain that bound his feet from the ring in the floor and hooked their arms under his and heaved him to something resembling a stand. His wrists were chained behind his back again, this time with a shorter length, pulling at the tendons in his shoulders. One of the other slaves who materialized from some other part of the building darted forward and wrapped a loincloth around his hips, knotting it in front. The guards half dragged him toward the door as he shuffled and stumbled forward, nearly tripping over the chain between the shackles on his ankles.

The door opened. He was outside, blinking into the haze of the sun. They dropped him on a stone bench by the door. One of them cuffed the back of Steve’s head with a fist, making his vision swim. Rumlow followed them out. Frowned at Steve, then nodded at the wagon that rolled up in front of them, pulled by two mules, slathered in sweat and dirt and objecting loudly to the demands of the driver who tapped their backs with his whip from his seat. The wagon carried two long trunks of whatever goods Steve’s new owner might have picked up at the port, a barrel of mead and three other slaves in long tunics chained together by a long line of metal that threaded through their collars and attached to a post on the back of the wagon.

“Up you go,” Rumlow ordered. He flashed Steve a rictus of a smile that was all teeth and leaned down next to Steve’s ear. His breath was warm and foul against Steve’s cheek, but Steve forced himself to keep still. “Just so you know,” Rumlow began, low and rough, his mouth so close to Steve’s ear that he could feel the brush of lips. “I hope you continue exactly as you have. I long for the day you finally get what you deserve. When no one cares about bringing the price down. I
want you to know, I’ll be there. First in line. Saved my copper. Just for you. It’ll be the best money I ever spent.”

Steve turned his head, fast and clearly unexpected. Rumlow screamed, almost a gurgling sound, as Steve’s teeth found a hunk of flesh and tore. Blood spurted into his mouth. Coppery, he thought, somewhat dazedly, before someone yanked at his collar, jerking his neck back and taking the tip of Rumlow’s ear with him. A blow to his lower back sent him flying off the bench and face forward onto the sand. He spat out what was in his mouth and glanced up. Rumlow was holding a hand to the side of his head, shouting and blubbering while rivulets of blood streaked down his neck. Steve grinned, feeling a wild looseness flow through him, even as the guards wrenched him to his knees.

“He bit me!” Rumlow shouted. “He fucking bit me!” Almost as if he had only remembered he had it, Rumlow raised the whip high into the air. That’s no warning, Steve had time to think, but a hand caught Rumlow’s arm before he could bring it down.

“That’s quite enough of that, I think,” the Lord said, stepping gingerly around the dark chunks of blood and flesh that marred the sand. “I’ll see to him, if you don’t mind?” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t a reprieve, either, Steve realized, feeling the weight of the Lord’s gaze settle on him.

“God-damn little cock-sucking whore fucking bit me!,” Rumlow insisted, his face scrunching up in pain. “He is yours to deal with as you see fit. My Lord,” Rumlow ground out through his teeth. “But, you had better make him pay for this.”

“Yes, hmmm,” the Lord said and made a sort of tsking sound, as if Steve were a naughty child. “I see what our good overseer here meant. Well. We can’t have that, now can we?” the man asked while Steve glared up at him. Maybe they would kill him. He had stopped caring about making out of this alive a long time ago. Now, he just wanted out.

“See that girl up there in the wagon? Thin little mousey thing? She was to serve a young Lady in a fine house. Have three meals a day. A warm bed at night. If she worked hard and served well, not a bad life, but as she is imminently replaceable and you are, sadly, not…” the Lord said, turning to Rumlow. “I trust the girl is sufficient payment for your injury?”

“Wait, don’t—she doesn’t have anything to do with—“ Steve cut in.

“No, please m’Lord, I want to go, please!” the girl pleaded. “Don’t leave me ‘ere with them no more, please sir! I’ll be good. I’m a good girl, I swear!”

“Take her to your barracks. Do with her as you will,” Rumlow told his guards, his eyes on Steve.

“No!” Steve shouted, struggling against the guards’ grip, though he knew it was of no use.

“Please, no, please!” the girl shouted, though to no avail. She was dragged off, her sobs trailing after her as Steve watched in horror. There was nothing he could do, though he made himself look. Made himself listen. He had done this. This was his fault. Why couldn’t he just have let it go? He was about to leave. There had been nothing to gain, except some small boon to what little pride he still had, and now, she would suffer for it. He had no doubt that Rumlow would make sure of that. He could at least not look away from it, Steve told himself as he stared. His eyes stung. Bile surged in his throat and his stomach roiled. If there had been food there, he would have retched, but as it was, he only managed a choking, dry heave of blood-stained spittle that dripped down his chin and onto his chest.

Rumlow looked down at Steve, blood still pouring from his ear. He walked up and slapped Steve
hard enough to send him sideways into one of the guards holding him prone. “I should’ve cut your cock off and shoved it down your throat the moment I saw you,” Rumlow spat out. “When you’re done with him, send him back here and I will,” he promised, giving a quick look to the Lord, before turning and walking back toward the warehouse.

“Well. That was rather unfortunate, wasn’t it?” the Lord said, sounding almost bored by the whole thing. “Though, hopefully, a good lesson for you. I trust we won’t have a repeat of this sort of thing? I’m usually a fair man. Follow the rules, and you’ll be treated well. Disobey, and you’ll find that I have years of experience in making people regret that choice. So, you’ll either learn to abide, or you’ll find out what happens to those who don’t. In the meantime, I believe a nice, brisk walk should rid you of some of that energy and help clear your head.” He snapped his fingers and two other guards appeared in dress that matched the colors the Lord was wearing and far finer gear than the guards at the warehouse. “See to it.”

Steve wasn’t sure what that meant, until he found himself chained to the back of the wagon, forced to walk behind as it trundled away from the port, following in the wake of the Lord’s carriage, a smaller one for his servants, another wagon loaded with goods and a host of outriders flanking them. At least they moved his arms in front of him, though they left the length of chain between his ankles, making each step that much more difficult. Move, he told himself, as the wagon jerked him forward. There wasn’t really any other option. His legs still hurt from being strung up for so long this morning and shook with the effort. Even at that slow pace, he had to hurry to keep up. Every motion of the wagon pulled at his already sore arms. A few hours in, and he was desperate for something to drink. His throat tasted of the sand and grit that spewed off the wheels of the wagon. He wanted to stop, rest, anything, but if he did, he wasn’t sure if he could get up again. So, he kept moving. One foot in front of the other.

Eventually, he stopped feeling the pain. He thought that might be worse, in some ways. His tongue had grown thick in his mouth. He kept stumbling, finally going to a knee in the dirt and then jerked forward on his elbows in the mud as the wagon ground to a halt.

“On your feet, whore,” one of the guards snapped impatiently as he rode up next to where Steve sat in the dirt. “Not so uppity now, huh? On your feet or that pretty face of yours’ll look like last week’s ground meat, you here?” Steve spat out a wad of dirt and looked up at the guard. “You think he won’t? Huh. Try it. I don’t care how much you cost, you think he wants the likes of them,” the guard said, jerking his head towards the other slaves in the back of the wagon with their round, hollow eyes, “Getting ideas in their heads about hitting their masters? Spreading rumors like that?”

“What’s the hold up back there?” the wagon driver called out.

“No hold up. Get on with it,” the guard shouted back. He looked down at Steve again, then pulled the reins of his horse and rode back to the front of the caravan.

When they did stop for the night, finally, Steve stood there, swaying. His legs quivered and shook, like they were trying to rid themselves of the pain and couldn’t manage it. If he looked behind him, he was fairly sure he would see a line of bloody footprints marking the rounded line of road between the wheel wells. He sat where he was, in the middle of the road. No one disturbed him. It wasn’t as if he could run off. Someone gave him a skin filled with water. He drank it too quickly, choked and coughed some up, then forced himself to slow his swallows. A hard hunk of bread landed near his foot. He brushed the dirt off and ate it in small, careful bites.

He slept. His dreams were of smoke and ash and a battlefield so deep in bodies, it was like stepping in snow and rivers of blood ran like veins across the white earth.
A foot nudged his shoulder, waking him. “Up,” a rough voice shouted. Another kick. Steve sat up and looked around, then down at his feet, which throbbed with a sudden jolt, now that he was awake. He wasn’t going to be able to walk. He knew it. “You can ride today,” the man said. Steve looked up in surprise and recognized the wagon’s driver. “Get ’im up there,” the driver said to two of the guards. “Best we be getting on our way.”

They got him into the wagon, next to the other two slaves and ran the length of chain through his collar. His arms and legs were still bound, but at least he was sitting. He leaned his head back and stared up at the sky. Puffy, white clouds that shifted in and out of shapes floated above. He looked over at the other slaves, who eyed him warily and dropped their gazes. Smart, he thought, swallowing back the surge of regret. Better that way.

The rest of the journey faded together into a long, slow haze. He knew they passed through villages, past large swaths of fertile farms, then towns and even small cities that dotted the region along the river. In the distance, he could sometimes see the larger keeps that formed the outer defenses, held by lesser Lords and vassals. They got bigger as the days passed, looming large on the tops of mountains and along the river where massive stone towers spanned the breadth of it and churned water through giant wheels that whirred and rushed as they turned. They were going to the capital, Steve knew. The Lord mentioned the low road, and even Steve knew what that was, the long road that ducked and twisted along the shores of the capital, where the ships came in with their goods and the sailors came in looking for ways to spend their pay. You could buy anything and anyone there, it was said. To hear the other slaves talk, no depravity was unknown on the low road.

He was probably going to end up there. His skin crawled at the thought, and he shook his head, trying to clear it. If it came to that, so be it. He should’ve been dead a long time ago.

The city finally came into view a week into their journey. Buildings of heights Steve had never seen before jutted into the sky like giant spears, all raised in homage to the castle, which sat at the top of the hill in the center of the city, looking down on everything around it from a central tower with a banner the length of at least four of the wagons Steve was currently riding in hanging down the side, bold and bright in its red and gold, even at this distance.

The city was unlike anything Steve could have imagined. Steve drank it all in from his place on the wagon. The smells, the sights, the sounds…such a strange tapestry, unlike anything Steve had seen before. So many people. It was hard to comprehend. He had thought the port where the slavers had their waystation was bustling, but this…he didn’t think he had ever seen this many people in one place before. People with strangely tattooed faces, some with dark, slanted eyes, priests dressed in long robes and foreign-looking mummers dancing with undulating, twisting movements while a monkey dressed more carefully than Steve collected pennies from the delighted crowd. For a while, Steve let himself forget why he was here.

The reprieve didn’t last, of course. Their small caravan wound its way past the city gates and through the narrow, cobblestone streets until they reached the entrance to the castle. After a few moments, the guards waved then through the open portcullis. The wagon jolted as it crossed under the sharply pointed metal spikes that formed the base of the raised gate. Then, they were through and it was long before they came to a halt in front of a long rectangle of a building draped in mosaics and festooned with heavily carved columns and arches. Large, red doors adorned with huge bronze flowers of a kind Steve had never seen before swung open, and Steve caught a glimpse of a courtyard beyond where a fountain trickled from the mouth of a stone fish.

A small, balding man with a squished, pallid face rushed out. He wore flowing red robes held at the shoulder with a large gold pin in the shape of the same flower that graced the doors came out to
greet the Lord as he stepped out of his carriage.

“Ah, Lord Sitwell, so good to see you have returned! Tell me that your trip was more successful than the last,” the fat man said, bowing low.

“Possibly,” Lord Sitwell replied. “Bring him,” Sitwell said to the guards, who dismounted and made their way to the back of the wagon. It took a moment to undo Steve’s chains from where they bound him to the wagon and get him out and on his feet, but he soon found himself standing in front of the smaller man. Sitwell eyed him impassively.

“Are these really necessary?” Zola asked, fingering the chain that ran from Steve’s collar down to the ones that secured his hands. “Has he tried to run?” Zola said, glancing down at the shackles around Steve’s ankles.

“Had a bit of an issue with him on the way here. I thought it prudent,” Sitwell replied.

“An issue?” the small man repeated with a raised eyebrow.

“I handled it. Though, I would suggest leaving those on until he learns his place. He still lacks proper discipline, though I’m sure that’s something you are more than able to provide. I’m told he was a soldier, once. Raiders fished him out of the sea or some such story,” Lord Sitwell remarked.

“Raiders?” Zola replied.

“Don’t worry. They know where their money is. Not even a good fuck is worth that much lost profit, or so I’m told,” Sitwell responded, pursing his lips with distaste. “You! This is Master Zola, overseer of the Royal harem, and your new Master, should he decide to accept you.”

“Hmm. Yes, well, let’s see him, then, shall we?” Zola said with a wave of his hand. Sitwell stepped in front of Steve long enough to give him a look of warning, then undid the loincloth at Steve’s waist and let it fall to the ground before stepping back. Steve had long ago lost whatever shame he may once have had over his body, but he still hated the feeling of being inspected, the way one would look over a horse or cattle, though he supposed there was little difference to people like this. “Nice,” Zola observed, tilting his head to one side in consideration as his eyes scanned over Steve’s body. “Very nice. Very nice, indeed, Lord Sitwell, well done,” Zola continued, circling around Steve and tracing a hand down his back and over his buttocks before signaling to one of the guards to pick up the loincloth. Zola retied it, peering up at Steve as he did. Steve watched the door. “He certainly seems to be of the type I’m looking for.”

“Lord Stone is a hard man replicate,” Sitwell said, though Steve had no idea what he was talking about.

“Stone was the only one he ever seemed to spend any time on, though we all know how that ended. This one has something of the look, true, though…softer, I think. More elegant, somehow. Oh, not now, don’t look at me like I’ve lost my mind!” Zola laughed, waving a hand at Sitwell. “Give me time. Though, God only knows whether it will even matter. Lord Stane commands me to keep him happy and pleasantly occupied, as if doing such a thing is a simple task. I send him the finest I have, but I think one must be a trebuchet or some such to hold his interest for very long,” Zola said with a frustrated grimace.

“I would keep a careful eye on this one, fair warning. He bit the ear off his last overseer. Saw it myself,” Sitwell cautioned.

“Really? How devilishly bloodthirsty of him,” Zola remarked, eyes narrowing on Steve. Steve
stared at the door over Zola’s shoulder. There was a strip of green beyond it, in the courtyard, and a wall covered in vines that were heavy with purple flowers. “How…different.”

“My thought exactly,” Sitwell agreed.

“You won’t be a problem here, now will you?” Zola asked, lifting his eyes up to Steve’s. Steve returned the gaze as defiantly as he could. To his surprise, Zola grinned, seeming pleased. “Oh, yes. Yes, good. You are definitely interesting, aren’t you now? How long was he at the port?”

“Three months. Possibly the longest three months of their overseer’s life, to hear him tell it,” Sitwell said with a derisive snort of laughter.

“Three months. And look at him. I do believe he’d slit all our throats, if he could. Interesting,” Zola said. “Guards!” Zola called out. Four splendidly dressed guards came out from somewhere beyond the red doors, their armor bearing the same flower as Zola’s pin and the bronze markers on the door. “Take him inside and see that he is bathed, fed and prepared. Here,” he said, turning to Sitwell. “A bit extra for your trouble. A pleasure doing business with you, as always,” Zola said with a deferential nod. A jingling pouch appeared from somewhere in Zola’s robes, and he handed it to Sitwell, who pocketed it inside his tunic.

“I wish you luck, then, Master Zola. I’m afraid you will need it with this one,” Sitwell commented with a slight sneer.

“What is luck, except good planning meeting good timing? There is a dinner tonight to honor the King for his generosity to the scholars at the university. I’m told His Highness may actually attend, though I find that highly unlikely myself. More likely, he will be occupied at the gaming tables Lord Stern runs,” Zola added with a slight smirk directed at Sitwell. “No matter, though. An evening for the King means a busy evening for me and mine, and you…well, either you’ll prove useful or I’ll find some other way to get my money’s worth.” Zola finished with a shrug.

“You’d send him without proper training?” Sitwell asked with a frown.

“I’ve sent my best trained concubines in droves, Lord Sitwell, with little success. Perhaps it’s time to try a…different..approach,” Zola said. “You should avail yourself of our comforts, Lord Sitwell. I know it has been a long and trying journey,” Zola offered. “Go on, then, get him inside,” Zola added to the guards, jerking his head over his shoulder towards the building behind him.

The guards gripped Steve’s arms and pushed him forward, almost propelling his shackled feet over the ground in their haste to obey, leaving Zola and Sitwell behind. Through the red doors, the small courtyard was empty, though Steve could see cushioned benches with small, tufted pillows on the ground next to them. He was led down a maze of halls, down a series of stairs, then through arched doors and past flower-crested guards, robed overseers and domestic slaves cleaning or carrying trays overflowing with food and pitchers of fragrant wines towards the rooms with lamps lit outside of them. His stomach rumbled.

It was apparently bath first, Steve quickly realized as they stopped in a large chamber filled with attendants washing various men and women while they stood in gleaming metal tubs. The room smelled almost sickly sweet from the perfumed soap. He was stripped again, then moved into one of the tubs. Awkward, since they left the chains on his hands and feet. Two attendants leapt forward with brushes and sponges to clean him from toe to head. The water was cold, but it wasn’t as if he could complain. They fed him. Not much, but enough to staunch the gnawing in his stomach.
His teeth were scrubbed. The dirt under his nails was dug out. Oils were rubbed into his skin until he gleamed. Twin metal bands went around his upper arms. A new collar, gold this time, replaced the one on his neck. He was shaved. Everywhere. For once, Steve was thankful for all the time he spent on missions being very, very still. He lay on a stone slab while they worked and stared at the ceiling. Someone had painted stars against a dark blue night sky on one side of the arch, as if in imitation of a window, though there were none of those down here that Steve could see. Someone lifted his cock, stroked it a few times, then slid a gold ring around it and tucked his balls into a larger gold ring that hooked onto the one around his shaft. He looked at the stars. Closed his eyes when they started to burn. Opened them again.

“Is he ready?” Zola asked as he swept into the chamber.

“Almost,” one of the overseer said. “Up,” he ordered, motioning to Steve. He got to his feet, flanked by two guards, and looked down at Zola with what he hoped was disdain. Zola smiled up at him.


“What should we do about…those?” the overseer asked, pointing at the shackles that still held Steve’s hands and feet.

“Oh, yes. We can’t have that, can we? No, no, that won’t do at all,” Zola said with a tittering laugh. He stepped forward, so close to Steve that Steve could see the wisps of fine hairs on the man’s upper lip. “You see, the person you will be serving tonight is very…important. Very important. I can’t have you disappointing him or embarrassing me. No, that…that we cannot have. You will go. You will do what he wants, whatever it is. Without question. Without hesitation. I don’t care what it is. If he wants to fuck you in front of the entire Court. Or put his fist inside you. If he wants his guards to fuck you while he builds his little projects and drinks his way to oblivion. I don’t care. You will be…pleased. To do these things for him. You want nothing more than to make him happy. Is that clear?”

Steve stared him. Swallowed. Lifted his gaze to look somewhere over the smaller man’s head.

“Nnuh-uh-uh, can’t have that kind of attitude, now. I had a nice talk with Lord Sitwell about you, and I think…I think you and I, we’re going to need to come to an understanding about how things work around here. This,” Zola said, swinging an arm wide. “Is…I’m sorry, what’s your name, boy?”

“Cameron,” the boy whispered. “But, they call me Cam. Sir. I mean, Master.”

“Cam. Hmm…now, you see, Cam here, he’s new. Like you. You’ll share a room. You’ll share your meals. If you earn leisure time, you’ll share that, too. Cam, how old are you?” Zola asked.

Steve set his jaw. Felt his teeth grind. He hadn’t thought he could hate anyone more than Rumlow. He’d been wrong. A bone-deep weariness settled over him. There was nothing to be done. He’d already failed the girl back at the port. Bucky. So many dead. While he’d waited on the sidelines like a good soldier for men a world away to make a damn stand.

“Twelve, Master,” Cam replied, blinking at Steve, then looking down at his feet again.

“Twelve. A wonderful age. On the cusp of manhood, wouldn’t you say? Some like them that way. Can’t stay that way forever, though. Alas. Now, I think perhaps you and I understand each other, but let me be clear. Of course, should you display the kind of behavior towards one of our patrons that you did towards that poor overseer back at the port, you’ll lose more than just your
head. You’ll pray for death before I’m done with you. But…if you misbehave, if you balk, if you protest or do anything that brings embarrassment onto me, you’ll be punished. Quite severely, I assure you. And whatever your fate is, Cam here will share it. Tell me that you understand what I’m saying,” Zola whispered. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I understand,” Steve said in a dull, flat voice. His eyes flicked to the boy’s wide, brown ones, then back down to Zola. He sucked in a breath. “I understand, Master.”

“Ah. Good. See? He can be reasonable,” Zola announced, clapping his hands together with mock amusement. “Those will not be necessary,” Zola said, nodding at the chains on Steve’s hands and legs. “Now, it is almost time. We want everything to be perfect. See to it that he is properly prepared. Then, I have something for him that I think will be just the right touch for tonight,” Zola added, motioning an attendant carrying a large, flat wooden box forward. Zola opened it and ran his finger over a waterfall of glittering metal inside.

“Turn around,” one of the robed men said to Steve as soon as the shackles fell from his hands and legs. “Face the table.” Steve turned. “Bend.” Steve bent forward until he felt the cold stone of the table against his chest. “Good,” the man said, then spread Steve apart and thrust two oiled fingers inside. Steve let out a sharp grunt, hips jerking. He let out a hiss of breath and told himself not to move. The man worked him open, stretching and pulling at his hole. A third finger, and the burning pressure worsened. Steve bit his lip. Tasted blood. “Give me the….yes, thank you,” the man said from behind him.

The fingers left him. Steve had time to feel relief, and then something hard and rounded, far larger than the fingers, was pushing into him, breaching him. He gave a stuttering gasp. His fingers scabbered and dug fruitlessly into the stone table. He squeezed hi eyes shut until the thing slipped past the initial resistance and settled inside him. He felt it slide out, then it was shoved back in again. Then again. Again. He tried to relax. Let it happen. Tell himself it wasn’t so bad. Not the worst pain he’d felt, after all. He could handle it.

The folds of a red robe came into view in front of Steve. Steve didn’t look up.

“Good,” Zola said, running a light hand through Steve’s hair. “See? I knew you could be biddable, with the right incentive. That’s enough, Lucien. We don’t want him too loose for tonight, just enough that he’s ready. They don’t like to work at it much.” Zola added, feigning a frown down at Steve, like he was sharing some disappointing secret. The other man grunted his assent and the thing slid out of Steve for the final time.

Steve let out a shaky breath and got his hands underneath himself, pushing himself up off the table. His legs trembled. His stomach felt watery. What little food he’d eaten curdled, and he tasted bile in the back of his throat. He glanced over at the boy. Cam. He was looking away from Steve, arms wrapped around his stomach. He was rocking back and forth a little where he stood. Steve shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them again and stared straight ahead.

“Bring it over,” Zola ordered, coming around the table and holding out his hands. The attendant brought the box forward and Zola lifted the strands of metal from the case. They fell in cascades of finely-honed metal chains from a belt that Zola wrapped around Steve’s waist so that the chains formed a metal curtain that swung low in front and back, then arched up high over Steve’s hips. It didn’t hide much of anything, but caught the light and glimmered when he moved, making small clinking sounds as the chains rubbed together.

“There,” Zola pronounced with satisfaction, bringing his hands together in front of him.
“Beautiful. You’ll do…very nicely, I think. He’d have to be more of an eunuch than my guards not to do something with you, and we all know he isn’t that. Now, follow me, then.” Zola ordered, sweeping out of the room.

Steve glanced over at the boy. Wide, watery eyes stared back at him. He took a deep breath and followed Zola, while two guards took to his heels. A jittery nervousness lapped at Steve’s spine and dug into his stomach. It had been a long time since he felt fear. After a while with Rumlow and his ilk, it had been too hard to sustain and devolved into something akin to numbness, a hollow victory when he stopped responding to their torments, but those kinds of victories were all he had. Now, he had the boy’s life at stake, too, and the sudden weight of it was almost too much.

He didn’t want this burden. He didn’t want any of this. He should’ve died when the Valkyrie sank with its hellacious cargo. He had never planned on being found, on shouldering someone else’s life again. He wanted to run, strike out, something—something that would end it, finally, even if it was a terrible end. He could handle that. The dying. He was getting good at it, he supposed. But, if he did that, he doomed the boy to the same fate, and he couldn’t let someone else die for him. Not again.

They made their way through some kind of network of stairs and tunnels and small doors that Zola opened with a key he produced from under his robes and Steve had to duck his head to avoid hitting his head on. The final door opened to a long corridor, brightly lit with torches and candle-filled chandeliers and lined with huge tapestries, paintings and banners. Suits of armor stood sentinel and rows of swords and shields, blunted by age, hung in spirals of metal. Steve’s feet sank into a plush, red rug, so deep and soft, it was like walking on new grass. He followed Zola towards the double doors at the end of the hall. It was only when they stopped in front of them that Steve looked up and saw the crest above the doors.

His head buzzed with disbelief. This was the King’s residence. Zola was taking him to the King. He shook his head and blinked up at the royal crest carved in stone relief.

The King.

Stark.

“You understand now, I take it, why I have to take such drastic measure to insure your cooperation?” Zola asked with a quick look at Steve and a small mincing step towards the doors. “The King’s proclivities are well known, of course, and as I am charged with seeing to his pleasure and that of his household and guests, I strive to provide…whatever might be required, you see. But he is…difficult to predict. And you, well, you are a bit of a gamble, aren’t you? Sitwell was right about the risks. But, I’m a man who has played this game for longer than you’ve been alive. Please him, and you will be rewarded. Fail to please him and…well. I suggest for your sake—and the boy’s—you see that you do not find out. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Master,” Steve replied, dropping his gaze down to Zola’s and holding it there until the other man looked away with a small humph of air.

“Good,” Zola muttered, then rapped his knuckles on the door. It opened after a pause and Zola said something in a low whisper to the guard, casting a quick look over his shoulder at Steve. “This way,” Zola said after a moment. “When we are inside, kneel. Keep your eyes down and your mouth shut. Unless, of course, he requires you to open it,” Zola remarked with a small, amused smile.

Steve followed Zola inside the chambers, down a small hallway and past two guards who stood silently in front of heavy, red curtains that were drawn back to reveal a large room with a fireplace.
surrounded by several chairs and low tables, a carved desk spilling over with stacks of parchment and yellow-paged books, and a massive bed against the far wall that drew Steve’s eyes for a long moment before he remembered to look down.

Zola made his way to an antechamber, the likes of which Steve had never seen. He forgot the admonition to keep his eyes down and stared in utter amazement at the seemingly random assortment. He had no idea what he expected to find in the King’s chambers, but this…this was definitely not it. The room was filled with all manner of contraptions. Rolls of paper were haphazardly piled on the floor, what looked like a part of a ballista, two wheels of various sizes, and a long table that ran the length of one wall held everything from hammers and awls to finely wrought pincers, the kind goldsmiths used. Pots and jars labeled with words that barely made sense lined a tall cabinet. Ropes and pulleys hung from the ceiling and walls and connected to the various contraptions that whirred and churned in the room, as if moving of their own accord. It was almost too much to take in at once.

A small fire was banked in the hearth, next to which a large, flat stone held an anvil and round grinding stone suspended between two posts by its side. A large, round table dominated the center of the room. It was clearly meant to be a map table, with the miniature battlements and sculpted proxies for cavalry, infantry and other markers scattered across the table in between bits and pieces of coiled metal, small-toothed wheels and an array of other items that Steve could only guess at their use.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” Zola said with a lisping deference and went to one knee, bowing his head and clasping his hands over his knee. Only then did Steve’s eyes catch on the man sitting at the large table, shoulders hunched over a sliding gear of some kind that moved back and forth along a long, smooth length of wood that ended in an axle while he made marks on a sheet of parchment in front of him.

Steve had the impression of dark hair before he realized his lapse. He quickly sank to his knees behind Zola and bowed his head, waiting. Steve heard a small huff from across the room and saw Zola rise out of the corner of his eye, so he supposed that was what passed for acknowledgement from a King. Mindful of Zola’s warning, he stayed where he was, keeping his eyes on the stone floor. There were flecks of wood dust in the grooves of stone, he noticed. And dark metal shavings. Ribbons of wood curled in corners and hid underneath the table.

“I trust you had an enjoyable evening? Such an honor, and so richly deserved, of course,” Zola tittered, shuffling a bit closer as he did.

“They come and eat my food and drink my wine and give me some dust-catching statue in return. Honor has nothing to do with it,” the King replied. There was a loud thump, followed by a clattering sound, and Steve watched as parts of whatever the King had been working on scattered and fell from the table. “Ah, damn it all to hell!” the King shouted, and a sweeping sound sent the whole thing crashing across the table. A long sigh followed. Then quiet. “And what does my harem Master want this time? Surely, Lord Hammer is in dire need of your services this evening, what with it being a day where the sun rises and sets,” the King said in a tight, rough voice that reeked of annoyance at the distraction.

“Why, my purpose is the same as always, Your Highness, of course. To see to your pleasure and comfort, as is my highest duty,” Zola said in a high, lilting voice that made Steve want to grind his teeth together. “I thought, perhaps, you might be inclined to enjoy some company this evening? To celebrate the occasion? A virgin, untrained, but eager to please, I assure you, Your Highness.”

The King made a small sound that felt like disdain, the pushed his chair back and got up from the
The King was younger than he would have expected, had he given it much thought. Dark eyes. Soft, thick hair that seemed to want to curl. A finely trimmed beard that sculpted around his jaw and chin. A fit, wiry frame wearing nothing fancier than a linen tunic stained with pitch and sweat that hung over brown breeches. The King’s eyes moved over Steve’s face, then down, his head canting to the side as his gaze roamed up and down over Steve’s body. Something flared in the King’s eyes, some kind of intensity that hadn’t been there before, and Steve felt heat dapple across his skin. The King made a small sound, just a humph of air, but his eyes were on Steve’s again and there was more than idle interest there this time.

“Beautiful,” the King murmured, then seemed to catch himself. Steve’s stomach swooped and his breath caught as the King held his gaze. Suddenly, the King’s fingers were gone from Steve’s chin and he was turning towards Zola. “But, unless he happens to maximize the height this counterweight can all without the whole damn thing completely coming apart with the recoil, then I have little use for him. Take him to Stern or one of your other favorite customers. They’ll thank you handsomely for it, no doubt. Go,” the King ordered, pointing a hand in the direction of the door.

“Your Highness, if you would but look—“ Zola started.

“You could attach it to the fortification’s wall to get the axle stabilized. That would maximize the vertical height for the counterweight to fall,” Steve said, the words seeming to come out of their own accord. He hadn’t meant to say it. Hadn’t meant to say anything. Except, as soon as the King asked the question, he could see it, the way he and Bucky used to lower themselves down the sides of the old keep daring each other to drop low enough to skim their bare feet in the morass of what remained of the ancient moat. Steve blinked sucked in a breath, and snapped his mouth shut. The room went silent.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness, please forgive me. He is, as yet, untrained,” Zola rushed out. “I assure you, I will personally see to it that such impertinence is corrected at once, with my deepest apologies for the affront to your esteemed—“

“Get out,” the King said.

“Of course, Your Majesty. We’re leaving this instant. Again, my most sincere apologies. Allow me to make this up to you by sending several of my very best, most accomplished—“ Zola stammered, nearly tripping over his robe in his effort to bow and seem contrite instead of as blisteringly angry as the look he leveled at Steve indicated. Zola was going to make him pay, which meant Zola was going to make Cam pay, and it was Steve’s fault, yet again. He had to try. Something. Anything.

“Your Highness, please, I—“ Steve began, lifting his eyes to the King’s again, a plea there that he couldn’t quite put into words.

“I said get out,” the King repeated.

“Of course. Right away,” Zola simpered. “Up,” he snapped at Steve and slipped his hands under Steve’s collar, giving it a sharp pull, to emphasize the point.

“Not him. Just you. He stays,” the King interrupted. Steve glanced over at him in shocked surprise. Zola let go of Steve’s collar and looked back and forth between Steve and the King,
before an insipid smile split his features.

“As you wish, Your Highness. I bid you a good evening then. Should you require anything further from me, you know you’ve only to ask,” Zola said smoothly, taking small, mincing steps as he backed out of the chamber with a bow.

A few moments later, Steve somehow heard the thud of the large doors closing over the pounding of his heart. He was alone with the King. Having no idea what to do, Steve dropped his eyes and bowed his head, staring at the stone floor. The King’s chair made a noise as he scooted it back to sit down at the table again. Steve heard the clacks and clatter of the parts on the table being shuffled around. After a while, the scratch of a quill on parchment filled his ears.

“Ah, no, that’s not—damn it, you are being very—oh, wait…okay,” the King mumbled, as Steve cautiously looked up only to realize that the King wasn’t actually speaking to him, but rather talking aloud or to whatever part he was holding in his hands.

Steve looked back down, hoping the King hadn’t noticed, though he seemed far too absorbed in whatever he was doing to pay attention to Steve. It went on like that, though Steve wasn’t sure how long. An occasional outburst. Disconcerted mutterings. Banging sounds. The grinding of metal on wood. A whirring noise. Heavy footfalls across the floor. The rustle of the fire and sharp taps of the metal being shaped. Steve’s knees ached where he knelt on the stone, which was probably good, since that might have been the only thing keeping him awake.

Since he arrived in the city this morning, the whole day had been almost a blur of pain and humiliation, waiting for whatever new horror would be next, and now…it was warm here. Quiet, in its own, strange way, with the sounds almost fading as his head hung to his chest. He couldn’t sleep, not like this, of course, but he let his mind wander in a way he rarely did these days. Green hills and leaves that turned to fire after the summer. Watching the fish swim under his feet when the river turned to ice. How his mother said the potatoes had eyes she had to cut out before they could eat them, and how it had both horrified and fascinated him until Bucky laughed and explained.

He jumped in startle when he felt a light touch under his chin and realized the King was standing in front of him. The room was quiet, though Steve hadn’t noticed, so lost in his memories for however long he had been drifting. The King made a vague noise in the back of his throat and tilted Steve’s chin up again, the way he had before. His thumb traced the line of Steve’s jaw, and Steve saw something flicker in the King’s eyes as they seemed to darken.

“Come,” the King commanded, turning on his heels and walking towards the other room with quick steps, leaving Steve no choice but to follow. His legs protested when he stood, but he ignored it. The King was pouring himself a cup of wine from a pitcher on one of the tables when Steve entered the room. He glanced up, mouth flattening a bit when his gaze landed on Steve, before bringing the cup to his lips and swallowing deeply.

Steve could feel the weight of the King’s gaze on him like it was a physical touch, gliding over his skin as he walked into the room. He was suddenly very conscious of his near-nakedness. The chains that fell from his waist swayed across his thighs and rubbed at his cock when he walked, not enough to be uncomfortable, but enough to make him aware. Steve stopped, halfway into the room, unsure what he should do. His first instinct was to cover himself with his hands, but he knew that wasn’t allowed, so he left his hands at his sides and waited while the King studied him with nearly the same expression Steve had seen on his face while he looked at the piece of gear and axle sitting on the table in the other room. Like he was something the King was trying very hard to figure out.
“How does a concubine know anything about the mechanics of trebuchets? Thought the only things that ever came out of concubine’s mouths were pretty lies,” the King asked, sounding only mildly curious, as if the answer didn’t matter, but there was an undercurrent in the King’s voice that Steve couldn’t name. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you. It was a good suggestion. Inspired, actually. I should’ve thought of it, tell you the truth. Affix the damn things to the walls. Why not? Just because it’s never been done before, not that I’ve heard of, and I’ve heard of a lot. It’s been…a while. Since someone managed to surprise me. So. I ask you. How does a concubine know anything about the mechanics of trebuchets?”

Steve had no idea how to answer. He opened and closed his mouth, trying to find the right words or something in the King’s manner that would tell him what to say, but the King’s face was closed, carefully blank.

“You know, despite what some would say, I don’t actually talk just to hear the sound of my own voice,” the King remarked lightly. “I asked you a question. I expect to be answered.”

“I—” Steve began, tongue twisting in his mouth as he swallowed. “I don’t,” he stammered. “I—”

“If you lie to me again, I don’t think you’ll like how that will go for you,” the King interjected, taking a sip of his wine and leaning one hip on the table. “Try again.”

“I was a soldier,” Steve said after a beat of heavy silence. “Before…”

“A soldier. I have lots of soldiers. Most have seen trebuchets in action more than a few times. They know how the things work. Yet, none of them ever suggested such a thing,” the King replied, swilling the cup around in his hand before taking another drink. “I’m fairly sure none of them ever thought such a thing. They think about their armor and their swords and what rations they’ll be given and whether fucking the camp whores is worth the risk, and if I asked ten thousand of them and offered a chest of gold in return, I wouldn’t get “affix it to the wall’ as an answer. But, you did. How?”

“I…” Steve started. Stopped. Shook his head and felt his jaw clench. He was messing up, somehow. Doing this wrong, and the King was going to send him away and Zola would be waiting. Waiting with the boy, and it had been so easy to slip beneath the waters, where it was dark and cold, and this was so much harder. He drew in a shaky breath. The King was watching him in silent expectation, his face hard and unreadable. “I didn’t want you to send me away, Your Highness, and I… I just knew it would work. When you asked. I could see it, in my head, that it would work. I couldn’t build it, or tell you how, but…” he trailed off, shaking his head in apology. He wasn’t saying it right, what he wanted to say, but he couldn’t explain it any better.

“You just knew it would work,” the King repeated, sounding oddly satisfied with the stumbling explanation Steve had managed to offer. The King pushed himself off the table and set the empty cup down, then walked over to stand in front of Steve. “Zola chose you because you look a bit like Tib—an old friend,” the King said with a twist of his mouth. Not a friend, then, Steve thought to himself. “He thinks that would please me.”

The King reached out a hand and ran a finger around the curve of Steve’s collar, then placed his hand at the center of Steve’s chest, splaying his fingers wide before trailing them down, across Steve’s stomach, making him draw in a quick, gasping breath. The King’s hand stopped, just above the metal belt at Steve’s waist, and he looked up at Steve, holding his eyes.

“You don’t want me to send you away,” the King said, repeating Steve’s words back to him.

“No,” Steve managed to husk out in a voice that didn’t quite sound like his own. It was the truth,
at least. The King seemed to relax a bit at that, and the hand on Steve’s stomach flexed, the fingers dipping low enough to skim the metal chains that wound their way through the belt.

“Did Zola tell you that I can be very generous to those who please me?” the King asked, a small, sardonic smile flickering across his lips.

“I—yes,” Steve replied, though he honestly couldn’t remember if Zola had said any such thing. It seemed the answer the King expected to hear, though, because he let out a small huff of laughter.

“I’ll bet he did, the sycophantic little bastard,” the King said with a shake of his head. Then he quieted, still and looked up at Steve. His eyes were wide and dark as they held Steve’s gaze. He wanted to look away, lower his gaze, but found he couldn’t quite tear his eyes from the King’s. His chest tightened. He remembered to breath, and felt the weight of King’s hand pressing on the flat of his stomach as he drew in a breath and let it out. The King’s face tightened. His mouth parted and his eyes grew hard, glittering in the firelight, as his hand sank lower until it found Steve’s cock through the chains and wrapped his fingers around the length. Steve let out a harsh, guttural gasp at the sensation and his hips jerked into the King’s hand of their own volition.

“Get in the bed. On your knees,” the King said suddenly, withdrawing his hand and stepping back.

Steve walked over to the huge bed and stood at the edge for a moment, trying to gather himself. It was fine. This was fine. People did this all the time. The King did not seem cruel. Everything would be fine. He crawled into the bed and felt the soft mattress dip underneath him, softer than anything he had ever felt. The carved headboard in front of him bore the same royal crest as the one above the door, though far more heavily embellished with paints and flecks of gold leaf. He realized his hands were fisted at his sides and forced himself to open them. Fine. It was all fine, he told himself.

Behind Steve, the bed shifted with King’s weight, and Steve felt hands sliding up and down his arms, then down his sides, over the curve of his waist and lower, across his thighs, then back up again, making the chains shift and move over Steve’s skin. The King’s hands were wet with warm oil, Steve realized, as he felt it drip down over his skin wherever the King touched. Warm breath flowed against his neck, and then the King’s mouth was there, kissing and sucking a line just below the collar’s circle, then higher, working his way under Steve’s jaw, just below his ear. Steve gasped when the King took the lobe in his mouth and nipped at it with his teeth, then sucked, almost soothingly, before letting it go and nuzzling at the curve of Steve’s neck.

The King wrapped his arms under Steve’s and let his hands fall down over Steve’s stomach and past his waist to grip the chains there. He tugged at them, lifting them up and letting them fall, so they rubbed and grated across the sensitive skin of Steve’s cock. Steve moaned, a rough, scraping sound that was pulled from somewhere deep inside. His head was in some kind of daze, too full and confused to keep up with what was happening to his body. The King let the chains fall and grasped Steve’s cock again, sending the metal links biting into the delicate flesh before he let go, making Steve’s whole body jerk with a rush of pleasure-pain that slammed deep inside him with a bright burst, then curled there, warm and throbbing while the King lifted the chains high, freeing Steve’s cock.

“Hmmm,” the King breathed out, hot and heavy against Steve’s ear, still wet from his ministrations. He stroked a hand up the length of Steve’s cock, leaving it slick and gleaming in the firelight, and wrapped his fingers around the gold ring of metal at the top of the shaft. “You like trebuchet’s, huh? Like noticing things about them. A good soldier. Who pays attention. Follows orders. Is that right?” the King laughed. “Somehow, I doubt it.”
“I—” Steve rasped out, watching the King’s finger trace a path around the ring on Steve’s cock, then down the underside, leaving a trail of thick, warm oil heating the skin.

“Did you know that the addition of a hinge to a counterweight trebuchet greatly increases the amount of energy that can be delivered to the beam?” the King asked, stroking his hand along Steve’s length and flicking his wrist over the head of Steve’s cock. Steve let out a burst of air and his head fell back on his shoulders as his hips stuttered against the King’s hand in a vain attempt to chase the friction. “It’s true,” the King said, and Steve could hear a knowing kind of smile in the King’s voice. “Some energy, of course, is lost, when the hinge is opened fully,” the King continued, rubbing his hand up and down Steve’s straining cock. “The counterweights, they work as a sort of brake on the rotation, you see,” the King said, letting his other hand glide down to cup Steve’s balls and roll them around in his palm. “This eases the strain on the beam.” Steve let out a sharp cry and shut his eyes as the King worked his hand up and down in a circular motion around Steve’s cock. His hips were thrusting helplessly into the King’s hand. “It’s all just math, of course,” the King added and there was definitely a smile in his voice now.

“Please,” Steve gasped.

“You’re beautiful,” the King whispered into the sweat-soaked skin at Steve’s neck. “Look at you. I could do this all night, and not get tired of looking at you. Capacity. Energy. Length. Thrust,” the King said, canting his hips forward so Steve felt the hard length of his erection against the opening of Steve’s ass and giving Steve’s cock a particularly hard tug with one hand while the other did the same to Steve’s balls.

Steve groaned and let his chin fall to his chest. He looked down at the King’s hand working his cock. Humiliation burned through him, but God, he wanted release so badly, even if he wasn’t supposed to want it. He didn’t know what that made him. He wasn’t supposed to be this, but here he was, thrusting against the King’s hand for all he was worth, begging for it, the way Zola told him he should.

“When the trigger is released,” the King went on, his strokes growing harder and more rapid. Steve let out a pleading whine, and heard a low, pleased chuckle in his ear. “When the trigger is released, the counterweight falls,” the King said again, and the hand that was playing with Steve’s balls slowly slipped them through the metal ring. Steve cried out, sharp and keening, and slumped over at the waist, curling in on himself. “The beam is pulled upward,” the King explained as he carefully slid the golden ring off Steve’s engorged cock. “The sling slips free and fires.” The orgasm hit Steve so hard it knocked the air out of his lungs with a harsh burst and sent sparks behind his eyelids as he squeezed his eyes shut while his hips pumped his cock in and out of the circle of the King’s hand while ribbons of white splattered across the bed.

When he finally came back to his skin, felt his body coalesce around himself again, he realized he was slumped back against the King’s chest, panting, while the King ran a hand up and down his back. He was too wrung out to think of anything other than trying to breath, at first, though the haze slowly left him and he was faced with a dawning horror at himself. This couldn’t be right. Whatever this was, it wasn’t what was supposed to happen, surely. He’d come all over the King’s bed, without permission, and the King hadn’t—he hadn’t—this wasn’t right. It had to be wrong. Had to be. Shame burned through him and settled like a hot stone in his stomach.

“You did good,” the King said into the top of Steve’s head. He felt a light brush of lips in his hair. “You were so good for me. Beautiful.” The King’s voice shook, barely, though Steve could feel it against his skin, warming him somehow. A few more soft strokes and murmured words, and then the King tugged the blanket spattered with Steve’s cum aside and tossed it to the ground.
“Kneel for me,” the King urged then, nudging Steve up and forward until he was kneeling on the bed again. “There you go. Good,” the King continued. He was rubbing a hand up and down Steve’s back, placing light kisses along the line between Steve’s shoulders.

The hazy lightness of the orgasm was leaving him, replaced by a hot tightness coiling in his belly and wrapping like bands around his chest. He knew what the King wanted. He tried to tell himself it was going to be fine, but everything had already been too much and he was still trying to grab onto anything about this that he could make sense of, but it was like trying to catch smoke. Nothing made sense. He didn’t make sense. Everything about this should be wrong, but his body kept telling him how good it felt and that somehow made it worse.

A firm pressure on the small of his back cut through the cacophony in Steve’s mind. Everything went cold for a moment. Like the way the water feels when you first break the surface, so cold, you forget how to move, Steve thought, then drew in a shuddering breath that burned his throat and lungs and followed the pressure forward, leaning down until his chest met the bed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw the King reach over to a small pot on the bed that was warming over a low-burning flame and dip his hand into it. Then, the King moved behind him again and lifted the metal strands up until they gathered at Steve’s waist. His hands smoothed over the curve of Steve’s ass with soft strokes, before cupping the cheeks and spreading him apart. Cool air hit his exposed flesh, making him shiver. He felt a light touch to the rim of his hole and couldn’t help tensing. He bit his lip and tried to force himself to relax to no avail.

Warm drops of oil hit his hole and dribbled down. He hissed, more in surprise than anything, then felt the King’s fingers gently tracing around the rim before one slowly slid inside. Steve’s body jerked instinctively at the intrusion, though it didn’t hurt. He was still loose from the preparation at Zola’s. The King could just…get it over with, Steve thought, but he didn’t, just worked his finger in to the knuckle and kept it there, letting Steve get used to it. He thrust slowly in deeper, then out again, pumping his hand at Steve’s hole.

A buzzing sort of pressure was building behind Steve’s cock, not quite arousal, but a kind of needy want that made his stomach turn and his legs shake. A second finger joined the first and the King thrust them in and out, harder now, tugging lightly on the rim of Steve’s hole as he worked them deep inside. When he spread his fingers apart, Steve let out a choked gasp and the rhythm slowed, almost to a halt, before picking up speed again. Finally, a third finger was added, and now, Steve could feel the burning stretch of it. He wanted it to be a bad feeling. To hurt, in that skin-crawling, sickening way that it had hurt with Zola’s man or when Sitwell examined him. Instead, a steady pressure was growing, beyond the ache, making balls tighten and his cock jump in small, weak motions, while heat dug out a crater deep inside, filled him, but left him empty. He tensed, muscles clamping together and dug his hands into the coverlet as he let out a choked-off cry.

Then, the fingers were gone, and Steve couldn’t help but cant his hips backwards, seeking more of something he didn’t want to name, a low, stuttering moan being torn out of him. A moment later, he felt the rounded head of the King’s cock press against his hole, hard and big, bigger than whatever they had used at Zola’s, and it did hurt, then, as his abused hole was stretched and forced opened. For a moment, it was almost too much, then the King grunted and gave a small thrust, and he was inside, cock buried deep. Steve’s body wrenched, tightened up, and then he felt the King pull out, almost all the way, before thrusting in again, hard this time. Steve gave a surprised cry, body rocking with the motion, then moaned and buried his forehead into the bed as a burst of pleasure lit deep inside him.

Hands gripped his hips, holding him steady, and the King began to thrust in earnest, long, deep strokes punctuated by shallow, quick ruts of his hips that kept Steve on the edge of something, not
able to find purchase, his whole body thrumming as the King slammed his cock into him again and again. The only sounds in the room were the slaps of wet skin, the occasional grunt as the King pounded his cock into Steve and Steve’s own gasping moans that slowly gave way to pleading, nonsensical cries. A wave of pleasure built inside him, holding him at the top. Steve reached for his own weeping cock, only to feel the hands holding his hips give a sharp, hard squeeze.

“You come on my cock, or not at all,” the King panted, then pulled almost all the way out and drove in again, finding that spot deep inside Steve that made his whole body spasm and quake with pleasure. Steve closed his eyes, felt his body relax, go limp, the muscles lax, and the wave inside finally crested, rolling over inside itself and bursting against the shore. His cock pulsed as he came, and he shook with the force of it, muscles clamping down around the King’s cock. He felt the King’s thrusts falter then, and his hips jerked. He pushed down on Steve’s back and hooked an arm under his waist, lifting and spreading him as he slammed into Steve a few more times. Then, Steve felt liquid warmth fill him in quick spurts, and the King thrust lazily, in and out, until he had spent all of his seed. He collapsed on top of Steve, sending them both to the bed, each panting hard and soaked in sweat.

The King ground his forehead against the dip of Steve’s back, then placed a quick kiss there as he slid out of Steve and rolled over to lay next to Steve on the bed, still breathing hard. He scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, then looked over at Steve. His eyes were soft, crinkled at the corners, and there was a small smile pulling at his lips. He reached up and ran the backs of his fingers down the side of Steve’s face. Steve could feel it tremble lightly as it traced its path down his cheek.

“You,” the King huffed, then grinned and rolled back over, slinging an arm across Steve’s shoulders and leaning down to place a nipping kiss on the jut of bone there, before flopping back next to Steve and lifting his gaze, all levity draining away from his face. “You,” the King said again, voice soft and husky and filled with something that sounded a bit like surprise.

The King’s eyes left Steve’s and turned to stare up at the curtain that canopied the bed. Steve wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. He thought he might have dozed. When he did look over again, the King was breathing evenly and deeply, hair slicked back with sweat-slicked curls, mouth parted in sleep, looking far younger than he had earlier.

Steve had no idea what he was supposed to do now. He pushed himself up and swung his legs off the edge of the bed, then stood, gingerly at first. He winced at the sudden stab of pain, though it faded to a dull ache as he stood there. He was sticky with sweat and…well. Other things. He could feel the King’s seed leaking out of him and down his thighs. He looked over at the King, then slowly walked towards the doors. He was almost there, when he turned around and looked toward the antechamber, where he had met the King earlier. Curiosity drove him to walk over to the table and pick up the drawing that the King had been working on. It showed a trebuchet attached to a wall, with a long throwing arm and lightweight beam, next to a toothed wheel that seemed to be designed to serve as a winch to load the catapult. He studied it, committing it to memory. It might be the last useful thing he did. This…this was his life now, he thought, looking over his shoulder towards the bedroom, where he could just see the outline of a figure on the bed. Tomorrow, he would serve someone else. And the day after that, someone else. Until no one wanted him anymore, and then, he would be used for something else.

His eyes stung, so he closed them. Took a deep, bracing breath and put the parchment back down on the table. As he turned to go, his foot caught on one of the miniature figures that had been a casualty of the King’s frustration. He bent down and picked it up, putting it back in its place on the map. Then moved the other pieces back where they belonged. When he was done, he gave the table one last, admiring look, then turned and walked to the door, past the silent guards who he had
forgotten were there, who opened the door and let him out into the hallway.

Two of Zola’s eunuchs stood waiting. Steve cast a quick look over his shoulder as one gave him a small shove down the hall. He turned around. Faced forward. There was a long, thin window at the end of the hall, where it sank into a winding staircase. If he looked, he could just see the bottom of the moon, hanging low in the sky, where the tops of trees seemed to reach up to catch it. He kept his eyes on that until he had to duck into the low tunnel that burrowed its way back to Zola’s compound.

He was taken to a small room. Two pallets lined the floor. Two buckets, one empty, one with water, stood in a corner. A single lamp burned behind a screen in a cubby cut into the wall. Zola was waiting for him. Of course.

“Did he fuck you?” Zola asked as soon as the guards pushed Steve inside the room.

“Yes,” Steve replied flatly.

“Turn around,” Zola ordered. Steve looked down at him, then over at the second pallet, where the boy’s dark head was barely peeking out of the thin blanket. He turned. Zola undid the metal skirt and pushed a finger between Steve’s cheeks, drawing a line up and over his hole. “Hmmm,” Zola said, holding up his hand and rubbing his fingers together. “Good. If you didn’t please him, I’ll hear of it, I can assure you,” Zola warned, lips curling as Steve just stood there impassively. “Lord Hammer will want you tomorrow. He always wants them when the King is done. He’ll be good for you. Take you down a few rungs. Likes to fuck their mouths. Likes to make sure you swallow it all,” Zola told him, tipping his head to the side and watching Steve with a predatory smile that looked a lot like hope. “Now, clean yourself up. You’re a mess.”

Steve watched them leave until he heard the lock grinding in the door. He walked over to the bucket with water and drew out the small rag, cleaning himself as best he could. He sank down onto the pallet and leaned his head back against the stone wall.

“Thank you,” a small voice said. “For not…you know.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve said after a long moment. He closed his eyes. He was so tired. So very, very tired. But, if he closed his eyes, it would be tomorrow, and he wasn’t sure if he could face that just yet.

“Were you—were you really with—with the King?” Cam asked in a hesitant, halting voice.

“Yes,” Steve replied around a sigh. It still didn’t seem real. Like something out of a strange dream, where everything was wrong and then something happened that seemed to have nothing to do with the rest of it, but was right in the middle of everything.

“Was it…was it alright?” Cam asked softly.

“Yes,” Steve said. “It was alright.”

“Good. Good, because I’m…I’m to go to a party tomorrow. At Lord Stane’s. A fancy party, Master Zola said,” Cam told him. “I’ve always wanted to see a fancy party.”

Steve felt his stomach double over and his throat tighten. He closed his eyes and tapped his head against the stone wall. He couldn’t save anyone. That had never even been a possibility. Maybe this was his penance, to keep on failing, until there was nothing left to lose.

He dreamed they were lowering themselves down to the old moat, him and Bucky, feet dangling
just above the murky water. He laughed and splashed a toe in it, to show he wasn’t afraid. When he looked over at Bucky, the other boy grinned, but the smile turned into a scream as the rope snapped and he fell, down into the water with a loud splash. He reached for Steve. Steve lunged for his hand, missed, tried again, but Bucky was gone, and the water was still and quiet as Steve shouted his name, and then a hand burst through the surface. Steve grabbed for it, held on. Pulled. But, he wasn’t strong enough. Bucky was too heavy, pulling Steve down, while he clung to the rope, and then he was falling, falling and the water burned, it was so cold. Cold and dark, and then there was nothing.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who gave this a shot. If you are still here, thank you for reading along. I really do appreciate it, since I know this is a bit different than my usual. I swear, there will be more Celestial Navigation at some point, don't worry!

Oh, and it was brought to my attention that maybe not everyone is as obsessed with Captain America: The Winter Soldier as I am, so FYI, Cameron Klein (Cam, here) is the Shield agent who refuses Rumlow's order. So...that guy.

Steve woke with a start, sitting up and nearly half off the pallet, reaching for someone who wasn’t there, before he realized he had been dreaming. He had no idea if it was morning yet, since the room had no windows. The candle burned low, barely flickering, leaving the room in shadow. He lay back and listened, but only heard the deep quiet of night. He glanced over at Cam, breathing softly and curled into a ball on the pallet across the room and felt a fresh surge of guilt that doubled over on itself into an unfocused, frustrated rage. The boy would go to a fancy party tonight and nothing about that would be alright, but he would survive the night. They both would. For another day. Steve just wondered how long surviving would be a goal instead of a yoke.

He let his eyes fall closed and lay back down on the pallet, though he knew he wouldn’t sleep again. He wasn’t going to think about it. What was going to happen with this Lord Hammer tonight. Likes to fuck their mouths. Likes to make sure you swallow it all, he heard Zola’s words echo in his mind, making his stomach clench and churn. Rumlow had delighted in shoving that long, leather-clad piece of smoothly-shaped wood down his throat until he gagged and choked and saliva dripped down his chin. Practice, Rumlow had told him with a sadistic, gleeful cut to his smile. Sometimes, he buckled a strap around Steve’s mouth, holding it in place, leaving him there chained to the wall while he struggled to breathe through his nose and keep whatever little food he had in his belly from killing him.

Rumlow was cruel, though, and exalted in the power he held. Perhaps this Lord Hammer was not. Perhaps it would not be so bad, Steve told himself, and for a moment, his belly filled with a rush a heat as his mind replayed the way the King’s hands had felt as they stroked Steve’s cock while the King teased and tormented Steve with his words. He shifted uncomfortably on the pallet and felt his cock twitch at the memory. Shame licked a fire through his gut and coiled low and deep behind the ache and soreness, and he felt himself harden even more. Rumlow had said he would like it, that he was made for it, and Steve had spat in his face, yet here he was, getting hard just thinking about what had happened with the King.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling where flecks of light from the candle’s flame danced off the screen in front of it. He wasn’t going to think about last night, he told himself firmly. He would think of wide, green fields and the way his mother smiled when he brought her the weeds he took for flowers. How she would burn herbs in a small kettle over the fireplace to help his chest. He would think of great battles fought with broken tree branches and mortars made of wet sod. They always won, he and Bucky. They were the heroes, and they always won, just like in the stories. He closed his eyes again and thought of that
Morning was announced by the room’s door banging open and two domestic slaves coming in, one bearing a tray of food and a new candle for the nook. The other emptied the contents of the buckets into a larger pail and promptly leaving without so much as looking at Steve or Cam. Breakfast appeared to consist of a hunk of bread and the same thin, brown gruel he’d been served yesterday.

“Hey,” Steve said by way of greeting as Cam stretched spindly arms above his head and rolled over. “Food’s here.”

“’M not hungry,” Cam mumbled into his pallet and pulled his arms over his head.

“You should eat something,” Steve encouraged.

“I can’t,” the boy protested weakly. “My stomach…I’m too...if I eat, I’ll get sick. If I get sick, Master Zola won’t send me tonight, and I don’t go, he’ll punish me or sell me or…I don’t know. I have to go. I have to do good,” Cam said, running his hands through his hair. “I’m not going to do good, am I? Oh, God, I’m going to mess up, I know it. I know I am. I am. I’m…you said it was okay, right? With the King, I mean? You said it was alright,” he rushed out in an anxious, hitching voice.

“Yes,” Steve replied. It was both the truth and a lie, but it was the only answer he knew to give. Was this really kinder, he wondered. And who was it kinder to, him or the boy? He grimaced and took a sip of the bowl of whatever it was someone had mixed up into a porridge, then almost spit it out again, but made himself eat. His stomach rebelled, momentarily, but he closed his eyes and drew in a breath and managed to keep it down.

“Oh. Okay. Well. Lord Stane, he’s—he was Lord Protector while the King was young, after the old King and Queen died, so…so, probably, the King is a lot like Lord Stane, since Lord Stane kind of raised him, don’t you think?” Cam asked, sitting up on his elbows on the pallet. Steve tossed him a chunk of the hard bread, which the boy caught against his stomach. “So, he’s probably nice, huh?”

Steve looked at the boy’s eager, hopeful face, flattened his mouth and gave a small nod before looking away. The day was going to be difficult enough on the boy without adding to it.

“Hey, you going to tell me your name?” Cam asked, tearing off such a big bite of bread with his teeth that the last of his question came out muffled.

“Steve,” Steve replied. “My name is Steve.”

“Is it true you’re a soldier?” Cam asked, chewing hard enough that Steve could see his whole jaw putting in the effort. “I heard some of the others talking.”

“I—yes,” Steve began, a pang of sadness knocking in the back of his throat. Regret tasted about as good as this food, Steve thought. But, the boy was eating and distracted, and that might be the only things Steve could offer him this day. “I did have a sword. And a horse. And armor.”

“Did you fight a lot of battles? Did you have a sword? And a horse? And armor?” Cam asked, the questions coming out in an overflow of words with the sudden, ferocious curiosity of youth.

“I—yes,” Steve began, a pang of sadness knocking in the back of his throat. Regret tasted about as good as this food, Steve thought. But, the boy was eating and distracted, and that might be the only things Steve could offer him this day. “I did have a sword. And a horse. And armor. I fought in many battles. And I had a shield. Round,” Steve continued, holding out his arm in front of him. “About this big,” he explained, drawing a large circle in the air. “Made of a special metal, unlike any other. A long time ago, where I’m from, a star that fell to earth. It burned nearly all the way
up as it fell, leaving a long, white tail across the sky, and when it landed, it cracked open and all
that remained of the star was inside. It was a metal unlike anything anyone had seen before. The
villagers who found it brought the metal to the king—we had a king, then, though he was the last
who called himself that—anyway, the king said it was to be made into a shield, because that was
what a leader was for his people. A shield. But, the smith who was tasked with working the metal,
he couldn’t get the metal to do anything, even though he was the best in all the land.”

“How…how did he make the shield then?” Cam questioned, eyes wide, hand hovering in front of
his mouth where it held a forgotten piece of bread.

“They say the king brought in all manner of alchemists and smiths, and none could work the
metal,” Steve told him, warming to the familiar story. “So, in desperation, the king called for a
shadowcaster from the East, who spoke spells into the fire and bound the metal with her magics.”

“Did it work?” Cam asked eagerly.

“It did. And they painted it the king’s colors of red and blue and drew a white star on the center, to
mark where it came from,” Steve finished, then smiled, curling his hand into a fist. He could
almost feel the weight of it, so familiar was it in his mind, like an extension of his arm. A part of
him.

“And you—you carried this shield? How come you got to fight with it?” Cam asked, tilting his
head to the side with a little frown.

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it again and looked down at the bowl of brown in his lap.
Weariness seeped into him. He was suddenly cold, so cold that his skin prickled and he thought if
he breathed out, he would see his breath holding frost. He did it anyway. Of course, there was
nothing. Just air. The sensation past, but the tiredness remained.

“I don’t know,” Steve answered finally. That might have been the only truly honest thing he’d told
the boy all morning, he thought grimly. I carried it, because no one would take it from me, except
at the end, when everything was gone and it was done. Maybe this was the price for winning, a
balance that had to be struck. Maybe they knew that, he thought with a dull sort of horror.

“How’d you end up here?” Cam asked.

“There was…I was…the ship I was on, it sank. I almost went down with it, but somehow…
somehow, I didn’t, and then…Next thing I remember, I was on some raider ship, shoved into a
hold with more people than I could count,” Steve told him. He didn’t tell him that when someone
got sick, they dropped them overboard and how you could hear the splash, and how your stomach
said that was a little more food for you. He didn’t tell him about the sounds from the deck above,
when the crew would take some of their captives upstairs, or what they looked like when they were
returned, if they were, all hollow-eyed and broken. Today was the day for half-truths and kind lies,
he thought with a fissure of disgust curdling his stomach. “We ended up at the port. The overseer
from the slaver station there, he found me. Then Sitwell came.”

“Me, I was born a slave, but out in this village down the river. Bowerstown. Because it used to be
Lord Bowers seat until he sided against the Starks back in the war. They tried to change the name,
but it never took. I grew up there. Me and my mom. It was nice. Our master, he was good to us.
He died, though, and his kids sold me to a banker for his household,” Cam said matter-of-factly.
“But, then Lord Sitwell came and he bought me and a couple of others. We got to ride in a wagon
the whole way here. Never thought I’d see the city, and definitely not the castle. My mom, she
was from here, and she’d tell me stories about it sometimes. She said, once, the old king, he held a
big festival and people came from all over to see. She said they shot off these big canons, and it
was so loud, it made her head ring, and, these canons, they made stars in all different colors fall from the sky. Can you imagine? You think the King would do something like that? I’d sure like to see it.”

“What happened to the others?” Steve asked.

“Huh?” Cam said, blinking.

“The others who came with you?” Steve said.

“Oh. I don’t know. I think I saw Millie, the girl, here at first. Duncan got sent away. Lord Sitwell said he’d been bad, and the banker had lied about it. I don’t know. He seemed nice to me. He cried a lot,” Cam said with a shrug and went back to chewing on the bread before picking up the bowl of gruel and sniffing it suspiciously, then setting it aside. Steve sat his bowl down, too, and leaned his head back against the stone wall behind the pallet, before pulling his shoulders back and looking across the small room at the boy, now wolfing down the last of the bread.

“Listen…whatever—whatever happens tonight, it’ll be okay. Just—you’ll be okay,” Steve husked out, trying to sound like he was sure of it.

“You’ll be here, right? When I get back. You—you’re gonna be here, right?” Cam pressed.

“I’ll be here,” Steve replied.

“Good. Okay. Good,” Cam said, picking a bit off the top of the bread, though not eating it, just rolling it around between his fingers. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” Steve said, his gut twisting on the hopelessness in the boy’s words. “It’s okay to be scared.”

“My mom said I should be brave. When I left. That’s what she said,” Cam told him, still staring down at the crumb of bread between his fingers. “But, I’m not. Soldiers, people like you, they’re brave. I’m just—I’m what I am.”

“Anyone can pick up a sword or put on armor. That doesn’t make you a soldier. Brave men are scared all the time,” Steve said after a long beat of silence. “And a soldier, if he’s any kind of soldier, is far more scared than most.”

“Yeah?” Cam asked, lifting his eyes to Steve’s.

“Yeah. They just do what has to be done anyway,” Steve replied. “That’s what makes them brave. And if they put themselves on the line to protect others, that’s what makes them soldiers.”

“Oh. Okay. I never thought of it like that,” Cam said with a jerky little nod. He gave Steve a lopsided smile even as he wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. “Sword would be nice, though.”

“Yeah,” Steve replied with a small huff of agreement. “Yeah, it would.”

“Slaves can’t wield weapons, though. On penalty of death. It’s the law,” the boy added, as if reciting by rote.

“Do you know why that is?” Steve asked.

“I guess because…they might hurt someone?” Cam said with a small frown.
“Because a man who holds a sword in his hand has a choice. And that’s what freedom is, when you get down to it. That’s where it starts, anyway. With a choice,” Steve replied, while Cam studied him with large, brown eyes that held far too much trust. “Also, you might hurt someone,” Steve finished with a small smile that the boy returned.

They were quiet for a long time, the silence only broken by the occasional question or stilted attempt at conversation. What else was there to say? They were both waiting. The door finally opened some hours later, and both of them turned, blinking at the brighter light spilling in from the hallway. Three flower-crested guards were standing outside, along with three attendants holding torches that they stuck through the hooks in the wall, Zola, who flitted into the room on a sway of robes, and one of the overseers Steve recognized from yesterday’s ministrations.

“Up, up!” Zola said, clapping his hands together. “You, go on now and get ready for tonight. You’ll do well, I’m sure, but we mustn’t keep Lord Stane waiting. Ah, the white robe for him, of course. Yes, that will do nicely. Off you go,” Zola tittered as one of the attendants took Cam by the shoulders and led him out. The boy gave a quick, furtive look over his shoulder at Steve, who lifted his chin in a silent salute, while a burning rage clawed its way up his spine. There was nothing he could do that wouldn’t get both of them killed, not with thousands of guards and an entire city between them and any chance of freedom, but the urge to do something, anything, was almost overwhelming.

“As for you…” Zola began, cupping a hand under his chin and looking Steve up and down. “Get him prepped. I think the blue with his skin and those eyes, don’t you?”

“Hmmm, yes,” the overseer agreed with seemingly little interest, though the remaining attendant rushed forward to hold out a blue swath of fabric for Zola’s examination. “Turn, put your hands on the wall and spread your legs.”

Steve stared at him for a long moment, then slowly turned and put the flat of his palms against the wall. He spread his legs apart and stared at the stone in front of him. The grooves looked a bit like rivers on a map, if he squinted.

“Wider,” the overseer said. Steve shifted his legs further apart. “Good. Be still.”

He was still. His fingers scraped into the wall, but that was the only movement he allowed himself. His stomach twisted into a knot, but he kept his breaths even and steady. Only when the overseer’s fingers were replaced did he move, rocking forward as the object was pushed into him. Steve bit the inside of his lip, hard, to stifle a cry of pain. It hurt. More than yesterday. A bright, blindingly sharp sting that burned its way deep inside him. The thing wasn’t as slick as before, and he was sore. When he looked over at Zola, he thought the man knew that. This was about punishment, then. For speaking up about the trebuchet, probably, even though it seemed to have gotten the King’s attention, strangely enough. Zola would still see it as disobedience, even if it worked to his advantage.

“Be still, I said,” the overseer admonished roughly and pushed the thing in hard, then again and again, and Steve grunted, trying to hold his feet under him as the man worked him open. Then it was done, and the pressure left with a swift jerk. Steve let out a breath he hadn’t meant to be holding and clamped his jaw shut and held his head up, staring forward until Zola finally ordered him to turn around. The overseer gave Steve’s shaft a few, hard strokes, then lifted his balls and pulled them through a metal ring before sliding his cock through and settling the ring at the base. The blue wrap came next, tying simply in a knot in the front.

“Good,” Zola remarked, sounding pleased. “I suspect your mouth will be quite too busy tonight to speak out of turn, but should the occasion present itself, I trust you have learned the benefits of
controlling your tongue? What was that?” Zola said, when Steve didn’t answer.

“Yes, Master,” Steve finally replied, keeping his tone as bland and even as possible.

“See? And Sitwell thought he couldn’t be trained,” Zola laughed. “Come, now. Lord Hammer is no doubt waiting. He’s a guest of Lord Stane and will be attending the party later this evening, but he can enjoy you first, and then perhaps again later, if he chooses.”

Steve’s stomach turned over a bit at that, though he held Zola’s gaze. Swallowed. Soldiers, he thought. We are the shield for those who cannot raise a sword. “I could attend the party with Lord Hammer. I could…provide whatever was needed. Instead of the boy. I would…attend to both Lord Hammer and Lord Stane and…whoever else might require it,” Steve offered, keeping his eyes on Zola. Pick me. Choose me. Let me do this. Please. Let me do something, in all of this, something that matters.

“Noble,” Zola said, brushing his hand across the front of his robe, as if removing imagined dirt. “Stupidly futile, of course. The boy will be put to use, whether it is tonight or some other time. But, I’m afraid, even were I inclined to consider your offer, you are not Lord Stane’s preferred choice of companionship, shall we say? Now, time to go. I suggest you remember your manners tonight. Lord Hammer is known to have something of a temper when he is displeased.”

Steve had no choice but to follow Zola and the guards, though the route they took was entirely different than the one they had taken the night before.

“This way,” Zola said, waving them forward as he approached a wood-paneled door flanked by a torch on either side. He knocked, and a muffled shout offered entry.

“Lord Hammer,” Zola acknowledged, giving a sweeping bow to a man lounging in an ornately carved chair with booted feet propped up on the table in front of him. The room was a splash of color to Steve’s eyes, with silks and heavy velvets intermingled, gilded candlesticks and filigreed trays, shell-covered boxes and a series of painted banners on the far wall with naked figures engaged in various acts that didn’t even quite register for what they were until Steve looked again. “As requested,” Zola said, turning to Steve with a pointed drop of his gaze to the floor. One of the guards nudged at the backs of Steve’s knees with his foot, and Steve sank to his knees next to Zola, biting back the flash of annoyance that came with it. “The King quite enjoyed him last night,” Zola added.

“That so?” Lord Hammer asked, sliding his feet off the table and dropping them to the floor with a quick thud. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and spread his legs wide, peering down at Steve across the room. “Did the King get you all broken in?” He titled his head to the side and poked his tongue against his cheek, then made a popping sound with his mouth, threw back his head and laughed.

There was something wrong with this man, Steve thought. Wrong in a way that sent a fissure of unease down his spine that settled in his gut and stewed there, roiling and hot. Zola was cruel and had found a place in this world that allowed that cruelty to flourish, but this man…this man was wrong. This was a show for him, and Steve was playing some kind of part here, he knew, but he didn’t know what it was. It wasn’t going to end well for him, though, of that much he was certain.

Lord Hammer stood up with a sudden flourish and side-stepped his way on odd, mincing little steps over to where Steve knelt. He grasped Steve’s chin and lifted it up, holding it there.

“Ooooh, he’s a pretty one, isn’t he? Thought Tony liked them a little rougher around the edges, if you know what I mean,” Hammer said, raising his eyebrows and pulling his mouth into a moue of
false distaste. “He ask you to hold him down, get a little rough? I hear he likes that. Or he did when Stone was around. God, those were good times, weren’t they?”

“Indeed,” Zola agreed. “I do miss Lord Stone’s patronage, though replacing my inventory so quickly was becoming a challenge.”

“Speaking of, where’d you find this one? Some pleasure house teach him to clench up and Sitwell fall for it again?” Hammer asked. He dropped his hand from Steve’s chin and walked over to flop down on a small, tufted divan, plucking a peacock feather from a vase and waving it around in the air.


“Rumlow’s? God, Zola, you think I want my dick to fall off? I’ve seen the shit that comes out of there. Dregs of fucking humanity, is what,” Hammer scoffed. “I wouldn’t let my dog fuck one of Rumlow’s. Well. I would. But, I’d feel badly for the dog,” he said, lips curling around the words.

“He wasn’t one of Rumlow’s. Not really. Came in on a raider ship. They fished him out of the sea, to hear Jasper tell the story. Half frozen and clinging to part of a ship. Rumlow just took him off of their hands. He caused a bit of a ruckus, apparently, and Rumlow got him for a song,” Zola explained.

“And just what kind of ruckus did you cause that made the raiders so eager to get rid of you?” Hammer asked drolly, swishing the feather back and forth and then jabbing it in the air like a sword.

“I put a hole in their ship,” Steve replied.

“A hole in their ship? Well, that would’ve pissed them off. Not too bright, are you? Lucky they didn’t tie you to the masthead and let the crows pick your eyes out while you die of thirst. I hear that’s what they do, you know. Leave you there to rot as a warning to others. How’d you manage to put a hole in their ship, anyway?” Hammer questioned.

“Mostly with their Captain’s head,” Steve said evenly.

Hammer twisted his head to stare at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing, slapping his hands on his thighs in some strange mimicry of delight.

“Oh, I like him! Has a bit of a mouth on him, doesn’t he? He’s going to be fun. Did the King like you? I’ll bet he did. I’ll bet,” Hammer continued, pushing himself to a sitting position on the divan. “I’ll bet Tony liked you a *lot*. Did he like you a *lot*? Did he like your mouth?” Hammer asked in a low voice threaded with something that set Steve’s teeth on edge. “I’ll bet he didn’t like it as much as I will. Tony has such a reputation, but he’s never quite known how to properly enjoy his amusements. He’d rather play with his little toys. Build his *machines*, he calls them. Fanciful nonsense, I say. As if what I provide the Crown isn’t sufficient,” Hammer sneered.

This wasn’t about him, Steve realized. This was about the King and whatever it was between Hammer and the King. Some kind of rivalry or enmity between them that Steve was swept up in for no reason other than the King’s notice, and because Hammer could do this to Steve, when he couldn’t do anything to the King other than hurl insults the King would never hear.

“Your work is well renowned, Lord Hammer. Respected the kingdom over. I hear the whispers of the generals and the Council, you know. If the King fails to properly appreciate it, well…” Zola trailed off with an obsequious little bow of his head. “I’ll leave you to it, then, shall I? Should you
require anything further, I am your most humble servant, as always,” Zola vowed, while Hammer gave him a disinterested wave.

Steve heard the door close behind him a moment later, though he kept his eyes on the carpet in front of Hammer’s boots. His heart was thudding a staccato beat in his chest, and he was strangely conscious of the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and out, each breath more difficult than the last, as if a vice was slowly tightening. He could do this, he told himself firmly. He could get through this. For Cam’s sake, if not his own. The boy shouldn’t return to an empty room because Steve couldn’t handle whatever it was Hammer wanted of him. It was just…what it was. He could just let it happen. He didn’t even have to think about it. It would almost be like it wasn’t happening at all.

“Come here,” Hammer ordered, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. Steve started to rise. “Eh, no. No reason to get up. Crawl.” He made a short, whistling sound and pointed at the spot between where his knees were splayed, then snapped his fingers, twice.

I could kill him, Steve thought as he bent low and put his hands to the ground. Hammer was Stane’s guest, according to Zola. Which meant Cam would be here, somewhere. I could kill Hammer, find Cam and then somehow get us both past the hundreds of royal guards between murdering a peer of the Realm and any shot at freedom.

As plans went, it wasn’t his best, Steve admitted to himself as he crawled over to where Hammer sat. It was pleasant to think about though. He thought he might think about it a lot in the next few minutes. Thinking about killing Hammer might be the only thing that kept Steve alive in the next few minutes. We’ve moved a bit beyond hoping for a glimpse of the sea, haven’t we, Rogers, he thought.

“I always have Zola bring them after Tony’s done, see?” Hammer said as Steve sat up on his knees in front of him. Hammer reached out and ran a hand through Steve’s hair. “They get all…awed or some shit. Being fucked by the King, like he’s wearing a God-damned crown on his cock. Then, they come here, and they get to see what it’s like when someone who knows what he’s doing, who knows what they really need, fucks them. Do you know what you need?” Hammer asked, trailing his hand down Steve’s throat and wrapping it around his neck. Steve could feel the light buzz of panic as Hammer squeezed, just enough, before letting go and dropping his hand down to Steve’s chest to flick at a nipple, making Steve wince. A small, pleased smile lit Hammer’s face. “You need to know what it feels like when real power, not some stupid accident of birth—some damn name—but real, true power takes you. Splits you open. Comes down your throat until you choke on it.”

The other nipple. Steve didn’t move this time. Hammer’s hand went to the front of his breeches, working the ties open.

“That’s what you need. That’s what they all need. Oh, they beg and cry and please, don’t m’lord, and God, they just need to shut up. You’re not going to do that, though, are you? No, not you. You’re just going to take it, aren’t you? Take all of this,” Hammer said, pulling his cock out of his breeches.

Steve eyes dropped to Hammers’ lap, and he felt a wild surge of hysterical laughter threaten to spill over. He was not going to laugh. Was not. If he laughed, this man would kill him. He had no doubt of that. Not today, maybe. Not right now. But, he would see that it happened, and that it happened in a way that was probably beyond Steve’s ability to imagine the horror of it. And Zola would see that Cam shared Steve’s fate.

“When they leave me, they’re changed. Different,” Hammer sniffed. He pushed his fingers
through Steve’s hair again and cupped the back of his head, twisting Steve’s hair into his fist. “You’ll see. Now, open your mouth. Don’t worry, don’t worry, I know what you’re thinking, but you can take it all. No choice, really. I’ll fuck your face and then let you ride me. Did Tony do that for you? He didn’t, did he? He wouldn’t. See? See? You see, he doesn’t know what you need, I keep telling him, but he doesn’t listen. He never listens to me,” Hammer grated out. Steve felt the hand in his hair give a sharp, brutal twist and jerk him forward. Hammer’s other hand came up to cup Steve’s chin. His thumb traced the seam of Steve’s mouth, then pulled down. “Open,” Hammer ordered, his eyes narrowing on Steve.

Don’t see him, Steve told himself. He isn’t there. This isn’t happening. Except, Steve could smell the man. Sweat and drink and odor, and he wondered if he could close his eyes, but he might mess up, and God, he didn’t know what to do. He’d never done this, not really, just Rumlow shouting at him while Steve tried to breathe. He wouldn’t be able to do this, he knew it. He’d choke or forget his teeth or worse, he’d throw up, and this one, he’d make sure Steve paid for that. Steve’s head was pounding a drumbeat that kept getting louder and louder as Hammer brought Steve’s head down to his lap.

“What the hell, Zola?” Hammer spat out, dropping his hand from Steve’s hair and tossing it into the air in obvious annoyance as Zola rushed into the room with barely a quick nod meant to suffice as a bow. “There had better be a good explanation for this. We’re just getting star—hey!” Hammer snapped in surprise as Zola walked over and grasped Steve’s shoulder, pushing him back on his heels. Zola looked harried, to say the least, Steve noted. His robes were askew where the pin at his shoulder had loosened to let the front gape open. A sheet of sweat coated his brow and his wispy hair was sticking up in places.


“What kind of fucking mistake do you—“ Hammer began.

“The King wants him. He sent for him, and I wasn’t there and—sorry. I’ll send you some of my best to make up for the inconvenience, Lord Hammer, but—“ Zola shrugged.

“The King already had him,” Hammer said, his face pulling in surprise.

“Well, he wants him again. I didn’t think, but,” Zola said, shaking his head and waving a dismissive hand, all earlier pretense of deference to Hammer seemingly forgotten. “Here we are.”

“You can’t just—look, tell Tony, this one’s with me, and you’ll send him along when I’m through. Tony’s like a brother to me. We practically grew up together. Brothers share, am I right? That’s what we do. Tony’ll be fine with it, you’ll see,” Hammer suggested. “Just tell him that I said—“

“Lord Hammer. The King, our King—you may have noticed his banners flying over the city or perhaps caught a peek of his crest on the armor of his guards you’ve seen walking up and down the hall outside? Well, the King is difficult to please in the best of times, not for lack of trying on my part, I assure you,” Zola muttered, taking a deep breath. “Half the time, he ignores who I send and, on at least a dozen occasions, I am nearly completely certain he was so consumed by whatever it was he was doing that he did not realize they were there. Do you know how many times the King has asked me for a specific concubine? Not once. In his life, Lord Hammer. Until this evening. When he told me to bring fetch this one,” Zola said. “So, no. I will not tell the King to wait.”

“Fine,” Hammer said with a frown. He flopped down on the divan and tucked himself back inside his breeches, then crossed his arms and looked up at Zola with as much arrogance as Steve figured a man who had just been told his opinion didn’t much matter could muster. “They better be good.
Not like last time. She could barely take all of me.”

“I shall see to the selection personally, my Lord,” Zola assured him. He smoothed a hand over his waxy head, trying pat down his flyaway hair. “You. This way,” Zola ordered, waving a hand for Steve to follow him.

Yet another route twisted through the castle this time, though Steve recognized the winding stairs that led up to the King’s apartments as soon as they reached them. Zola took a huffing breath when they reached the hallway that Steve remembered from the prior evening and cast a sharp, studying look at Steve.

“You are here for the King’s pleasure. Nothing else. I trust you will remember that. The King has no interest in the…trivial matters of my position,” Zola said in a low voice. “If the King is happy, then I am, of course, happy. And if he is not, for some…reason, well…let’s just say it is in your interest to keep both of us happy,” Zola told him. “Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Steve replied.

“Yes…?” Zola repeated, looking up at him with an arched brow, crossed his hands at the wrists and waited. Steve stared at him until the smaller man’s mouth flattened into a thin line and his jaw worked his teeth together. He stepped closer to Steve and leaned in close. “The King will tire of you. Maybe after tonight. Maybe after the next night. But, he will. And I’ll be here. Waiting. Ask yourself, are these little rebellions really worth it? For you, perhaps, but the boy…” Zola said, making a tsking sound through his teeth. “Pride is such a petty reason for suffering, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Master,” Steve said, then clamped his jaw together and looked somewhere over Zola’s shoulder where a statute of a knight raised his shield to ward off a dragon’s stone fire.

“Good. Then, off we go,” Zola replied, clapping his hands together. They reached the doors to the King’s chambers and Zola rapped his knuckles against the wood. Steve looked up at the crest carved above the door. A burning heart. And the Stark motto in the old tongue below it. Aga Dvara Banavati. Forged by fire.

A guard opened the door and stepped back to allow them to pass. The room was much the same as Steve remembered it from last night, though this time, he spared a moment to look around. He had Lord Hammer’s chamber to compare it to, now, and this was…different. Far more lavish in many ways, with its fine fabrics and beautifully done furnishings, but, Steve noticed, nothing was for show, the way Hammer’s room seemed designed to showcase whatever it was Hammer hoped to convince people of. It was a chamber fit for a King, and, had he had anything of value, Steve would have bet that the King hadn’t chosen a single thing in there. The antechamber, though, that told a different story, Steve thought as he followed Zola in that direction. This was where the King lived. You could see it in every corner and pile, in the way the walls hung with bits and pieces and tools of every sort Steve recognized and then some.

“Finally,” the King said from his position on his back on the floor underneath some kind of—of something. Steve’s mind couldn’t quite grasp what it was to try to place it. Some kind of massive hand crank attached to a wheel next to a mounted, rotating cannon. The King sat up and brushed his hands against his pants, though a smear of grease was left streaked down his cheek.

“Your Highness, I was so pleased to get your message. As you know, I strive to always provide the very best—” Zola said, dipping into a deep bow and giving Steve a nudge with his hand as he swept it back behind him. Right, kneel, Steve reminded himself, dropping to his knees.

“Get out,” the King cut in, holding a hand up in the air in front of Zola’s face. Zola snapped his
mouth shut and bowed.

“Of course, Your Highness, I completely understand your eagerness,” Zola replied with an oily, sycophantic smoothness.

“Seriously, why are you still here?” the King demanded, snapping his fisted hands together, then popping his fingers apart, his mouth twisting into an exasperated frown. Zola looked up at him in surprise, turned and practically ran out of the room.

“Let me see your hands,” the King said, standing up and walking over to stand in front of Steve, who looked up at him in bewilderment. Steve held out his hands in front of him. The King took one in his grasp, then dropped it and ran a hand through his hair, leaving a smudge of grease just above his temple. “Obviously, too big. Goes without saying. What was I thinking? Stupid. I need small hands. Damn it. I’m this close…this close! My kingdom for small hands!” the King shouted, turning toward whatever it was he was working on and raising his hands towards the ceiling before letting them fall back down to his sides with a grunt.

“I…I know someone. A boy. Cam. He shares a room with me at Zola’s,” Steve said, watching the King’s back carefully. “He has very small hands. Steady. Careful. I’m sure he could…help with…your project, but, he was sent to Lord Stane’s tonight. For a party. If you sent for him,” Steve continued, the words falling slowly, carefully from his lips. His heart was racing, pounding so loudly, he was surprised the King couldn’t hear it. “If you sent for him, I’m sure he could help.”

The King turned around to look at him, held up a fist and shook it, then walked out of the room. When he came back, he dropped a flat pillow in front of Steve, sat down at the table in the center of the room, picked up a piece of parchment and held it up in front of candle. Steve could see some kind of design on the other side. His first thought was a large turtle, like the big ones the fishermen talked about, gentle giants that the merfolk used to pull their chariots, they said. That wasn’t right, of course. The design was clearly something else. And yet, it was right, too. In some way that Steve couldn’t quite fathom. He looked over at the hand crank and cannon. It goes inside, he thought. And the shell on top. Four of those cranks with men sitting inside to turn them, and the thing could move. Move and fire and be covered. Safe from the rain of deadly arrows and mortars that flew from above. It was amazing. He had never seen anything like it, never thought of anything like it, and yet he could see at once the advantage.

“Did you ask Zola—“ Steve started.

“Anyone ever told you, you’re prettier when you’re quiet?” the King said without looking up.

Steve clamped his mouth shut and pulled the flat pillow under his knees. Having nothing else to do, he watched the King as he put the strange parchment down and started making large slash marks across it with a slim piece of charcoal, then picked up a quill and began making other, more careful marks. Steve looked over at the wheel again, then back at the King.

“The wheel’s too thin,” Steve said.

The King looked up at him and rolled his eyes, then went back to the parchment.

“I know the wheels are too thin,” the King snapped just over sixty heartbeats later, because Steve had been counting. The King sighed. Dropped his quill and leaned back in his seat. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Steve with a blazing sort of intensity, as if he had just suddenly realized Steve was there. “So, tell me. Soldier. Why are the wheels too thin?”
“Mud,” Steve replied. “I’ve seen those get stuck more times than I can count, and under that weight,” Steve said, nodding at the parchment, “The wheels will sink.”

“Mud,” the King repeated with a nod. “Which is why this,” he continued, holding up a long sheet of metal that had large ridges bisecting it. It attached to another, similar sheet and then another, so the whole piece curved around into almost a circle. “Is going to go around the wheels, and that gear there, the one that is currently refusing to cooperate, will run it in a continuous loop. Like…a caterpillar’s legs. One after the other after the other,” the King explained. “Any other…design issues that you feel the need to bring to my attention? Questions? Concerns? Allow me to alleviate them, please. That is what I’m here for. I have all the time in the world.”

“No,” Steve said quickly and looked down at the floor.

“Nothing? You’re sure? Because I want to be sure you’re comfortable with the design before I proceed,” the King pressed. Steve looked up. The King was watching him with a look of wry amusement, but his eyes were sharp, gleaming with challenge.

“The slope of the armor on top will help deflect the impact of projectiles,” Steve said in slow, halting words.

“Yes,” the King nodded.

“But…you want a crossbowman in there,” Steve continued, letting the image fill his head.

“Why?” the King asked, cocking his head to the side.

“To keep cavalry off it,” Steve replied.

“Exactly. And?” the King asked.

“The arch is too low for the crossbowman to reload and rotate efficiently,” Steve said, feeling the certainty of it click.

“You’re prettier when you’re quiet,” the King remarked, almost idly, then leaned back over the table and picked up the quill. “The arch is too low for the crossbowman. Need to keep the weight down so the damn thing rolls, and keep the armor sloped enough to deflect your projectiles,” the King murmured, drawing out the word. “So, something more like this, then,” he said, holding up a different piece of parchment with a far more conical design, which he had clearly already drawn with the issue in mind. “Ah, good,” the King said, hopping up all of a sudden. “Small hands. You, here,” he said, pointing at the gear next to the large wheel base.

If he hadn’t already been on his knees, Steve thought he might have gone to them. His whole body sagged with relief, going liquid and boneless. Hot spikes pricked at the corner of his eyes. He drew in a ragged breath and let it out again. He had done something. He had mattered. God, it had been so long, so very long, since anything he had done had made a difference to anyone.

Cam.

The boy looked over at him and gave a small, furtive wave, then went down on his knees and bowed his head before the King. “My L—Highness. Your my Highness—I—“ Cam stammered, shooting a horrified, anguished look at Steve before going back to studying his feet.

“Eh, no, none of that. Come on now, up with you,” the King said quickly. “Well, not up. More like, down, but over here. I need you to reach—yes, there, can you feel in the gear? There should be a small, interlocking cross-piece that is, rather determinedly, not interlocking. I need you to
push it through this opening here, see? And then we’re going to add a bolt and mortis it into the side piece, like…this. Good,” the King said. “Excellent. Hold it there. Now…don’t move it,” the King said. He got down on his hands and knees next to Cam, and a moment later sprung up with a grin. “Outstanding. Good lad. You did very well,” he said, patting Cam lightly on the back as he pushed himself up and walked back over to sit down at his work table. “Eh, don’t go anywhere just yet, Small Hands. Come over here.”

Cam walked over to where the King sat and stood with his eyes on the floor, shuffling a bit back and forth on his feet.

“So. That one over there tells me you share a room with him back at Zola’s,” the King said. He picked up his quill and sorted through the stack of papers on his table until he found a small ream of parchment and put the quill to it. “That true?”

“Y—yes. Your Highness,” Cam replied in a whisper.

“Your name is Cam, right?” the King asked. Cam nodded. “Is he demanding? He is, isn’t he? Always wanting you to fetch him treats from the kitchens, fan him all day so he doesn’t break a sweat, tell him how fine he looks, that sort of thing?” the King asked, waggling his eyebrows a bit at Cam.


“Yes, well, he does that talking thing a lot, doesn’t he?” the King asked, giving Steve a side-eyed look. Then he smiled at Cam, almost gently. “Steve, huh?” the King said, raising an eyebrow and glancing over at Steve. “Does he talk your ear off? Bothersome, isn’t it? I know, I know. Say no more. Complete agreement from me,” the King continued as he wrote. Cam shot a helpless, confused look over at Steve. “Now, listen. This is important. When you get back to your room, I want you to draw a bath for him. Nice and hot, alright? And give this to Zola,” the King said, rolling up the parchment he’d been writing on. He dropped a spot of red wax on the seam and picked up his seal. He pushed the seal into the hot wax, then blew it cool and handed it to Cam.

“But, before you do that, take this,” the King said, pulling a piece of silver out from his breast pocket. “Down to the kitchens and show it to the fattest man you’ve ever seen in your life. Don’t give it to the greedy bastard. This is for you to keep, okay? Just show it to him. He’ll understand. Tell him to make you a tray of sweets. Lemoncakes, tarts, berries—don’t let him skimp on the cream, because he will—with my thanks for your assistance tonight and my apologies for taking you away from your party. Obie always goes to excess when he has guests, and I’m sure you had your heart set on some leftovers, but this way, no clean up. So even better, yes?”

“Y—yes,” Cam said, reaching out to pluck the silver coin from the King’s hand, while Steve dropped his eyes to the floor so the King wouldn’t see his expression. Was it possible that the King truly did not know about Stane and his…preferences? Or was this some obfuscation meant to gloss over the behaviors of a Lord that everyone accepted, but no one wanted to see acknowledged?

“You’ll take good care of him for me, won’t you?” the King asked, drawing Steve’s gaze back up. “Even though he talks a lot and forces you not only to listen, but probably scrub the scabs off his toes. Does he have scabby toes? Probably does. Let’s say he does anyway. Makes me feel better,” the King added. Steve watched Cam grin, then his eyes widen and the smile drop off his face, as if he had been caught doing something wrong. “Go on then, now. That’s a good lad.”

“Th—thank you, Your Highness,” Cam whispered, voice filled with a nervous awe.
Cam looked over once more at Steve, then darted out of the room, like he was afraid staying any longer would risk whatever had just happened. Steve couldn’t blame him. His own head was reeling. It felt a bit like the time he and Bucky got it in their heads to roll down the big hill out east of the pasture, which ended up with the two of them hurtling down towards O’Bannon’s cows, head over legs, like two small, shrieking rocks. When he finally rolled to a stop, Steve remembered looking up and seeing the sky spinning as fast as a top while a large, brown cow shoved her wet nose in his face and Bucky’s howls of laughter rang in his ears. It had taken his mind a long time to settle and catch up then, long enough for Bucky to proclaim that cow was Steve’s best shot at romance.

This whole evening as even more disconcerting. Less than an hour ago, he’d been kneeling in front of Hammer, certain he was going to end up damning both himself and Cam to some horrible fate and now, Cam was off to get lemoncakes. He couldn’t get his head around it all. Half of him was convinced he would wake up and find himself in the hot box with Rumlow kicking at the sides and all of this was some mad fever dream.

The King was hunched over the table, drawing something on the parchment, then stretching out his arm to scribble something on another piece, seemingly engrossed, again, in whatever it was he was doing. He would sometimes get up, almost in a frenzy, and rush over to do something on the gear or the cannon, then return to the parchment spread in front of him. Sometimes, he simply turned and looked at the apparatus sitting in his workshop for long stretches of time.

It went on like that. Steve wasn’t sure for how long. It seemed a long while. The fire was burning low and the candle on the table had dripped long rivulets of wax down the sides in slowly drying puddles. His legs were starting to ache from kneeling, though, admittedly, the pillow helped. Steve remembered Zola’s words to Hammer about the King sometimes failing to leave his projects long enough to notice the concubines Zola provided and wondered if he had been forgotten or if the King had simply lost interest.

“Take that off,” the King said.

Steve’s head shot up in surprise. The King wasn’t looking at him, still peering over his papers, though now with a large book open on the table in front of him. Not forgotten, then, Steve thought. He looked down, then slowly undid the knot on the front of the loincloth and let it fall away, leaving him naked, save for the bands of metal that circled his cock and balls and the collar that rested around his throat. He dropped his hands to his sides and glanced up. The King was reaching for another book from the shelf behind him, seemingly absorbed in whatever he was doing. Then, so fast that Steve almost missed it, the King’s gaze flicked over to Steve, before going back to the book he started leafing through. Steve felt a sharp tug, low in his belly, just behind his cock and a sudden pooling of warmth there. He shifted his knees. The King’s lips twitched, just the barest of movements, though he didn’t take his eyes off the books and papers in front of him.

Again, the minutes stretched out. Steve watched the King. Waited. He wasn’t sure what he was waiting for, but the more time passed, the harder it was to keep still. It felt like there was a weight on his chest, making each rise and fall all the more difficult. A jittery, crawling sensation was coursing under his skin. The warm pressure in his gut seemed to spread, inching its way down his half-hard cock.

When the King finally did raise his eyes from his work, Steve felt the gaze like a sudden jolt that made his whole body stiffen and go rigid. Heat wiped its way across his skin as the King’s eyes settled on Steve’s own, then slowly worked their way down Steve’s body in a leisurely sort of inspection. The King leaned back in his chair and rubbed at his chin with one hand, then got up
and walked over to the long table that ran along the wall of the room. He opened a drawer, took something out and walked over to stand in front of Steve. He bent down and placed a small, round marble jar in front of Steve, then went back to his seat and moved the books out of the way, pulling one of the larger sheets of parchment in front of him and going back to writing out long lines across the page.

“Use that to stroke yourself,” the King told him as the quill scratched its way along the parchment.

Steve’s body jerked in surprise and something that wasn’t surprise bloomed bright and hot inside his chest. He let out a ragged breath and reached down to open the jar. A thick greasy substance was inside, though it was almost soft when Steve’s fingers touched it. He looked back up at the King, and found him still writing, apparently uninterested in watching what Steve was doing. Which was good, Steve told himself, though a searing heat twisted through his stomach that he recognized as shame. He’d done this before, of course. Even done it with others around. Soldiers found what solace they could in the field. Quiet, furtive moments when he could, with his hand over his mouth so no one would hear. Never like this, though. Never with someone who could see him, but was choosing not to, and somehow, that was both better and far worse.

He rubbed the substance on his hand and then coated his cock, giving it a long stroke. Then another. Another. He found a rhythm and worked his hand up and down his shaft. The King got up and went over to the wheel, pulling out some kind of pin and tossing it aside before going back to the table and grabbing another, slightly longer pin and replacing it. He didn’t look at Steve. Steve stroked himself. Long, slow strokes. He was getting harder, his cock straining at the metal band that wound around the base. He felt his balls draw up with a stinging sort of pressure where the band constricted around them. His hips jerked a bit and a small, breathy moan fell out of his mouth. He clamped his jaw shut and kept stroking. His cock was growing painfully hard in his hand, straining up, red and thick. The vein on the underside pulsed and throbbed.

A bead of moisture formed at the head of his cock. Then another, and soon, he was dripping with it, the fluid flowing down and mixing with the waxy substance. He grunted and closed his eyes against the waves of need that kept slamming into him on each stroke. He slowed his hand and tried to focus on breathing, but his cock was so hard and the band around the base was stretched painfully tight. He couldn’t think. He needed to come, but the metal bands around his cock and balls prevented any actual release. He looked up at the King and thought about asking. Begging, if he had to, though the King seemed unaware or unconcerned about Steve’s plight.

“Harder,” the King ordered. Steve’s head jerked up and his hips canted forward into the ring of his hand. The King still wasn’t looking at him, but Steve would have sworn his voice sounded strained. Rough. A little shaky, maybe. A pant of air burst out of Steve’s chest, and he let out a low groan, but his hand stroked harder, pumping his cock with fast, strong strokes. His shoulders hunched forward and he curled in on himself. His cock was full and leaking as his hand worked it. The skin was stretched and so sensitive now that each stroke of his hand burned a line of fire up and down the shaft. He groaned again and looked up at the King.

“Please,” Steve gasped. “Please, I—I need—please!” He moaned and squeezed his eyes shut, breathing out through his nose in a long, slow exhale. Steve heard the scrape of the King’s chair across the stone floor and a moment later, the King’s boots filled his line of vision. Steve looked up. “Please,” he begged, the word punched out of him in a long, high keen.

“Do you need to come?” the King asked. Steve nodded jerkily and choked on the breath he was trying to take in. The King knelt down in front of him and put his hand over Steve’s where it was stroking his cock, then drew it off and wrapped his own around the weeping head of Steve’s shaft. A low, throaty groan that was half sob tore from Steve’s lips. “That…looks very uncomfortable
for you. Being hard like this, needing release, but not being able to find it,” the King said in a hushed, silky voice. “How unfortunate something like that must be.”

Steve’s hips thrust against the King’s hand of their own accord and he heard pleas in his own voice, ragged and harsh, tumbling from his lips. The King ran his thumb up and down over the slit at the head of Steve’s cock, then traced his finger up the shaft and stopped on the band of metal at the base. He circled his fingers over the band, then pulled them all the way down along Steve’s cock, twisting his wrist around the head. Steve howled and leaned forward, one hand shooting out to catch himself before he fell over. The King leaned close to his ear and let go of Steve’s cock. Steve’s hips stuttered forward, seeking the friction again, and his body went taut, swollen cock jerking and pulsing as more beads of liquid dripped from the head.

“If you ever leave my bed without permission again, I’ll chain you to it,” the King told him as Steve’s eyes snapped to his, wide with shock. The King stood up then and walked back to his chair, sitting down and pulling out another volume from the stack of books while Steve looked on in mute helplessness. “You may go,” the King said without looking up from his book.

Steve blinked and gasped, folding over on himself on the floor. Horrified shame crashed into him. He had wanted it, begged for it. Even now, his mouth opened and closed around an entreaty. He looked down at himself, cock still dripping and straining for relief. He closed his eyes and sucked in a long, bracing breath, then slowly wrapped the loincloth around his hips. His cock jutted out against the fabric, and each move and stretch of the material over the overly-stimulated skin there felt like agony. He got to his feet on shaky legs and cast one last, quick look at the King. The King did not return it.

Steve limped out carefully, each step sending a cascade of want stabbing through his aching cock. He rubbed his palm over it and pressed down at the base, to no avail. One of the guards opened the door for him and he stepped out into the hallway, where two of Zola’s flower-crested guards waited to escort him back. He swallowed his embarrassment and tried to concentrate on walking without causing more of an issue. The guards didn’t seem concerned with Steve’s condition and nudged his shoulder to hurry him along. Back at Zola’s compound, they led him to his room and one of them lifted the long metal lockbar from the door, while the other gave Steve a hard shove inside.

Cam was waiting. Steve stood there for a long moment. He closed his eyes and tilted his head all the way back, then opened them and looked at the ceiling. He honestly had no idea what to feel. Bewilderment. Frustration. Amazement. Anger. Amusement. It all warred at once inside his head.

“Master Zola said I’m to be your attendant now. I made you a bath. Just like the King said. It was nice and hot, but, you were gone so long, I-I think it got cold now, though,” Cam said with an apology in his voice. “Sorry.”

Steve dropped his head down and shook it, rubbing his hands over his face. The laugh that burst out of him surprised both him and Cam, but once he got going, he found himself genuinely laughing for the first time in months. He wanted to grab the King and shake him until the damn man’s teeth rattled, sure, but Cam was here and not with Stane and whatever Hammer wanted was apparently going to wait for another day, and if the price of all that was a cold bath, then he supposed it was more than worth it. Even oddly...thoughtful. In a twisted sort of way, Steve acknowledged as he stripped down and stepped into the small metal tub, hissing at the cold water. Maybe thoughtful was the wrong word, Steve thought as he sank down into the tub. He had to pull his knees near to his chest to fit, but managed to make it work.
“Should I?” Cam asked, holding a small bottle of oil up.

Steve nodded, and the boy added the oil to the bath. Steve took the sponge that Cam offered and cleaned himself off. Quickly. His skin was already prickling with the cold, but it was doing its job. By the time he rinsed off and got out, his cock was hanging blessedly limp between his legs. Cam handed him a towel, and he wrapped it around his hips, then sat down on the pallet and leaned back against the wall.

“There’s some tarte left over, if you want it,” Cam offered, though Steve shook his head. “I think Master Zola was angry with the King,” Cam said after he straightened the few items he seemed to have been given charge of in his new role.

“I’d just bet he was,” Steve agreed with a grimace. “He won’t object. Zola. He’ll do what the King says. Which means you—you don’t need to worry, okay? For now, just keep your head down and stay out of Zola’s way, and let me—I’ll deal with the King and…whatever else there is.”

“Oh,” Cam said, dropping his eyes. “Okay.” He paused and glanced over at the tub before looking back at Steve, biting his lip before continuing. “I think maybe it’ll be okay. With the King, I mean. I met Lord Stane. At the party. Just for a few minutes, but—I think—I think maybe the King isn’t really all that much like Lord Stane after all,” he added in a hushed voice.

“No,” Steve said after a moment. “I don’t think he is, either. I don’t know what he’s like, to tell you the truth.”

“He seems nice,” Cam offered. “The King, I mean.”

“I’m currently imagining ways to torture the cruel bastard,” Steve grumbled, then caught Cam’s shocked expression. “I’m…I’m jesting, Cam. Mostly,” he amended, then smiled ruefully. “I think…I think he might be. Perhaps.”

“He likes you,” Cam added with an eager, bright grin. “I could tell.”

“Oh, yeah. And how could you tell that?” Steve asked with a huff of a laugh.

“He kept watching you. When you weren’t looking, he’d look over at you, and his face would do this thing,” Cam told him, making a terribly exaggerated expression of coquettish pining. “He said I was to take care of you for him. And he said you were pretty,” Cam reminded him.

“Yes, but he didn’t mean that,” Steve corrected.

“You should get some sleep,” Steve suggested. He lay down himself, though sleep didn’t come easily. His thoughts were too muddled, swirling around and smashing together like waves on rocks. He looked over at Cam, snoring softly where he curled on his pallet. At least, Steve thought, he had done something good in this God-forsaken place. For however long it lasted. That was the question though, wasn’t it? How long would this reprieve stand? Did the King really not realize Lord Stane’s depravity or was he only looking the other way to avoid a scandal? Or did he simply not care? They were only slaves, after all, and what king bothered with their fates unless it directly affected him? The King hadn’t been concerned with Steve, after all, except that he
hadn’t been available when he wanted him.

The King wanted him, Steve thought to himself with a small fissure of unease and...something else, something that unfurled low and hot in his belly that he tried to ignore. *If you ever leave my bed without permission again, I’ll chain you to it.* A shiver that had nothing to do with fear raced up Steve’s spine and his cock twitched against the soft towel. The King wanted him. For now. That much was sure. Had the King himself not said that he could be generous to those who pleased him? Perhaps that generosity could extend to Cam, Steve thought. If pleasing the King was what it took, he would do it, he told himself, even as the thought sent a low, pulsing throb spiking through him.

Steve rolled over and stared at the wall, letting his eyes fall shut. Duty. Sacrifice. A soldier’s way. Keep telling yourself that’s the only reason why you’re wondering if he’ll send for you tomorrow, some traitorous part of Steve’s mind whispered as his heart sped up. No! He didn’t want this. He didn’t want any of this. He wanted to go home, share his grief with Natasha, have Clint make them all smile, tell Sam what he could of this nightmare and let him tell Steve it would be alright, even if they both knew it was lie.

That was what he wanted. Home. Not hanging on to some thread of hope that the King might not be as horrible as he feared. He couldn’t stop his body from reacting, that much was made painfully clear tonight, but he could stop his mind from twisting an absence of cruelty into a kindness. The King wasn’t kind. He just wanted what he wanted from Steve, and when he was sated, he wouldn’t care what happened. Which meant keeping him interested for as long as possible and hoping some other option would present itself. Some tactical genius you are, Rogers, Steve thought with a silent reprimand that seemed to sound in Natasha’s voice. Cam, though, Steve thought as his mind flattened and went hazy. I did something. Something that mattered. Not enough, maybe, but something.

He slept, finally, long hours later, dreamless, until the metallic creak of the lockbar being lifted on the door woke him with a start. Zola entered, flanked by two guards, an attendant and Steve’s least favorite overseer. Steve went still. His stomach swooped, as if he was falling. A rush of cold swept over him and his hands balled into fists as his sides. His stomach churned with a sick, helpless hatred. There was a scream building in the back of his throat and it took all of his willpower to swallow it down. He looked over at Cam, feigning sleep on his pallet and was thankful, at least, for the boy’s sense.

“*The King wants you,*” Zola announced. He didn’t look especially pleased about it, either. Steve scrubbed a hand over his face and stood up, keeping the towel at his waist as he did. “*Come, come, hurry now,*” Zola urged, snapping his fingers for emphasis. “*No time. He’s in a mood.*”

Steve had a moment to wonder what Zola’s choice of words meant before overseer stepped forward and took the towel from Steve’s waist, handing it to the attendant, then reached down and pulled the ring off Steve’s cock and the other from around his balls. Steve held himself still, waiting for the command to turn around and face the wall. He could do this. It would be fine. It would hurt, but then it would be over. He sucked in a breath, felt his stomach recoil and let the breath out, slowly. He would be fine. Instead of an order, however, the attendant rushed forward with a swath of dark blue and wrapped it around Steve’s waist, knotting it in front. That was...it. Steve glanced over at Zola, who had his lips pursed in displeasure, but said nothing.

Steve followed Zola and the guards along the same route they had taken the first night, though Zola’s steps were hurried, almost a run, if such a man could run. A quick knock on the King’s door and it was thrown open by one of the King’s guards, who held up a hand as Zola started to enter.
“Not you,” the guard said. “Just him,” he told Zola, nodding at Steve. Zola shot an annoyed look at Steve, but bowed and murmured some politeness as the door closed in his face. “In there,” the guard told Steve.

Steve walked into the now-familiar antechamber, where the King was standing next to the large table, with both hands on his hips, frowning down at the line of cavalry figures sitting along his southern border. He turned as Steve entered.

“Eh, no, forget that. Come here,” the King snapped, sounding oddly distracted, waving a hand at him as Steve started to kneel. “Here. Now,” the King said again and moved a few paces around the table, then walked back to his original spot. Steve walked over to stand next to him and looked down at the table that seemed to be the source of the King’s agitation. The King looked over at him and his expression shifted, the consternation draining away and something light replacing it.

“Did you…enjoy your bath?” the King asked, curling his lip into his mouth before he could smile. His eyes lit up, crinkling at the edges. “I hear those are very good for relaxing. Was it relaxing?” Steve turned slowly to look at the man in disbelief. He was…teasing him. The King was teasing him. About last night. Steve glared at him. The King threw back his head and let out a bark of laughter, then clapped his hands together and pointed at the table in front of them.

“Tell me what you see,” the King ordered, though the sharpness had left his tone.

“Your…map table, Your Highness,” Steve answered with a confused frown. He looked again, harder, trying to figure out what it was the King expected him to see. It looked like a map table, just as it had the prior two nights.

“Yes, yes, my map table,” the King replied, rolling his eyes. “I knocked the pieces over the other night. I do that. Annoys Rhodey when I make light of his toys. And when I call them toys. Anyway, you,” the King said, drawing out the word. “You picked them up. Put them back. One of the guards saw you do it before you slunk out of here in the middle of the night totally without permission, which you won’t do again, even though you had a very relaxing bath,” the King added, making a slash through the air with one hand.

“I—yes—no—I,” Steve stammered, trying to keep up.

“You picked the pieces up and put everything back on the table,” the King reminded him.

“Yes,” Steve acknowledged.

“And why did you put the pieces where you put them?” the King asked, sweeping a hand out towards the table.

“I just…I put them where they go,” Steve replied, frowning down at the table. “I can put them back where they were, if you want,” Steve said quickly, reaching out for one of the miniature battering rams.

“Wait,” the King said, his hand shooting out to grab Steve’s wrist. “You put them where they go,” he repeated, slowly, almost like a child would.

“Yes,” Steve said, still baffled.

“Because this is how they should go,” the King said, still in the same slow, careful tone. “And you just…knew that.”

“I—“ Steve started, looking down at the map again, then back at the King. “Yes?”
“This morning, my favorite general stopped by, probably to play with his toys, spent five minutes staring at this, then started mumbling incoherently and shouting words that made even my ears burn and now, he wants to call a war council to redistribute our forces accordingly,” the King told him, sounding not so much angered by the development as bemused. “So. I’m going to require a bit more of an explanation than, ‘I put them where they go.’”

Steve looked down at the table again, then back over at the King, who was eyeing him with a somewhat perplexed look, the same one that Steve had seen on the King’s face when he had been turning through the pages of the books last night, like he was trying to see something he knew was there, but couldn’t find. Steve dropped his gaze to the map table, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked back at the King.

“Your skirmisher units were too far from what would likely be the main front of any assault. Here,” Steve leaned forward and pointed. “And here, where they’d have supply line access and your defenses are weakest because of the river, which leaves you with too much line to properly defend and which presents a problem, since it could be dammed upriver and the whole basin flooded, which would make your heavy cavalry and mounted archers ineffective.”

“Oh-huh,” the King said, narrowing his gaze on Steve. “Go on.”

“You had your legions spread out to defend the keeps along the road, here, here and here, but the wings were too tightly grouped to pull a flanking maneuver if an assault comes from the west,” Steve pointed out. “The main attack would likely come through here, not across the bridge and straight through towards the city gates. It’s not as direct, but it would avoid the bulk of your mortars and if they blew the bridge, they could cut off or slow the advance of the forces and wagons you have spread out along this line. Supporting attacks would come from here and here, with a tertiary attack from the sea, if they have ships. Your defenses were largely relying on encirclement from your cavalry and infantry divisions, but that’s presuming a slow-moving attack on one or two main fronts, and this way, with your wings here and here and the mortar cannons here on…on tracks, like this, see? You could meet the secondary attack before it converged with the main assault.”

The King blinked at him, then walked around the table and sat down heavily in his chair, cupping his head in his hand and massaging at his temples.

“Sit,” the King said after a moment, indicating the chair next to him. He shot Steve a bleary, baleful look as Steve sat down.

“I—I’m sorry,” Steve said quickly. “I shouldn’t—I didn’t mean…”

“No, no. Please. Tell me more about how you’d destroy my kingdom. I have all day,” the King said with a long, drawn-out sigh and wave of his hand. “Is that all?” the King asked drolly.

“Yes,” Steve replied and looked down at his lap where his hands fidgeted. He pulled them apart and gripped the arms of the chair instead, then finally raised his eyes back to the King’s. The King was staring at him, eyebrows lifted high, a challenging, sardonic look tugging half of his mouth into a smile. His eyes were gleaming, as if pleased, though the same confounded look appeared after a moment.

“No,” Steve amended, his mouth flattening around the word. The King’s eyes lit up and he threw back his head and laughed, slapping a hand on his thigh.

“Okay, Soldier. Tell me what you’ve got. Wait,” the King said, holding up a hand as Steve opened his mouth. “If we’re going to do this, I need food and wine. Lots of wine,” the King
announced with a sudden burst of energy, standing up and walking over the wall to tug on a cord. A moment later, the bell above the cord rang, and the King grunted in seeming satisfaction and sat back down.

“Who are you?” the King asked, eyeing him sharply. “Not just a soldier, we already established that the other night. Soldiers don’t look at a table and just know how to reposition an entire network of defenses. To hear Zola tell it, you deserted, got picked up by slavers while on the run and he saved you from a life of hard labor in the quarry or the mines. All of my benefit, of course, glory to the realm and all that rot,” the King said, rubbing a finger across his lip as he studied Steve.

“I did not desert,” Steve ground out as a white-hot anger spike through him, followed by surprise that the King had apparently taken some kind of interest in him, enough to ask Zola in the first place.

“Technically, that’s probably what a deserter would say,” the King remarked idly. Steve clamped his jaw together so hard he thought he could feel his teeth grind together and shot a glare at the King before he realized what he was doing. The King grinned, wide and full, looking for all the world like he was delighted. “God, you make it so easy to get a rise out of you. And such a pleasure, too. To get a rise out of you,” the King teased, and that was what it was, Steve knew, some kind of…of provocation, damn the man. “Hmmm, nothing to say? Wouldn’t blame you, if you had deserted. Soldier is a hard, often short, life, and not exactly filled comforts. Anyway, doesn’t much matter,” the King continued, giving another wave of his hand. “But, I admit to a certain…curiosity where you are concerned. Zola sends his little entertainments and they all spend the evening telling me how wonderful I am. How powerful. How handsome. You can see how that would be simply exhausting after a while,” the King finished, giving Steve a knowing grin while Steve resisted rolling his eyes. “But, not you. No, you…the pleasuring the King teased, and that was what it was, Steve knew, some kind of…of provocation, damn the man. “Hmmm, nothing to say? Wouldn’t blame you, if you had deserted. Soldier is a hard, often short, life, and not exactly filled comforts. Anyway, doesn’t much matter,” the King continued, giving another wave of his hand. “But, I admit to a certain…curiosity where you are concerned. Zola sends his little entertainments and they all spend the evening telling me how wonderful I am. How powerful. How handsome. You can see how that would be simply exhausting after a while,” the King finished, giving Steve a knowing grin while Steve resisted rolling his eyes. “But, not you. No, you…you tell me how you’d lay waste to my kingdom. Did Zola give you advice, tell you how to act?”

“He tried,” Steve answered.

“Ha! I’ll bet he did,” the King said around a gale of laughter that left his shoulders shaking. He smiled at Steve and then his face softened, eyes crinkling at the corners and mouth going slack as he regarded Steve. He looked away then, picking up some kind of small hammer from the table and banging lightly on the wood before putting it down and shuffling through the papers instead. “You do…please me,” the King finally said, his mouth twisting into a grimace at the words, as if he wasn’t sure if he liked them.

He looked up at Steve then, going still, eyes wide for a moment before his face shuttered and he was motioning someone forward. Steve turned in time to see two servants come into the room bearing trays laden with food and a flagon of what Steve assumed was the requested wine.

Steve looked at it all and felt his mouth water and his stomach rumble with a sudden pang of hunger. Mutton chops in a thick sauce, roasted potatoes and root vegetables, a hunk of soft bread with slices of cheese next to it and dates honeyed in a light sauce and mixed with nuts and spices.

“Eat,” the King said, pointing at the tray. “Go on.” Steve reached out and took a piece of bread and brought it to his mouth, chewing a bite carefully. It was heaven. Warm and floury, and so good, he thought he must have never had anything better. He looked over at the King and swallowed.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

“Oh, for God’s sake, would you eat? If you looked at me the way you eyed that mutton, I’d give
you half the kingdom. Eat!” the King ordered and promptly speared a potato with his fork. “Eat, and then we can spend the rest of the afternoon attacking my kingdom,” the King said, mouth quirking up a bit.

The King’s words proved prophetic, Steve thought, some hours later when the sun was just barely touching the horizon. Round and round, back and forth, all morning and most of the afternoon. Each grudging admission that perhaps the King’s counterpoint had merit seemed to delight the man, who all but crowed when Steve agreed with his proposal to move the ballistas to the sides of the castle’s bastion. *We can attach mortars to the ends of the spears before we launch them, with long fuses designed to detonate on impact,* the King said, eyes lighting up, while Steve stared incredulously at him.

Which was an insane idea, obviously, and yet there was a sketch on a piece of parchment next to three types of fuse materials sitting on the table in front of him and Steve knew it would work, just the way the King said, which was both impressive and annoying, for some reason Steve couldn’t quite name. He thought he had swayed the King to most of his suggestions, though the King’s faith in his siege engines and machines, as he called them, made Steve reconsider several aspects along the way, and now, he thought as he stared down at the table...what they had reached together was a vast improvement, even he could admit.

The King’s mind was incredible, Steve had realized at some point during what turned into a lecture on the benefits of hinged counterweights on trebuchets as opposed to fixed. Not just well-read or highly educated, the way all the upper class would be, but brilliant and intuitive in a way that Steve had never encountered. The King seemed to move from topic to topic in some kind of mental flow that only made sense to him, and it took all Steve could do to keep up. A part of Steve was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to close his eyes, and, yet, exhilaration was firing under his skin, too, the kind he hadn’t felt since...well, since the first time he lifted the shield and threw it, arm outstretched, waiting, knowing it would find his hand again.

“I need a drink,” the King announced wearily, reaching for his goblet and filling it again with the spiced wine that the servants had provided. “Ugh,” the King grunted after taking a long sip and letting his head fall back against the back of his chair. “God, that was entertaining. You,” the King said, wagging a finger at Steve. “You are a puzzle, I’ll give you that. Not many people can...stay with me at this kind of thing,” the King said, gesturing to the table as his mouth twisted. “Rhodey. Obie, probably. Bruce, if he’d leave his plants and potions long enough. I like puzzles,” the King continued, taking another drink and watching Steve from over the lip of the cup before setting down and steepling his fingers under his chin, regarding Steve for a long moment. He stood up and walked over to stand in front of Steve, who turned away from the table to meet him.

“I like you,” the King told him in a dark, husky voice, looking up at Steve from under his lashes, eyes dark and gleaming in the low, afternoon light. He reached out and ran a finger around the collar at Steve’s throat, then down Steve’s chest, scoring a line of heat as it went. “I like how responsive you are to me. I like how you felt under my hand. I like the sounds you gave me when you came. I like how hot and tight you were around my cock. So beautiful. You have no idea, do you? So very, very beautiful for me,” the King continued in that same low, rough voice that scraped over Steve’s skin, sending shivers of heat arcing down his length until his cock was hard, straining against the loincloth, and he knew the King could see it, feel it, and it was...
terrible, awful, wrong, and he wanted it anyway.

“This is where you say, ‘I like you, too, Your Highness,’” the King urged, teasing and light, splaying his hand wide and low, palming Steve’s cock and then giving it a leisurely stroke. Steve blinked, sucked in a breath and closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at the King.

“I—like—you—too—Your—Highness,” Steve panted in halting gulps of mingled air and words.

“Hmmm,” the King murmured as he untied the knotted fabric at Steve’s waist and let it fall to the floor. “I don’t know if you mean that. Well. Part of you clearly means it,” the King snickered, then smiled, that soft one that lit up his face and drained away the years. “You are, rightly, perhaps, upset over last night? If it’s any consolation, that might have been my least well thought out punishment, since I think I suffered as much as you. No? You don’t think so, huh?” the King teased, even as he wrapped his hand around Steve’s cock and gave it a pull. “You were so gorgeous, begging me for release like that. I should have you touch yourself like that all day for me,” the King suggested mildly. Steve groaned at the King’s words, both horrified and inexplicably aroused, his hips bucking into the King’s hand, seeking the warm friction that was promised there. “We’d start slow, like this, and I’d have you work your way up, then stop. Take the edge off, let you come down, and then we’d start again and again.”

Steve let out a low moan of surrender. His body quaked with want. Already, drops of moisture were leaking from the head of his cock onto the King’s hand. The King stroked him again, spreading the fluid around, then rubbing it into the slit at the head with the rough pad of his thumb. A stuttering half-cry tore from Steve’s throat and his hips jerked again, pumping uselessly into the air as the King let go of him.

“Or, maybe I’d have you work yourself open. Finger yourself for hours before I let you add another. Wouldn’t let you even touch your cock, just get yourself all loose for me until you begged me to fill you. Would you like that?” the King asked. Steve didn’t answer. He couldn’t. All words had been driven from his head, as if leaked out through a sieve. His mind was filled with the image the King described, with the King’s words, his voice—dark and deep and slyly aware of how it was affecting Steve--with the way the King was looking at him, hungry and wanton and half-amazed. “But, for now, allow me to make up a bit for last night.”

With that, the King’s mouth quirked into a smile, and he put a hand on each of Steve’s hips, just above where the muscle started to vee and dip, and then he went to his knees. Steve had a fraction of time to manage bewildered confusion before his world exploded into bright stars before his eyes and all the questions and swirls of feeling left his head as the King nuzzled the side of his cock where it jutted out from the juncture of his thighs, then licked a long, wet stripe up Steve’s length. Steve’s whole body went taut, shook. He was on fire. Pin-pricks of heat raced across his skin and settled deep and low, coiling up there just behind his balls. He let out a gasp, and reached behind him to grip the edge of the table for support.

The King grinned, a smug, pleased look, then slowly drew his hands down to cup Steve’s balls and roll them around, massaging and hefting them. He splayed his hands wide, then, on either side of Steve’s cock and leaned forward on his knees, taking the head into his mouth. He looked up at Steve from under half-hooded eyes and moved his head, taking Steve’s length in deeper before drawing back in one long, slow slide of his lips before letting Steve’s cock pop out of his mouth, wet and glistening.

“Breathe,” the King said, almost gently. Steve blinked at him. Finally, the tight coldness in his chest registered and he sucked in a breath. “Good,” the King said, then leaned forward and took
Steve in his mouth again. The King wound his tongue around the head, smearing the droplets that had gathered there, and then started to suck, making some kind of obscene wet, sucking moan as he did. He flattened his tongue and worked the underside of Steve’s cock, laving wide strokes over it, then found the slit and niggled his tongue up and down and inside of it.

Steve’s grip on the table was almost painful, would have been except he couldn’t feel anything except the way the King’s mouth felt as he drew Steve’s cock in deeper again, deeper this time than before, until Steve felt a slight shift as he slid all the way down the King’s throat. The King swallowed around him once, the motion constricting and then releasing around Steve’s cock, then pulled back and let Steve’s cock slide almost all the way out before the King’s lips caught around the head and sucked hard. He looked up at Steve with a wicked gleam in his eye and reached one hand between Steve’s legs, just behind his balls and pressed the pad of his thumb into the smooth skin there.

A cry echoed from Steve’s throat and he nearly fell forward, doubling over and planting a hand on the King’s shoulder for purchase. The world got very small and all Steve could see or feel or think about was the way the King’s mouth felt, so hot and tight and good. He felt the King’s mouth widen into a smile around him, and then he was swallowing Steve down again, so deep and hot and wet and Steve’s vision whitened out, then went dark, and he was coming, hard, hips pumping in stuttering, jerking thrusts, his cock bouncing against the back of the King’s throat as he spilled himself down the King’s throat.

The King moved off of him just as Steve’s legs finally gave out, and he crumpled to his knees, panting and gasping heavily as his muscles quaked and quivered. He was slowly, dimly aware that the King was rubbing a hand over his back and murmuring soft words, good words, Steve’s mind thought, though the thought was weightless and distant. He couldn’t think. He couldn’t move. His body was boneless, languid and limp. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the King swipe a thumb over his mouth and catch a small dot of white on it, then suck that into his mouth, and Steve realized what it was, and that sight sent a full body shake through him that left him thrumming and hot. He made some kind of inarticulate noise in the back of his throat and the King smiled down at him, still rubbing his back with firm, sure strokes.

“I take it I had the honor of being your first,” the King asked, lips quirking into a smile.

“Ngugh,” Steve replied, then frowned and licked his lips, trying to work his jaw around the word.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” the King said agreeably. He swept a hand through Steve’s hair, then down his cheek, tilting his head to one side as he studied Steve.

“S-so—srr—srry,” Steve tried again, closing his eyes and forcing the word out.

“Nothing to be sorry about. You were beautiful. Perfect,” the King said softly, dropping his hand down to cradle Steve’s chin. “I don’t usually care,” he added with a slight frown before giving his head a quick shake. “Let’s get you to bed. Think you can walk?”

Steve nodded. Then actually tried it and found that proposition took a bit more doing than he realized, but between the two of them, he managed to get his feet under him and follow the King into the bedchamber. The King nudged him forward until his thighs hit the edge of the bed and he sat down heavily and looked up at the King who ran his hands down the sides of Steve’s face before dropping them to Steve’s shoulders and pushing him back onto the pillows. Steve swung his legs up onto the bed and waited.

“I must go to a meeting. Trade agreement. Can’t be helped. Obie will pitch a fit if I miss another one. Terrible timing, I know,” the King said with a grimace. He looked away from Steve, then,
scratched a finger at his forehead where the skin creased and furrowed with a frown and let out a long sigh. “I’m going to think about you, like this,” he said, tracing a finger down Steve’s thigh. “In my bed, waiting for me so blissed out you can hardly think. It’s a good look on you, by the way. When I get back, I’ll take you. Take my time and get you loose and begging for it on my fingers, then fill you up, the way you need. And you’ll think about that while I’m gone, too, but you won’t touch yourself.”

The familiar mixture of arousal and shame bloomed deep inside Steve and snaked its way down his cock at the King’s words, though he only managed to shake his head in acquiescence.

“Good,” the King said, then gave Steve one last, long look and bent down, placing a lingering kiss to the top of Steve’s head and running a hand through his hair.

“I do like you, Your Highness,” Steve heard his own ragged voice say, and immediately felt a rush of cold that made his stomach churn, even as the King’s hand slowed and gentled against his hair. It was a lie. It had to be. A manipulation. It wasn’t true. He didn’t think he could handle it, if it were true, because what would that say about him? Had circumstances been different…but, they weren’t. He was a slave, and the King was his master, and a kind master was something he couldn’t afford to let his mind allow.

“Tony,” the King said as he pulled away. “In here, when we’re alone, you may call me by my familiar name. Tony. I would…like to hear it from you, I think,” he said, then gave a little huff of laughter that seemed to hold some small amount of chagrin in it.

“Tony,” Steve repeated. It sounded odd. So normal. Common. There was nothing common about this man, of that much Steve was certain, and yet, it fit, in the way the King’s face slackened and went soft sometimes, how his eyes lit up with humor at the strangest times, how he moved, all a whir and blur of motion when he was on to some idea or argument.

“I’ll bring you a gift when I return. Something to match your eyes, perhaps,” the King added as he turned to walk towards the door. He stopped, just before the curtained chamber, turned and peered at Steve across the room, something shifting across his face, a trick of the light, surely, for it looked for a moment like sadness. “I told you that you would find me generous.”
People were asking about the picture that inspired this fic, so here you go
Steve had not meant to sleep. That he would had not even occurred to him. He had watched the King depart, with the two statue-silent guards on his heels, then lain there on the bed, body thrumming and tightening, like a key twisting in a lock just before it finally catches.

The King’s words were still echoing in his head like a beacon, bright and pulsing, and each one sent a low, throbbing beat of warmth down his cock. He thought the King knew that, wanted that, was...pleased by that, and that thought made Steve want to squirm, roll over on the bed and find friction, though he was too mindful of the King’s words to do anything other than think about how good it would feel, and that, somehow, made the waiting good, too. He didn’t touch himself, didn’t do anything, really, but he thought about it. Thought about how it would feel when the King returned and touched him like that, the way he had the first night.

Tony, Steve had tried, turning the name over and over in his mind, trying to make it fit, while his body seemed to light up with a nervous energy that refused to be quelled no matter how hard he tried to focus on something else, anything besides the King’s promise. Home. His team. His people. Hydra. The mission. It all seemed so distant, the memories like he was watching someone else’s life, and maybe he was.

Maybe that was closer to the truth than he wanted to admit. Maybe the person he had been went down with Shmidt’s ship, and someone else was dragged out of the ocean. Someone who lay in a king’s bed and thought of the way his touch would feel and told himself there was no choice.

Tony. It had sounded odd. The name. Small. Too small for someone like the King, who seemed far more suited to a moniker than a name, let alone a fairly common one that could be carried by any number of men. There was nothing common about the King, that much was certain, Steve thought as his mind swirled around images and caught on beats of time, the way a hook might catch on the long reeds that dotted the shoreline of the small river that cut through the town where he was born.

*If you get too close, you’ll fall in, Stevie.*

The light in the King’s eyes while he argued with Steve over the positioning of the fast-moving ready infantry. The fervor in his voice when he spoke of his machines and how many of his men could go home to their own beds because of them. The way he would flatten his mouth and wag his head from side to side when he conceded some point that Steve had to pry from his hands as if it was a miser’s last coin. How kind he had been to Cam, teasing the terrified boy into something that approached camaraderie. The way his mouth looked, wrapped around Steve’s cock in his own, strange version of an apology that few else would have even conceived of as being owed.

He shouldn’t have slept. His body was alight, his mind full and his cock half-hard. He shouldn’t have slept, but he had, miraculously, dropping off some cliff into his mind into a dreamless slumber. Perhaps it was a soldier’s ability to take sleep where it could be found, but his skin grew warm from the fire that was stoked in the hearth and his eyes grew heavy.

When he closed them, he meant to think of his home, all that remained to be done to piece together a shattered people, his team, with the blank, dark space next to him where Bucky was meant to be, his mission, his oath, and the ravings of a madman before fire engulfed him and the sea claimed
them both, but thought instead of the way the King had looked at him that first night, how the King’s voice tremored just slightly when he called Steve beautiful.

He woke with a sudden start on the heels of the kind of blinding certainty that he wasn’t alone anymore. He was curled on his side, with one knee pulled up underneath him and jutting out at an angle, facing the warmth of the fireplace. As he pushed himself up on his elbow, Steve immediately saw the source of his disquiet. The King was leaning against the bottom poster of the bed with his arms crossed over his chest, watching Steve with the same strange, intent expression Steve had caught on the King’s face before, though it was softer this time, as if the King’s features were carved in wax, rather than the hollows of flesh and bone.

“I kept imagining you, back here, in my bed, while Stern and his ilk droned on and on about taxes and tariffs. The guilds are demanding military escorts to stave off raiders on the Eastern routes, and we haven’t the admiralty for it, but with the Assarians still refusing to properly patrol their own shores, what choice have we? We’ve lost far too many merchant ships in those waters already, and Stern is all but refusing to provide letters of transit without the Crown’s backing. Thoughts of you might have been the only thing keeping me sane,” the King muttered, half under his breath as he dipped his head and knocked his booted toe against the bottom of the bed. “The finding, though. That…quite exceeded the imagining,” he said, giving his head a light shake around a huff of deprecating laughter. The King pushed himself off the poster and walked the few steps up the bed closer to Steve. His eyes were dark, heated and narrowed as they swept up and down Steve’s body. He rolled his lip between his teeth, as if weighing something Steve couldn’t begin to fathom. Steve could feel an embarrassed flush prickle across his skin, and his cock twitched and thickened where it lay against his thigh, as if in memory of what that mouth could do.

“I should keep you like this all the time,” the King continued, climbing into the bed to sit next to Steve’s hip. He cupped a hand over Steve’s knee and trace a path up his thigh and then scraping lightly down the same swath of skin with his nails. “Here in my bed, naked and waiting for me. God, but you are beautiful. Granted, I would get precious little accomplished, but...” he shrugged, a small, pleased smile playing on his lips when Steve’s cock hardened at the motion, reaching in vain for the King’s hand where it stroked Steve’s thigh. “It might be worth it.”

The King’s eyes found Steve’s, a warm, teasing glint in their depths. Steve felt his breath catch, then quicken as the King’s hand delved lower, skimming the inside of his thigh, just above where his cock strained upward. A bead of moisture appeared at the head, and the King stopped the motion of his hand on Steve’s thigh, reached out and caught it on the pad of his thumb. He brought it to his mouth, and his tongue darted out to capture the taste. Steve swallowed, watching the motion with a rapt sort of fascination, let out a small gasp and drew in a shuddering breath, even as his cock leaked all the more in response.

“Here,” the King said, pulling a square of soft fabric from the pocket of his tunic. “I believe I promised you a gift.” Steve started blankly at the pouch in the King’s outstretched hand for a moment, then looked up at the King. “Take it,” the King urged. Steve did. The pouch was heavy with something inside, and when he opened it, a large, round stone of bright blue, circled in gold, fell into his palm. “I thought, perhaps, it would match your eyes, but I see now that it pales,” the King said, taking the stone from Steve’s hand and reaching up to hook its bail around the collar at Steve’s throat. “There,” the King finished, with a satisfied look. “It suits you, nonetheless. Lets everyone know your value.”

“This is where you thank me, tell me how incredibly generous I am, and then try to subtly wheedle something more from me,” the King added after a long beat of silence, an air of exasperation in his voice.
“Thank you, Your Highness. You are very generous. I would...like more,” Steve replied flatly.

“God, you really are truly terrible at this, aren’t you?” the King barked with a surprised laugh.

“I’m sorry—I don’t—it’s beautiful, truly, I--” Steve rushed out, feeling a flush heat his cheeks and his stomach swoop. A miserable, sinking feeling flooded his gut. If he failed at this, if he angered the King, he knew what would happen. To him and to Cam. He opened his mouth to say more, offer some kind of apology, find words that would appease the King, but nothing came out save for a ragged, frustrated breath. He was terrible at this, that was true enough. Bucky had been the one with the charm, the easy, open manner that drew people to him and made them feel like they belonged there. It was Steve they followed into battle, but Bucky they sang songs with, got drunk with, and shared stories of home.

“Shhh,” the King admonished suddenly, placing his hand over Steve’s knee again and rubbing lightly, soothingly, different than before. “It wasn’t meant as a criticism. People, they...it is just that they rarely surprise me anymore. But you...you leave me astonished at regular intervals, and I assure you that is quite more the accomplishment than you may realize. I keep telling myself, it is an act, and one that will falter. Another of Zola’s attempts to gain the favor he craves, and it is, isn’t it, in its way? I am not so far gone as to not realize what the little toad is about, sending me someone like you, and yet you...I think he stumbled upon you without quite meaning to, without quite realizing what it was he was giving me, didn’t he?”

“Zola said I reminded him of someone you...knew. Lord Stone, he called him,” Steve replied with a flash of unease at the memory of the discussion between Zola and Sitwell. “He thought that might be something you would like.”

“Zola has no idea what I would like,” the King said through his teeth, jaw clenched tightly around the words. “And you...you are absolutely nothing like Tiberius, thank God,” he breathed out, eyes going half-hooded as he looked down at Steve. “Enough of that. I’ve listened to old men drone on for hours with a stack of papers in my lap, trying not to embarrass myself. Let me see you,” the King ordered abruptly, nudging at Steve’s knee with his hand.

Steve looked up at him, uncomprehendingly. The King’s mouth quirked a little at the corners, and then he pushed more firmly against Steve’s knee, prying his legs apart, following the motion by shifting on the bed to move between them, even as he pressed Steve’s knee up and out, so it jutted out next to his chest, then repeated the motion with the other, until Steve was spread out before him, completely exposed.

Steve swallowed, or tried to. His mouth had gone dry. He turned his head to the side and closed his eyes as shame and humiliation crested through him, heating his skin and sending quivers shaking through his legs where they stretched out to his sides. His breath went shallow, and he couldn’t quite get the right amount of air, always too much or too little. He could feel his cock, hard and throbbing against his stomach, leaving a wet trail from his thigh. He thought of the King taking the droplet into his mouth, the way his tongue had darted out to savor the taste, and his hips jerked, just a bit, into the cold air.

“Look at me,” the King commanded, so Steve did, opening his eyes and turning his head to face the King. “You’re gorgeous like this. I should have your portrait painted, with you all spread out for me. If I showed it to the council, they would never blame me for my lack of attention. Or parade them in here. Let them see what they are keeping me from.” Steve let out a shaky breath and blinked, a wave of horrified arousal crashing through him at the King’s words. Threat. He didn’t know. His cock jumped and stiffened, rising off his stomach under the King’s gaze. The King smiled down at him, a dark, knowing smile at Steve’s body’s betrayal. “I wouldn’t, of
course. I find that I…do not care for the thought of sharing you.”

Relief and something else, something that made Steve’s limbs go watery and quavering, poured through him. A small, surprised cry tore from Steve’s throat when he felt the King trace his thumb around the circle of his hole, tugging gently at the bottom, before pulling his hand back and studying Steve for a long moment. He grinned then, and leaned down to place a kiss on the knob of Steve’s knee, then let his mouth follow the path his hand had stroked earlier down the delicate skin on the inside of Steve’s thigh. Steve gasped, a hiccoughing, stunted sound as the King’s mouth edged lower and lower. The King stopped, looked up at him from under his lashes, grinned wickedly, then dipped his head back to his task. The King’s mouth found the seam where Steve’s thigh met his groin, and his tongue darted out to trace the line of skin. Steve groaned, bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from crying out, and looked down, seeing only a dark, brown head of almost-curls between his thighs.

He could feel the King’s mouth curve into a smile. His warm breath tingled against Steve’s balls, making his cock harden impossibly more. And that was before the King’s mouth found one of the firm, tight mounds of flesh and licked a wide stripe over the soft skin. Steve gasped, choked on the burn of air that rushed out of him, and his body jolted. The King’s hands went to Steve’s thighs, in silent command, and Steve realized he had brought his knees up without meaning to, and let them lower again. A light flutter of lips and tongue over his balls and Steve moaned, low and deep and shuddering. The King’s mouth found one of the firm, tight mounds of flesh and licked a wide stripe over the soft skin. Steve gasped, choked on the burn of air that rushed out of him, and his body jolted. The King’s hands went to Steve’s thighs, in silent command, and Steve realized he had brought his knees up without meaning to, and let them lower again. A light flutter of lips and tongue over his balls and Steve moaned, low and deep and shuddering. Then the King drew one into his mouth and sucked at the tender flesh, before turning it go with an obscene, wet sound before turning his attention to the other, taking it into his mouth even as a finger breached Steve’s hole to the knuckle. Steve’s hips bucked involuntarily, earning a grunt and a low, husky laugh from the King. The finger left him, and Steve could feel a sudden, burning scrape of emptiness that hadn’t been there before.

Hands trailed up and down Steve’s thighs, kneading at the muscles, then cupped under his bottom and pulled him apart. Hot breath covered his hole, and then Steve’s entire body stiffened, caught between shock, a litany of no, no, no, in his head, because it wasn’t possible, it couldn’t be what it was, and a burst of pleasure that exploded deep inside of him, ran from his toes to the hairs on his head and back down to the tip of his cock, before coiling low and deep inside of him with a steady throb.

“Oh, God. Oh, God, oh, God,” Steve moaned and blew out a long, thin breath through his teeth. A warm huff of air that might have been a laugh sent a shudder through his whole body. The King’s tongue laved a path up and down over Steve’s hole, circled the rim, and then pressed inside, just the tip, flicking lightly against the inside of Steve’s body. Air punched out of his chest, and some kind of keening wail built in the back of his throat, coming out in stuttering gasps of barely-there sounds. He tossed his head side to side, and gripped the thick brocade coverlet in his fists.

The King’s withdrew his tongue, then delved in again, deeper this time, lips brushing against Steve’s rim. And then, the warm wetness was gone, replaced by the sudden, rough scrape of the King’s bearded chin across Steve’s hole. He cried out. He thought it might have been the King’s name. His hips juddered against the King’s mouth, and his cock bounced at the motion, sending drops of fluid across Steve’s stomach. The King sat up and stretched across Steve’s prone form for the warm oil that brewed in the small pot over the candle by the bed and dipped his fingers in, coating them generously before running those same fingers down the crease of Steve’s ass, swirling them around his wet hole, mimicking the path the King’s tongue had taken moments before.

“I’ll bet,” the King began, voice raspy and thick. “I could make you come on my tongue. What do you think? Should we try that one day? Keep you spread, with my tongue inside you until you
begged for release? Keep you this close, right on the edge, for hours? You’d be so beautiful like that,” the King continued, circling the pad of his thumb around Steve’s hole. “Or on my hand. You could come on my hand, I think. Wouldn’t even take much effort. You’re so responsive. God, the sounds you give me. You should hear yourself. The way your body shakes when you get overwhelmed. That blush. It’s going to be the death of me, I swear. Would you like that?” he asked, low and husky-voiced as he slipped a finger all the way inside Steve’s body and pumped it in and out in long, slow strokes. “To come on my hand?”

“Yes. Please. Please, I need to, please,” Steve gutted out, somehow finding the words, though it was as if they floated in some haze in his mind and he had to grab them before they disappeared. His mind was a bright, blank space, like snow blanketing the fields back home where they met the mountains and all you could see was white.

A second finger entered him, pumping with the first, filling him with a pleasant, stretching burn that seemed to follow some line of fire from the King’s fingers to the tip of Steve’s cock.

“Not tonight, I don’t think,” the King tsked with a low chuckle, earning a frustrated, plaintive moan from Steve. “Soon, though. God, you would be magnificent, coming apart for me like that. You open so beautifully under my hand. Just look at you. Gorgeous,” the King husked out.

Steve answered with a groan and arched his back, pressing down against the King’s hand. A third finger filled him, worked him loose and wide, until Steve thought he would surely shatter. The muscles in his arms where his hands gripped the coverlet were corded so tightly, he could see them shift and move as his body shook with the effort to stay still. The King was whispering words of praise, filthy, wonderful promises, and then he flicked his wrist, twisting his fingers and pushing in deep and a soundless scream clawed at Steve’s throat as his body went taut as a bowstring, pulled back and ready to let fly.

The King’s hand slowed its rhythm, thrust in and out of Steve’s loose passage a few more times, and then was gone, leaving Steve feeling a wide gulf of emptiness. Take my time and get you loose and begging for it on my fingers, then fill you up, the way you need, Steve remembered. That was what the King had promised before he left, and now, lying here, panting and spread wide, Steve wanted that, needed that. He couldn’t even bring himself to care what it said about himself that he did.

The King was shoving his breeches down and pulling his cock out, thick and hard and wet at the head where it was leaking. He reached over and coated it with more of the same warm oil he had used on his hands, then moved forward on the bed until Steve could feel the blunt head of it pressing against his hole.

“Say my name,” the King ordered, looking down at Steve with a strangely fierce expression. “I want to hear my name on your lips when I take you.”

“Tony,” Steve rasped out, voice thin and thready with need. “Please, Tony, please, I—“ he broke off with a sharp gasp as Tony pushed slowly into him, filling him with a burning stretch of hazy pleasure-pain, making his body rock with the force of it. His eyes widened and a low, guttural moan somehow managed to work its way out of him. Steve looked up at the King, eyes fluttering shut for a moment, then opened them again. “Tony,” Steve said again, soft and breathy, almost a sigh. He would care later, he told himself.

Tony stilled, watching him, face going tight, eyes bright for a moment before he turned his head and dropped his chin to his shoulder, taking in a deep breath. He turned back to Steve then, smiled, eyes soft and crinkled at the corners, and pulled out until the head of his cock caught on the rim of Steve’s hole before pushing all the way back in again in a long, slow, steady glide. Again
and again, Tony thrust, keeping the same, steady rhythm of pressure and need, fullness and emptiness, as a low, thrumming built under Steve’s skin the way water kept flowing against a dam until he was sure it would be too much, and the dam would break. He would break. But, he didn’t, and it was driving him mad. He lifted his hips again and met Tony’s thrust with his own, clenching his muscles around Tony’s length and earning a grunt and muffled curse as Tony sped up his thrusts.

Harder now, the King pounded into him, his thrusts losing some of their rhythm in favor of quick snaps of his hips. Steve felt the King’s hands under him, lifting, spreading, and suddenly, the angle was different, pleasure exploding inside him on each thrust.

The King’s hand was on Steve’s cock, working it up and down, twisting his wrist around the head on the tail end of each thrust, and the dual sensations, the pleasure-pain deep inside and the pressure and friction on his cock made Steve’s hips jerk, canting forward hard against Tony’s hand and cock as he slammed into him. The dam broke. He broke. He didn’t know. Everything was bright and dark and Tony, hair mussed and falling in his eyes, a sheen of sweat on his brow, his cock thrusting deep and hard, hand stroking hard and tight on the head of Steve’s shaft, and Steve was gone, over some edge he couldn’t see, but could only feel, and he was falling. Falling apart, shattering into pieces from the inside out. Distantly, like an echo, he heard Tony give a sharp, guttural shout and felt a warm stream fill him as Tony pounded into him, chasing the last of the feeling as he spilled himself inside Steve.

Tony collapsed forward with a groan, bracing himself on one hand and burying his head in the center of Steve’s chest, breathing hard, his heart pounding against Steve’s ribs. Steve lay there, enjoying the weight, the warmth, the solidness of Tony on top of him while he slowly came back to himself. He stared at the deep red and gold threads of the canopy above the bed, where they melded into a brocade of feather-like patterns, twisted with vines and florals. He could feel Tony’s breathing slow, the thumping of his heart steady.

Steve’s deathgrip on the coverlet was gone, and without thinking much about it, he brought his hand up to rub along Tony’s spine. A soft sigh escaped the King’s mouth, and he raised his head up to look at Steve a long moment before settling his cheek back against Steve’s chest. Tony toyed idly with the pendant hanging from Steve’s collar, then brushed a hand down the flat of Steve’s stomach before sighing deeply and pushing himself up, pulling out of Steve as he did.

It was an odd emptiness that followed. Not the needy, desperate emptiness of before, just more of an awareness of absence, of having been full and now being different. Not unpleasant, exactly. Good in a way, even, with the dull, pulsing ache left behind and slow trickle of Tony’s seed as it leaked out of him somehow satisfying. The King crawled off the bed and walked over to a pitcher on a stand by the window, dipping a cloth into the bowl next to it before returning to Steve.

“Sorry,” Tony said with a grimace as he gently pressed the cloth to Steve. “I’ll have them be sure to leave warm water next time.” It was cold, but not uncomfortable, Steve thought, though the thought had little substance to it. Letters formed into words, that was all it was. Everything was feeling right now, and this feeling wasn’t bad, so he settled into it and let Tony clean him. “You should soak tomorrow. Not that I don’t appreciate your enthusiasm, but you are far too rough with yourself. I noticed the first night, too. You must take your time. There is no hurry. Besides, I like getting you ready. I know some don’t, but…it pleases me,” the King added, giving his head a little shake as his brows drew together and his lips tugged up at the corners.

“It isn’t…I don’t,” Steve stammered, tongue suddenly thick in his mouth. His stomach curled up and something withered in his chest and left him with a dizzying speed. The room was too hot. Stifling. He couldn’t breathe. His skin prickled and he felt a tremor wrack through him. He was
cold, then, but that wasn’t right, though he didn’t know why. “Zola has a man who does it.”

“What did you say?” the King bit out as his hand stilled. Steve swallowed. Blinked. What had he said? Something wrong, obviously, but his mind was too hazy to latch onto anything.

“Zola has a man who does it. With a…he uses a….” Steve stammered, waving a hand in the air and turning his head towards the fire where it crackled in the hearth. He didn’t have the word for it. Didn’t want to say it, even if he could. “He does it. I don’t. I don’t—I like what you do. But not. Not that,” he added, then clamped his jaw shut. That was all he could say, and even that admission hurt in a way he couldn’t quite explain.

“Should I…should I go now?” Steve asked, finally turning back to the King when there was only silence.

“No, I—stay,” the King said abruptly, finishing his ministrations with a sudden hurry and tossing the towel aside before getting up and walking towards what Steve had decided to call his workshop only to turn on his heel and walk back to the side of the bed next to Steve. “Sleep,” the King said, glancing down at him, then quickly looking away. “You should sleep. I have work. There’s…I have work to do.”

Steve pushed himself up onto his elbows with a frown and watched the King turn away, walk a few steps, stop, rake a hand through his hair, then continue on, disappearing into the antechamber. A few seconds later, a loud, clanging bang erupted from there, followed by a muttered curse, then a heavy, deliberate quiet.

He didn’t sleep. Eventually, the quiet from the workshop gave way to sounds Steve associated with the King’s work, and he felt himself relax with the familiar notes. He finally pulled back the bedcovers and climbed under them as the fire dimmed in the hearth. Turning on his side, he let his eyes drop closed and sank into the warm softness of the bed, trying not to think, though his mind kept wanting to replay the evening as if it was a bard with a new favorite tale, each thought seemingly punctuated by some plink or clank from the workshop as Tony did whatever it was he felt needed doing at this time of night. Steve tried to think of ships and raiders, trade guilds and taxes and the problems of kings. It didn’t quite work, as his mind kept slipping back to other things, but it did prove at least partially successful, as distractions went.

It was a long time, hours maybe, he wasn’t sure, before he felt the bed dip next him and Tony’s warm presence slide under the covers next to him. Steve held himself still, feigning sleep, though he wasn’t sure what drove the impulse, except that for some reason, Tony’s time in the workshop this evening had seemed private in some way that Steve didn’t quite understand. A moment later, he felt a light caress as Tony ran a hand gently over his hair and halfway down the curve of his back before the hand fell away.

Long minutes ticked by in Steve’s head while he waited for the steady, even rumbles of breath that indicated Tony finally slept. Only then did Steve allow himself to roll over and look upon the King, his profile outlined by firelight. Once again, Steve was struck by how young the King looked in sleep with the lines of worry brushed away.

A strong profile, Steve thought. Striking. The beard wasn’t to hide gout or a second chin, but rather because it suited the face. Full lips, a straight nose and eyes just slightly too wide set. For the first time in months, Steve fingers itched for a stick of coal and a bit of parchment to see if he could capture the King’s features with any degree of skill. He would need to convey motion, Steve thought to himself. The King was almost always moving, gesturing, talking, expressive in everything he did. He wondered if he could get the eyes right. The fierce intelligence there, the constant calculation, coupled with a heady dose of interest and challenge, and an unexpected
softness, almost brittle in how transient it sometimes seemed, like one wrong word or move could shatter it, and the occasional waspish hardness that seemed to drop over the King’s features like a portcullis.

Steve let out a low sigh and closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep, though it refused to come, despite his body’s exhaustion. I should hate him, Steve thought, though the knowledge had a distant, detached sense of truth to it. He didn’t hate the King. He didn’t know what he thought about the man, but it wasn’t hate, even if that was what was deserved. Steve had seen enough vileness in the world in his time to know it when he found it, and the King was not evil. Could a good man look away from everything wrong around him and still be called good?

And how are those escape plans going for you, Steve, Bucky’s voice rang out in his head. You marched in and saved me and all those men from Shmidt’s fortress, but can’t figure out how to get you and one boy out of a place more shittily guarded than old man Roberts’ blueberry patch?

Steve opened his eyes and stared up at the canopy with a sick feeling roiling around in his gut. He had no answer for the Bucky in his head, and he supposed that was answer enough.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, though he must have, because he woke, warm and languid, the next morning to find Tony sitting on the end of the bed, pulling a high, black boot on his foot. Steve blinked against the light spilling in from the windows, wiped a hand over his eyes to clear them of sleep and sat up in the bed.

“He wakes!” the King announced. “I thought perhaps you would sleep the day away, and took this as proof of my incredible prowess, which is, I am sure, a completely valid assumption,” the King continued, eyes twinkling with mirth. “Agree with me,” the King commanded with a jaunty grin.

“Sorry, I—I didn’t mean to oversleep, I--what? Ah…yes?” Steve stammered with a surge of embarrassed awareness of his nakedness, even though that made no sense after the night before. Still, there was something different about waking in the King’s bed the next morning, naked, sleep-warm and thick-tongued, while the King himself was so splendidly attired. He felt wildly out of place, like whatever spell had fallen over him the night before broke with the rising of the sun.

“Clearly overcome. It happens,” the King said with a shrug, then laughed, a high, deprecatory sound, as he tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling, shoulders shaking as he closed his eyes and shook his head. “You are exceedingly awful at artifice, do you know that?”

“That has been mentioned at some point by pretty much everyone I’ve ever known,” Steve admitted, mouth flattening around a chagrined sigh as Natasha’s voice seemed to ring in his ears. A surprised bark of laughter answered for the King, who looked delighted when Steve raised his eyes from where his hands curled into fists in his lap to notice. “Sorry, I—“

“Don’t apologize,” the King said quickly, cutting Steve off. “Let us say that I find it…refreshing,” the King finished with an odd sort of half-smile and that same intent, puzzled look that Steve was growing familiar with. The King waved a hand at him, stood, walked over and cupped the sides of Steve’s face in his hands.

“You needed rest,” Tony told him, head tilting slightly to the side as he studied Steve. “I’m glad you found it. Spend your day relaxing. Return to me tonight. Bring the boy. I could use an assistant for a bit, and not only is there the issue of me not getting much work done with you around, but you tend to follow directions with all the hearty enthusiasm of a man being told to put his head on a block. I thought soldiers were supposed to be good at obeying orders?”
“I heard that somewhere, too,” Steve replied evenly, when his heart sank back down his throat after lurching its way out of his chest when the King first mentioned bringing Cam. The King laughed, smile lines crinkling his face, shook his head and dropped his hands from Steve’s face.

“Tonight, then,” the King said, giving Steve a small nod as a smile played about his lips. “This is where you tell me how bereft you will be all day without me, how you will pine for me until the night finally comes and you can return to bask in my presence once again.” Steve drew in a slow breath and looked askance, teeth chewing at the inside of his cheek. “See? There it is. That’s the face. You two!” the King shouted over his shoulder at the guards. “You see the face, right? The I’ll-put-my-head-on-the-block-but-I’m-going-to-kick-you-in-balls-as-you-swing-the-sword-face? That one. They see it,” the King crowed gleefully, wagging his head back and forth and squinting in the direction of the guards before turning back to Steve, eyebrows raised high in challenge. “They’re silently judging you, you know? I can feel it. They miss me when they are off duty. Their own lives are rather comparatively dull, I’m sure, and, while, granted, they’ve never actually said as much, seeing as how they don’t actually seem to speak unless directly spoken to, and even then, they employ a certain economy of words—”

“I will miss you, Tony,” Steve said, surprising himself with the admission, though he found he meant it, as strange as it felt to admit. The interruption must have surprised the King as well, because his expression faltered for a moment, eyes going wide, lips working soundlessly, before a practiced smirk took its usual place.

“Good,” the King added after a beat of silence. He reached out and cradled the pendant that hung from Steve’s collar in the palm of his hand, closed his fist around it and tugged, until Steve had no choice but to follow the motion up to his knees on the bed so he faced the King. “Think of me,” the King said in a low, husky voice as he leaned close enough to Steve that Steve could feel his breath warm his cheek. The hairs on the back of Steve’s neck stood on end, and it was all he could do to suppress a shiver. His breath was suddenly coming in quick, short bursts, and he was keenly aware of the rise and fall of his chest, his heartbeat echoing in his ears, his cock hanging heavy between them.

“Think of me, and how it will feel to be back in my bed tonight. You’ll come on my cock again tonight, I think. I liked watching you. Feeling you as you did,” the King continued, stroking his thumb along the slit at the head of Steve’s cock as he did. Steve did groan then, half surrender, half plea, and leaned closer, until he could feel the brush of Tony’s lips on his cheek when he spoke. “You’ll be so beautiful, riding me, chasing your pleasure until you’re desperate with it. Think of that, while you’re missing me. Don’t touch yourself, though,” the King warned, dropping his other hand down to circle Steve’s cock. Steve bit his lip to stifle a groan, but couldn’t stop his hips from juddering forward, seeking the warm friction of Tony’s hand. “This is mine. You are mine, and you should know that I am a greedy, selfish man.”

“No, you’re not,” Steve corrected. The thought had burned so bright in his mind in that instant, it took him a moment to realize he had said it out loud.

The King drew back, a flash of disbelief and something else—perhaps just surprise —it was gone before Steve could catch it, crossed his face. His brow pulled together, eyes narrowing as he searched Steve’s face. Steve wasn’t sure what he saw there, but for a moment, the King’s face went soft, slack and seemingly almost confused, before he gave a quick, jerky nod.

“Think of me,” the King repeated, voice gone rough and tremorous, then dropped his hands, turned on his heel and left the room without a backwards glance.

Steve watched him go, the guards following him out, then sat back down on the bed. He did not
particularly look forward to returning to being locked in the tiny cell Zola called a room, but he wanted to check on Cam, and his stomach was reminding him that he was hungry. With a sigh, he pushed himself off the bed and padded across the rug-strewn floor to the workshop, where his wrap waited in a heap on the floor. The memory of the King’s mouth wrapped around Steve’s cock assailed him anew, somehow seeming even more obscene to think about in the light of day. Had it really only been the night before? Steve raked a hand through his hair, walked over and picked up the wrap, fixing it around his waist.

Only then did he allow himself a moment to look around the workshop. The King’s efforts from the night before were evident on the large, wooden table, where a long, bronze barrel, almost like a small, think cannon, with a curved hook protruding from one end and a small hole drilled in the sidewall sat. Next to it, somewhat ominously, was a small metal pan filled with fine, black powder, and an S-shaped hook that was clearly intended to somehow be incorporated onto the pan itself by the look of the bits and pieces of metal strewn haphazardly around it in what must have been a series of attempts. Steve had no idea for what use the thing was intended, but he knew a weapon when he saw one. Powder that burned and blew through rock like it was wheat chaff. It seemed impossible, but Steve had seen it with his own eyes. Shmidt had used powder like that, Steve remembered with a slight shudder.

Two of Zola’s guards waited for him when he finally left the King’s chambers. He followed them in silence back to the compound, unable to stop turning the prior night over and over in his mind. He was so distracted, it took him a moment to notice that they took a different path from the compound’s courtyard, turning right at the fountain instead of left.

“This isn’t the way to my room,” Steve protested, slowing his steps and looking between the guards.

“We have our orders,” one of the guards answered. “This way,” he said, jerking his head forward.

“Where’s Cam? The boy who serves as my attendant? Is he where we’re going?” Steve demanded.

“This way,” the guard said again, ignoring Steve’s questions. Steve grimaced and felt his stomach clench and roil, and his back stiffen. There really wasn’t much to be gained by arguing now, not with Cam God only knew where, but couldn’t help the rush of fear and anger at whatever it was that waited for him now. He could do it, he told himself. Whatever Zola had planned, he wouldn’t harm Steve, not with the King waiting on his return tonight.

There were ways to hurt that could not be seen, though, Steve knew. Ways that left no marks. He thought of the cramped, boiling space of the box Rumlow had used, with it’s fetid smell and the nails hammered through the boards on all sides, so you couldn’t lean or find any remotely comfortable way of sitting, but had to crouch until your legs felt like they would simply dissolve, and what a welcome end that would have been.

Steve walked between the two guards as they wound their way through the compound, up a series of staircases and down a long hallway to a set of wood-paneled doors painted a bright red. One of the guards took a heavy key off a chain that hung from a hook on the wall by the door and unlocked it, gesturing for Steve to enter. Steve sucked in a breath and stepped inside the room.

He stopped. Looked around. Tried to take it all in and find some sort of context for it. He looked around for Zola, but the man didn’t materialize. Just as he turned to ask the guards, he saw the door shutting behind him and heard the key turn in the lock. He stepped forward, his feet sinking into a soft, thick carpet that covered the tile floor. A long couch, covered with plump, silk pillows dotted with tassels at their corners, was in front of him, flanked by two gilded chairs stuffed with
fat, feather filled cushions.

A fireplace dominated one wall, set in a mosaic that glittered as the flames moved, casting colored lights across the ceiling. The fireplaces corbels were undulating bodies of stone, and the mosaic itself depicted nude figures writhing around on a golden bed, not unlike the huge bed that sat across the room. Steve stared at it in amazement. It was nothing like anything he had ever seen before. Shrouded by sheer, golden draperies, the bed was on a raised dais, and covered in long, rounded pillows in a rainbow of silks and a red coverlet shot through with gold threads that reached all the way to the floor. Each of the posters was a finely carved figure, nude and undulating, with arms extended above to hold up the bed’s canopy.

There were other things in the huge room, though Steve could barely light on one for more than a moment before he moved on to the next incredible thing. A tall cabinet painted in flowers. A chandelier that dripped strings of carved glass. A shelf of leather-bound books. To his left, he could see other rooms, and to his right, the thing that his mind finally caught on and clung to, a large balcony with vines of the same flowers he had seen in the courtyard stretching up the sides. A divan was spread out under a large fabric canopy, and a small table laden with food and drink waited.

“You’re back!” an excited voice shouted from one of the rooms to Steve’s left. He turned and immediately felt himself relax as Cam half ran into the room. “Isn’t it great? Can you believe this? Even the chamberpot is gold!”

“What is this?” Steve asked, shaking his head slightly. “Why are we here? I thought…” he trailed off, not really sure what he had thought now.

“Master Zola said you are to stay here, now, and since I’m to take care of you, I stay here, too,” Cam said with the matter-of-factness of youth. “I have my own room, just back there,” he added, turning and pointing with a wide grin. “With a bed and a window and everything.”

“He—he did? But, why?” Steve asked with a frown.

“Why? Because the King likes you,” Cam replied, tilting his head and giving Steve a look that said he thought Steve was rather slow, which Steve supposed with a sigh, might make Cam the more observant of the two of them. “There’s food. And then I’m to make you a bath. Oh, there’s a bath! You have to see it. It’s got a cord I pull and the attendants just bring you hot water. I don’t even have to carry it! And, it’s enormous. Huge. The biggest tub you’ve ever seen, I swear! You could fit four people in there!”

Steve didn’t comment on that observation, but his stomach gurgled at the mention of food, and, as the nervousness slipped away, he remembered how ravenous he was.

“Food?” Steve said, making it a question.

“Huh? Oh, right, food. Loads of food!” Cam told him. “Wait ‘til you see it all. Well, not all, because I ate some, but there’s fruit and cheese and meat and hard-boiled eggs and some kind of sweetbread with raisins—no, wait, I ate that—I wasn’t going to, but then you were taking so long and…then I did.”

“It’s okay, Cam,” Steve responded with a small puff of laughter. “Sounds like there’s plenty.”

There was. Far more than even the two of them could eat, even when he ate more than he should have simply because it was all so delicious, and Cam kept pointing at things and insisting he try it, declaring each dish to be some version of divine providence, even better than the last.
“So…we are to stay here,” Steve said as he leaned back heavily on the divan and rubbed a hand over his stomach. Over the balcony’s ledge, he could see the city spread out before him, all sand and rust colored, as if the houses and buildings had sprung out of the rocks themselves, and the Castle rising up behind him, ringing its thick, stone walls around the bailey and the outbuildings, including the compound where he and Cam stuffed themselves on the King’s largesse.

Cam nodded as he chewed on an apple, clearly delighted by their change in circumstances. Not that Steve could blame the boy. To say these were far nicer accommodations was something of an understatement.

“What did Zola say?” Steve asked, curious.

“Just that we were to be here, now,” Cam told him around a mouthful of apple. “I think because the King summoned him this morning, and he got all worried.”

“The King summoned him? When?” Steve asked, frowning. He hadn’t slept through Zola’s visit, had he? No, surely, he would have woken at that, but Tony had been dressed and long awake by the time Steve finally woke, and must have some sort of office or other, more formal meeting chamber than his private rooms.

“First thing this morning. I heard it from one of the other attendants when I was bringing up the wine. Oh. There’s wine,” Cam added, tipping his head up and looking back towards the suite of rooms. “I can get some, if you want…”

“No, no, that’s—I’m fine. What else did you hear?” Steve pressed.

“Not much. Just that Zola seemed really pleased, because I guess the King never calls him, but then when he got back, Lena—she’s one of the kitchen girls—she said he was white as snow and went directly to his quarters,” Cam told him. “Oh, and Lucien got sent away.”

“Lucien?” Steve repeated with a frown.

“That overseer who—who--you know. That first day when we met? The one who,” Cam stopped, frowned and looked down at his lap where his hands tugged at the pleats of the robe he wore. “The one who prepared you.”

“Oh,” Steve managed. His chest tightened and the food in his stomach soured. Oh. Satisfaction, bitter and acrid, rose in his throat until he could taste it. He tried to swallow and felt it stick. He didn’t know what to think, except that he was sure that this man’s departure was because of him, and pieces that led him there didn’t want to connect in his mind, but he couldn’t exactly deny it. Tony had done this. All of this. In a morning, while Steve slept, because Steve had told him what he told him last night, as bewildering and confusing as that realization might be.

“Lena said he was begging Master Zola to help him as they dragged him away. I’m glad he’s gone, though. I didn’t like him,” Cam added after a long beat of silence. “No one did. He liked what he did, I think.” He lifted his eyes to Steve, then looked out over the balcony with a solemn expression that was far too old for his face.

“Where was he sent?” Steve asked in a careful, measured voice.

“Don’t know. Away,” Cam said with another light shrug. Steve supposed that was all that mattered to a twelve-year-old.

“The King requested that you come assist him in his workshop tonight,” Steve said, which managed to get the boy’s attention the way a squirrel running captures that of a dog. Cam’s head
swiveled back around to Steve and his eyes went wide.

“Really?” Cam breathed out, almost a squeak.

“Really,” Steve assured him. “Asked for you specifically. Said you are…far more helpful than I am.”

“Oh God, that’s amazing!” Cam blurted out, grinning. His smile faltered as quickly as it had appeared. “I’m going to mess up. Break something. Get sent to the mines. They make you wear birds on your head, you know.”

“You’re not going to—what? Birds?” Steve stopped, then laughed at the boy’s nod of absolute conviction.

“Birds,” Cam repeated and gave a shudder. “On your head.”

“You’ll do fine,” Steve assured him. “Besides, the King is…he’s not…like that. He’s good. I think. As good as a man who has only known power can be, anyway.”

“He must be. If he gave you all this, I mean,” Cam replied.

“This…this makes him generous. I think this,” Steve said, looking around. “May be the farthest thing from what makes him good. But, I think he is. Good. Or, he could be. He tries to be. Maybe that’s all any of us do, in the end. Even kings.”

Cam looked at him for a long time, as if he was considering Steve’s words, then nodded and looked squarely at Steve.

“I think he wants you to like him, and that’s good, isn’t it? Most of them, they don’t care if we like them or not,” Cam mumbled in a soft voice.

Think of me.

“Maybe he sent Lucien to the mines and a bird will shit on his head,” Cam added thoughtfully, then grinned.

“I think I’ll have that bath now,” Steve said, shaking his head at the absurdity of the conversation. Cam let out a whoop and practically leapt off the ottoman on which he had been sitting. He sprinted towards the bathing room in his eagerness to pull the cord that would bring servants bearing pitchers of water, clearly delighted by the prospect of someone else answering his call. Steve shook his head as he watched the boy dash off, then frowned down at the nearly empty tray of food.

The bath was impressive, Steve had to admit as he slid into the steaming water after the last of the attendants left with their now-empty cauldrons of water. The walls of the room were covered in the same kind of mosaics as the main room, though these scenes, not surprisingly, featured bathers, water nymphs and other storied beasts in various stages of…well. Frolic, Steve decided, casting a dubious look at one of the scenes that seemed to depict a rather improbable encounter between a man and a many-armed sea creature. Cam had added some kind of spicy-scented oil to the water that stuck to Steve’s skin and left it soft and gleaming. Steve leaned his head back against the edge of the tub and closed his eyes, letting his mind drift.

Had it only been a few days since he was in chains at Rumlow’s? It seemed like another life. Someone else’s life. And this…this was someone else’s life, too, wasn’t it? Not his. He had to remember that. This wasn’t real. All of this was at the whim of the King, and nothing here was
his. Not even himself. The collar around his neck marked him as property, and maybe the jewel said he belonged to the King, but the King was wrong. It told no one his value. This is not who I am, Steve told himself firmly. This is who I must be, for now, but it is not who I am. If he forgot that, he would truly be lost.

Zola and the King were both a part of this place. Two ends of the same string, perhaps, but they both held this world together in their own ways. There were no kind masters. Yet, he couldn’t shake the certainty that what he had told Cam about the King was not just to assuage the boy’s fears, but true in its own way, too, and trying to reconcile those thoughts was driving him to madness.

Tony had gotten up this morning, ordered Zola to him and had that overseer sent to God only knew where, because of what Steve had told him last night. That much Steve knew to be true. Steve wondered what tale of innocence or ignorance Zola had woven to avoid a similar fate. He wondered how Tony would react if he told him about other things. Hammer. Zola. This Lord Stane, whoever he was. Though, what had those men truly done in this world? Would the King even see such things as an evil or was the issue with Lucien more a matter of personal inconvenience? Sending away one overseer was hardly an indictment of a system that allowed such things, after all. The King still ordered Steve to his bed, Steve reminded himself with a fissure of disquiet.

It was an order.

It was.

But, you want to go back, too, a sly, insistent voice echoed in his head. You’re thinking about it now. About what he promised for tonight. It was true. He was half-hard, even in the warm water, though he didn’t touch himself. Wouldn’t, he knew, though he couldn’t quite explain why. As much as he kept trying to think through Zola’s machinations or philosophizing over good men who turn their eyes from a terrible world, a part of his mind was replaying the things the King had done to him last night and brimming with anticipation for what was to come. He couldn’t refuse, after all. Have you tried, the same voice asked. Do you even want to? Or was it easier to let himself enjoy it if he told himself he had no choice?

There’s always a choice. Wasn’t that what he told General Fury? We only tell ourselves there isn’t to excuse what we’ve already chosen. Was that true here, too? He didn’t know. Cam didn’t have a choice. So many others here didn’t, either. He just wasn’t sure if he was one of them.

He didn’t really believe Tony would allow Cam to be hurt if he refused. Maybe he wasn’t completely sure of that. Not yet. Not enough to risk it. But, he didn’t believe it. That was what it came down to. And then, when he was sure, where did that leave him? It left him with a lot of questions that didn’t have answers, he supposed as he pushed himself out of the tub with a sigh.

There was a shaving blade, along with a pot of precious soap, sitting next to a pitcher and basin on a small, high table with a tufted stool below it and polished looking glass hanging above. His face and neck itched, so Steve took the blade to them and the few sparse hairs on his chest, though he went no further.

A silk robe hung on a hook next to the tub, so he put that on and let Cam call the attendants to empty the bath while Steve explored the rooms. Taking one of the books off the shelf, he leafed through the pages, then stopped. Stared wide-eyed at the intricate drawings that filled the pages. Closed the book and put it back. Pulling out another, he tried again, though with much the same results. There was a small room across from the bath that was for an attendant, already strewn with food, clothes and a wooden game board and pieces.
Opposite that, another room held trunks filled with silks, brocades and all manner of garments, each finely-embroidered in swirls of pattern and color and decorated with seed pearls, glass beads and bright threads that had been dipped in gold or silver and made the fabrics glisten and sparkle in the light. Shelves were lined with other bits and pieces of jewelry and other items clearly meant to adorn the body. Sleek arm bands. Elaborate head coverings. Collars of all sort. Wide bands inlaid with gilt and jewels that fit around the waist. Other, smaller pieces meant to decorate the face, ears and hands. Even delicate, filigreed chains with tiny bells to fit over the feet.

Leaving that behind, Steve walked over to the painted cabinet and opened its doors. Inside were a series of drawers and smaller cabinets. He pulled open the middle drawer and looked down at the contents. Well. He supposed the purpose of some of the items was fairly clear, at least based on their shape. A series of polished silver beads strung together in increasing size. A bulbous-headed hook on the end of a chain roughly the length of Steve’s arm. A circle-shaped metal ring with leather straps that ended in a buckle. Others, he had no idea their purpose. What looked like a small, gilded bird cage. Several small, delicate-looking metal pipes, no bigger than Steve’s palm, that also came in a variety of sizes. A round leather cuff, smaller than his wrist, with two chains hanging from it that ended in metal weights.

Steve turned at the sound of the lock grating as it turned, and watched as Zola swept into the room, flanked by two of his flower-crested guards.

“Ah. I see you are settling in,” Zola said, almost demurely. Steve frowned. “I’ll have to arrange a demonstration of some of those, since you lack formal training. Oh, not on you,” Zola quickly corrected at Steve’s look, waving a hand in the air. “His Highness prefers it if you are…left to him,” Zola said, blinking rapidly at Steve and trying for something that Steve thought might have been meant as a smile, but looked more like the man was choking on the words. Good, Steve thought. Let him. “I hope you are finding your new accommodations to be pleasing?”

“Yes,” Steve replied after a long moment. He waited to see if Zola would say anything about his lack of use of the term Master, but he held his tongue, though Steve noted a flash of annoyance that was quickly diffused. Interesting. Cam came up to stand behind Steve, and Steve gave him what he hoped was a reassuring look over his shoulder.

“Good, good,” Zola muttered. “I trust you will remark upon that to His Highness. Perhaps tonight?”

“Perhaps,” Steve said flatly. He rather enjoyed the way the smaller man’s face twitched at that. Must have been quite the discussion with the King this morning, Steve mused. Certainly seemed to have left an impression.

“Excellent. Well, then. Should you require anything further, send your boy to arrange it,” Zola told him, flattening his mouth into a thin line. “As always, we want to ensure the King’s happiness in all things. As I am sure you do, as well,” Zola continued. “You understand the importance of that, I am certain. The King is…very generous, when he is pleased, but, like all men, he is fickle in his interests. Nothing lasts forever. Something to…bear in mind.”

And there was the threat, Steve thought, as Zola regarded him, all pretense of obsequiousness dropping from his face. Steve could feel his pack pulling tall and straight and his stomach swooped, because he knew that what Zola said was true, but he refused to let Zola see anything from him other than disdain.

“Is there anything else?” Steve asked, arching his brow.

“Not as such,” Zola replied. “I merely wanted to be sure we understood each other.”
“We do,” Steve said. He closed the drawer on the items in the cabinet and crossed his arms over the front of the robe. “I’ll be sure to thank the King for the…changes,” Steve continued, arching his brow. “They were most welcome.” Zola pursed his lips into a sneer, then pulled it into a smile that was all teeth.

“I see that we do have an understanding, then. Until next time,” Zola replied, dipped his head in mock deference and swept out of the room with his guards on his heels. Steve waited until the lock clicked into place before turning to catch Cam’s wide-eyed stare.

“I don’t think he likes me much,” Steve said.

“He hates you,” Cam corrected. “You should tell the King.”

“Think Zola needs a bird hat, too?” Steve teased. “I don’t think the King is going to send his Harem Master off just because I don’t like him.”

“He sent Lucien away,” Cam pointed out.

“It’s…different,” Steve said. “Zola is…someone important.”

“You’re important,” Cam argued. “To the King, I mean. I think Master Zola likes to think he’s important, but he really isn’t, like this rooster that used to chase me around the barnyard back home. He always wanted the best food, and would peck at the hens so they couldn’t get anything but the leftover scraps, but then when the cook needed dinner, guess who ended up on the master’s table? Zola’s like that.”

“Expendable is the word you mean,” Steve told him, dropping his arms from his chest and looking down at his feet where his toes curled into the thick carpet. “I think we might be the rooster, too.”

“Nah, not you. Me, maybe. But, not you,” Cam insisted with complete certainty.

“Nothing will happen to you. I won’t let it,” Steve promised, almost by rote, because he couldn’t not say it, even if he wasn’t sure if it was within his power or not.

“Sometimes, you can’t stop bad things from happening,” Cam said in a soft, thin voice that sounded weary. “Most people don’t even try, though. They just do what they’re told, look the other way. Hope it doesn’t happen to them. I think they should, though. Try, I mean. If more people did, then maybe even more would, because they wouldn’t be so scared, and then things wouldn’t be so bad.”

Steve looked down at the boy, sucked in a breath and tipped his head back on his shoulders to stare at the ceiling where the chandelier glowed with candles and sent specks of light dancing across the room.

There is always a choice. If he forgot that, he would truly be lost.

“Think the King will let me go get sweets from the kitchen again?” Cam asked, bright-eyed now, voice eager, the cobwebs of their discussion wiped away in an instant by the thought of food.

“Probably,” Steve replied, earning a smile from the boy.

The rest of the afternoon dragged on, though Steve spent part of his time running through a few training exercises malleable enough to be done indoors. It wasn’t much, but the familiar rhythm of movements worked his muscles to a stinging soreness by the time he was done. Cam watched in fascination for a while, then grew bored with watching Steve lift things and wandered out to the
balcony with a handful of dried fruits and nuts.

Steve wiped himself down afterwards, then studied his wardrobe choices with a slight frown. He finally settled on a length of dual circular chains with a cascade of golden strands dripping from the front and back that wrapped across one shoulder and under his arm. Around his waist, he tied a simple golden sash, then looked appraisingly over his reflection in the tall looking glass that leaned against the wall next to the bed.

“The King will like you,” Cam said, coming up to stand beside him. That was what he wanted, right? For the King’s interest to hold. So that he and Cam would be safe. That was the whole point of this.

*Keep telling yourself that’s the only reason for the fancy get-up, and maybe you’ll believe it,* Bucky’s voice sounded in his head. Steve let out a sigh and allowed Cam to add circles of gold to his arms, though he balked at the ear cuffs with their delicate chains and glints of jewels.

“Ready?” Steve asked, and Cam nodded, bobbing his head with an excited nervousness and twisting his hands in his robes. Steve wasn’t sure what they were supposed to do now, but Cam apparently had been given some instructions, because he immediately went and pulled another one of the bell cords, this one hanging by the door, and a few moments later, then a guard opened the door and stood back to wait for Steve and Cam to pass.

They followed the guards down through the compound, then the length of passageway that opened into the now-familiar hallway outside the King’s chambers. One of the guards rapped his knuckles on the door, which was promptly opened by one of the King’s guards, who waved them in. Everything was as Steve remembered it from the morning, though, looking around, he realized that Tony wasn’t here.

“The King was detained longer than he expected. You are to eat and wait,” one of the guards said, then turned and went back to his post without further explanation.

Steve and Cam swapped a look, and then the boy pointed at the spread of food set out on the table in front of the fireplace. Steve shrugged his acquiescence, and Cam bounded over to the tray. Steve tried to eat, but his stomach was fluttering too much to have an appetite. He found himself constantly looking towards the door, waiting for Tony to arrive, though the time dragged on with no sign of the King.

Cam seemed to have divested himself of his earlier nervousness and was wolfing down a fruit-covered tart even as his plate was piled high with a hank of rabbit and roasted potatoes.

“It’s good. You should eat,” Cam said when he noticed Steve picking at his food.

“Not hungry,” Steve replied.

“Slaves are always hungry,” Cam stated in the same matter-of-fact tone he used for hard truths that Steve didn’t care to hear.

He did eat then, though not much. The boy was right, after all. When they finished, they sat in silence for a few minutes, which seemed to be the expiration of how long Cam could sit still, because the boy was up and moving around the room before Steve could admonish him against it.

“He has a lot of books,” Cam observed, nodding at the desk. He didn’t touch them, just tilted his head and looked at the spines.

“Do you read?” Steve asked.
“Slaves aren’t allowed to read. Besides, all the books at Zola’s have pictures,” Cam pointed out, giving Steve a look that said he thought the question silly.

“You keep your nose out of those books,” Steve warned, frowning.

“People do some weird things,” Cam replied, drawing out the last two words, then letting out a low whistle. “Lena said she heard one of the girls say Lord Stern likes them to pee on him.”

Steve choked on the wine he had been trying to swallow and had to pound his chest and cough to keep it from coming back up his throat.

“Excuse me?” Steve scraped out when he finally found his voice. Cam shrugged, utterly unconcerned.

“You should find out what the King likes and do that,” Cam added. “He’d like it, I bet. If you did.”

“That’s…why I’m here,” Steve replied.

“Nah, you just do what he tells you, but he would like it if you did something else. Like the other night, he said you were pretty when you’re quiet, but he likes it when you talk to him. I can tell. He tells you to stay put, but if you got up and came over to him, I think he would like it. He just doesn’t want to tell you to,” Cam said as he picked up and put down various bits and pieces on his path through the room. He opened a green jar, sniffed it, and put it back down with a disgusted face, then moved to a quill sticking out of an inkpot, tracing a finger up and down the feather.

“What makes you so sure about what the King wants?” Steve asked.

“Because I’ve been a slave my whole life. You learn to pay attention. Hear the things the masters want, but don’t say. Sometimes, they trick you, because they can, but if you pay attention, then sometimes you’ll know,” Cam explained. “I don’t think the King’s like that, though. He just doesn’t want to order you to like him.”

“He orders me to do a lot of things,” Steve reminded him dully.

“Yeah, but that’s what you’re here for,” Cam replied with an air of pragmatism that Steve envied sometimes. “You’re his concubine. You’re supposed to pleasure him. The other stuff, though. It would be kind of sad if he had to tell you to like him, because then he would know you didn’t, really. So, you should find out what he likes and do that, and then he’ll like you more.”

It was, Steve supposed, the only kind of strategy someone like Cam could afford to think about. Someone like Cam, Steve scoffed. Was he really all that different?

“I’ll try,” Steve promised, making the boy smile and nod, like he had accomplished something. Maybe he had. “How about a game?” Steve asked, jerking his head towards the chess set that stood on one of the smaller tables as he recalled the gameboard Cam had hoarded into his room.

“Never played that,” Cam said, eyeing the tall, marble pieces with interest.

“I’ll teach you,” Steve offered.

Cam was a fast learner, no surprise. After Steve explained the basics, they tried a practice game to let Cam get a feel for the board, and then began in earnest with Steve offering the occasional bit of coaching advice as Cam moved his pieces. Steve was leaning over, reaching for his Bishop when a hand closed over his.
“Are you sure you want to do that?” the King asked, voice dancing with amusement. Steve and Cam both snapped backwards in startle, Cam’s foot knocking into the table and nearly upsetting the board. “I would sacrifice your Pawn, there,” Tony added, pointing to Steve’s pawn where it faced down Cam’s Knight.

“That would leave my King unprotected,” Steve argued.

“Maybe he is a bold and brave sort who can handle himself?” the King mused, then grinned.

“Maybe he’s smart enough not to leave the surround of his Knights and get himself killed,” Steve countered.

“How very dull of him,” the King remarked. “As my assistant for the evening appears to already be engaged, I shall begin without you. No, no, continue your game,” the King said quickly when Cam started to get up from his chair. “It is a good exercise in humility. Or, so I’ve heard. On your next move, put your Rook there, in front of your King,” Tony told Cam.

Steve shot Tony a wan look, which Tony returned with an even wider grin, and then walked to his workshop. A moment later, Steve heard the scrape of his chair as Tony must have sat down at his worktable. He looked over at Cam, who glanced back at him and wrung his hands together, then jerked his head towards the workshop, eyes widening with emphasis.

“It’s fine,” Steve said, reaching out and moving his piece. “Your turn.” Cam did as the King had instructed, effectively castling his King. Steve moved his Pawn, as Tony had suggested, because, damn, that was actually the better play, much as it annoyed him to admit.

“Knight forward along the edge!” Tony shouted from the workshop. Cam looked down at the board, then pushed his Knight forward as the King instructed. Steve frowned, then moved his Bishop again.

“What did he do?” the King called out.

“Moved the hat guy again!” Cam answered back.

“He’s trying to control the center four. Move your Rook along the edge and flank him!” Tony yelled back. Cam grinned and shifted his Rook.

“What’s he doing now?” the King shouted.

“Glaring at the board!” Cam said, twisting around to yell over his shoulder. Steve heard a muffled huff of laughter from the workshop, then moved his Knight to try to support from the fringes.

It went on like that until Cam, courtesy of Tony, had most of Steve’s pieces lined up in front of him, with only Steve’s Bishop, a Pawn, the King and Queen still in play, though he was left unable to move his King without putting the piece in check.

“He’s still frowning a lot and hasn’t moved anything,” Cam called out. Steve rolled his eyes. “He rolled his eyes!” Cam pulled a smug look at him and wagged his head back and forth, rolling his eyes in mimicry.

“That’s because he’s stalemated, and he knows it!” the King replied.

“Would you stop?” Steve gritted out whisper that was part laugh as he nudged Cam’s chair with his foot. Cam grinned wickedly.
“He says he’s been too long without you and thinks we should stop playing now because he misses —oof!” Cam broke off in a huff of air as Steve mimed to grab for him.

Cam bobbed his head towards the workshop again, flattening his mouth and making his eyes go wide. Steve let out a breath, looked over his shoulder and then back at Cam. He gave a little nod and stood up. Cam followed him into the workshop, where Tony was hunched over a gear of some kind with a large, leather glove on one hand and a small, heated tool of some kind that Steve didn’t recognize in the other. Tony was, by all appearances, hard at work, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth that he kept trying to push away.

“You. Small hands. Here,” Tony said, pointing with the leather-gloved hand to his side. “Ah… chess losers have to wait,” Tony told him, eyes twinkling. Steve sucked in a breath and tried to hold his face still, though Tony’s smile only grew all the more satisfied as he watched Steve’s efforts. “There,” Tony said, pointing at Steve. “You see that? That’s the face. Where are my guards? They’ll tell you. They were silently pondering it all day. Does he do that with you? He does, doesn’t he? Poor attitude, that. Why do you think that is, when I have it on good authority that he is being extremely well cared for?” Tony asked, eyeing Steve with a knowing smirk.

“Here, hold this,” he told Cam.

“He mostly just lays around and talks about how wonderful you are,” Cam replied with a completely guileless expression. Tony dropped the tool he was holding on the table and leaned back in his chair with a delighted grin. He watched Steve sink down to his knees on the pillow across the room, eyes going dark and focused for a moment, boring into Steve.

“See? This one,” he said, nodding at Cam. “This one knows what he’s doing. You, on the other hand, could use some coaching. At this and chess, apparently, hmmm?” Tony asked, leaning in conspiratorially towards Cam. “Tell you what. You teach him a few pretty lies for me. I’ll teach you how to play chess, because, obviously, you don’t want to learn from someone who can’t even beat a beginner,” Tony continued as Cam smiled proudly and looked at Steve.

“What will you teach Steve?” Cam asked. All innocence, the little bastard, Steve thought with no small degree of amazement at the boy’s brashness, apparently having decided to take Steve’s word that the King was good, or, more likely, having been convinced by tarts and chess.

“Oh, I have a few things in mind for Steve,” the King replied, cocking his head and glancing over speculatively at Steve.

“He’s doing the face thing again,” Cam offered helpfully.

“I see that,” the King answered. “I don’t know why, but I rather enjoy seeing it. Perverse of me, I suppose,” the King said, arching a brow at Steve, a teasing glint in his eye. Steve decided he would count backwards from a thousand.

Cam spent the better part of the evening helping Tony with various tasks, some of which Steve was sure were entirely designed to keep the boy occupied and of little actual use to Tony. It was easy to just kneel here and let everything else, all doubts and questions, fade away as he watched Tony and Cam work, listening to the careful explanations Tony gave of what they were doing, why and how it would all fit together, and the gentle answers to Cam’s halting, but ever-growing, litany of questions. In here, watching them, he was me sure than ever that he was right about Tony, though, conversely, less sure about exactly what that meant. His mind wandered from there to the night to come like a stone skipping across a lake.

Think of me, and how it will feel to be back in my bed tonight. You’ll come on my cock again tonight, I think. I liked watching you. Feeling you as you did
Steve shifted his knees. Sat back on his heels. Rose up on his knees again. His own cock hung loose, rubbing at the confines of the sash, and he was more aware of it now, the soft brush of fabric, the way the harder bulb of the knot scraped against it whenever he moved. He wanted to move again, but when he looked up, Tony was watching him, eyes dark and hard and heated, and the image of a cat watching a mouse popped into his mind, and then it was worse, because Tony knew, knew what was in Steve’s head, and Steve couldn’t help thinking about it all the more. Telling himself to stop only seemed to accomplish getting his mind to focus. Tony rolled his lip between his teeth and canted his head to one side, lips quirking up.

“I believe that will be enough for tonight,” Tony said to Cam. “With my thanks for your very able assistance,” he added and pulled out another silver coin. Cam glanced over at Steve. Steve tipped his chin at him and gave him a small, encouraging smile.

“Thank you,” Cam replied, looking in awe at the coin in his hand, then shooting a speculative look at the King. “He said you were a good man,” Cam said, almost shyly, giving Steve a quick, pleading look as he did.

“Did he now?” the King asked, and Cam nodded. Steve could feel the weight of the King’s gaze on him, different now, though no less assessing. “Go. Off with you now. Tell the fat man, who is probably yelling about sauces, to give you something called chocolate that he is hiding in his private stash that he thinks I don’t know about,” the King urged, clapping a hand on Cam’s shoulder and sending him scooting out of the workshop. With another sly, if somewhat apologetic, glance at Steve, the elated boy practically ran out of the room, off to raid the kitchens again.

Steve watched the space where Cam had left the workshop until he heard the outer door close with a soft snick, and then turned back to look at Tony. The King was eyeing him sharply, rubbing his thumb and forefinger over his chin as he seemed to consider Steve. With a slight jerk of his head, he stood up and walked over to stand in front of where Steve knelt and stared down at him. Steve tilted his head back to meet the King’s gaze and waited.

“A good man?” the King repeated, making it a question, the words flowing soft and husky from his lips. “High praise, indeed. From you, at least, I believe.”

Steve held his tongue. He wasn’t sure what he could say. Sometimes, he thought. Sometimes, I think that. An answer, but not the one the King wanted, Steve knew instinctively. The King’s expression hooded for a moment, and he rubbed a hand up and down his face, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Must the boy speak for you?” the King asked with a flat grimace. “Have I not given you—” he broke off and looked away, an flash of annoyance crossing his features before he masked it with a sardonic, practiced expression that twisted his lips and made his eyes empty. “This is where you--

“He spoke truly,” Steve cut in. It was true. In here, at least. He did think that that. In here, when the King was Tony and he outplayed Steve at chess after barely looking at the board, teased him and spent long, patient hours with Cam, Steve thought he was a good man. Out there, he was the King, and it was far too easy for a powerful man to be blind than to be good. Tony’s gaze searched his face, then the practiced expression slipped away, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes went half-hooded, crinkling at the edges.

“Come,” Tony said after a heartbeat that made Steve’s breath catch. Tony turned and walked towards his chamber, leaving Steve to follow. He stood by the bed and waited while Tony poured rich, red wine into a goblet, swirled it around and leaned a hip against his desk. His gaze roamed up and down Steve’s body, head tilting to one side as he scrutinized him. It made Steve want to squirm, cover himself, drop his eyes, something, but he held himself still and returned the King’s
If I must clothe you, travesty that such a proposition may be, you should look like this all the time. Jewels and silks and little else. It’s truly beautiful on you. Like a work of art. Gorgeous. Now, take that off,” the King ordered, eyes dancing as he nodded down at the wrap around Steve’s waist. “Get in the bed and spread yourself for me.”

Steve’s stomach clenched and swooped, and a pool of heat bloomed low in his belly at the King’s words. His cock jumped and hardened. His hands were trembling as he undid the wrap and let it fall away. He looked up at the King, who was watching him and sipping his wine, then sat back on the bed, scooted up to the pillows and, remembering the night before, lay down, spread his legs wide and pulled his knees up toward his chest, leaving himself bare to Tony’s view. He breathed out a long hiss of air through his nose and looked up at the canopy overhead.

He should feel ashamed, exposed like this, but heat was coursing through him, firing his blood, and his heart was pounding in his chest. His cock stood stiff and proud, beads of fluid slowly dripping from the head and flowing down the shaft, and it should be terrible, but he knew Tony was watching him, could feel the weight of his gaze, hungry and possessive as it moved over him, and an odd, hazy feeling of power flowed through him. He was wanted, and beautiful, and Tony’s, and in here, he could be that, for just a little bit, and think of nothing else, save for how it felt.

The bed dipped, and Tony was there, smiling down at him, possessive gaze moving over him, eyes wide and dark. Tony’s mouth was parted slightly, and his breath came quick and heavy. Steve shivered at the look. The pressure down the length of his cock where it jutted out between them grew exponentially, and he dug his hands into the bedcovers to keep from reaching out to grasp it.

“Look at you,” Tony said, leaning over and running an already oil-slicked hand through the waterfall of beads that hung down over part of Steve’s chest, leaving a glistening trail down Steve’s stomach. “All golden,” he smiled and let his hand drift down to Steve’s groin, where a light fuzz of blonde hair was just beginning to return.

Tony ignored Steve’s cock, and instead, took Steve’s balls in his hands and hefted them, rolling them around and squeezing lightly. Steve’s hips jerked, and he closed his eyes, biting his lip to hold in a groan. He heard Tony give a low chuckle, and then felt deft fingers dipping down his crease, pressing and rubbing at the small, smooth patch skin just behind his balls, then digging his knuckle in hard enough to jolt a sharp cry out of Steve.

Steve’s eyes flew open as a burst pleasure slammed into him on the heels of the pain, and for a moment, his mind couldn’t work out which sensation to feel as they both cascaded together, intertwined and overwhelming. He wanted to close his legs and buck into Tony’s hand at the same time. He did groan, then, long and low and tremulous. Just when his head cleared, the pressure was gone, and he felt Tony’s hand stroking softly at the inside of his thigh and murmuring soft, reassuring words.

“Good, good, you’re so good, Steve, look at you. God, you’re amazing. So sensitive. Going to get you open, now,” Tony told him, and that was all the warning Steve had before he felt Tony’s slick finger slip inside him to the knuckle. Steve barely had a moment to adjust before Tony crooked his finger and tugged, then slid it out, only to push in again, this time all the way. A surge of hot pressure sparked its way down Steve’s cock, curled there at the head and throbbed insistently. The urge to touch himself, to find some kind of friction, was almost too much, and he ground down on Tony’s finger, seeking the sensation of being filled.

In and out, Tony worked Steve’s hole loose, then pulled his finger out and reached over for more warm oil before adding a second, both sliding in with ease. He set a quick pace, pumping his hand
in and out of Steve’s body, while gasps and moans fell from Steve’s lips and his hips undulated on Tony’s hand.

Steve’s cock ached, he was so hard. He was desperate to touch himself. All he could think about was the pressure in his cock, the need to thrust, the feeling of being filled and still too empty at the same time. Without thinking, he reached a hand towards his cock, only to have Tony slap it away.

“Unh-uh,” Tony warned, a hard bite to his voice. “Who does this belong to?”

“You,” Steve panted, making some kind of desperate mewling sound in the back of his throat as Tony worked his fingers in and out, twisting and separating them as he thrust. “Please, Tony. I need—please!”

“Good,” Tony soothed. “You’re doing so good. Almost ready. A little bit more.” Steve moaned, pushed a burst of air out of his chest and sagged into the bed, loose-limbed and shaking, while his cock strained and pulsed with the rhythm of Tony’s hand.

The strings of beads danced across his chest and swayed over his nipples, making the peaks harden and rise. He was thrusting to meet Tony’s hand now, all self-consciousness gone in the pursuit of some sense of release. A third finger slid into him, stretching him, pulling at his hole and twisting as they plunged deep, brushing against that nub inside him that made his muscles clench and go taut as white stars burst behind his eyes.

“Please, Tony, please,” Steve begged, stretching out each word into a plea. “I can’t. Please, I need you, please!”

“Please Tony, what?” Tony asked, a smile in his voice. “Please let me ride your cock, Tony?”

“Please,” Steve groaned. “Yes. Please, Tony.”

“Tell me what you want,” Tony demanded as he pushed his fingers deep again.

Steve’s throat worked, bobbing up and down as he tried to find the words, whatever words Tony needed, he didn’t care, he just wanted more.

“I want to ride your cock,” Steve husked out, then arched his back and pressed down on Tony’s hand, cock bouncing and sending droplets of moisture across his stomach and thighs.

“On your knees, then,” Tony told him. He was breathing hard, too, Steve noted. His eyes were dark pools, and curl stuck to his forehead where it had dampened. Steve managed to sit up and then stared dumbly at Tony for a moment, until Tony smiled, soft and tremulous, and wrapped an arm around Steve’s waist to help him to his knees and get him turned around. Then, Tony was tearing open the ties of his breeches and pulling his cock out, dark red with strain and leaking a path of fluid from the head. He shimmied over to the table by the bed and applied oil to himself, then laid down on the bed and lazily stroked a hand up and down his cock as Steve’s eyes tracked the movement.

For some reason, Cam’s words filtered through the haze in Steve’s brain. He didn’t let himself think about the impulse long enough to question it, just reached out and took Tony’s cock in his hand, giving it a long, slow stroke, following the path of Tony’s hand. Tony went still, his eyes fluttering shut, and he breathed out a long, low sigh.

“Is this—should I—“ Steve stammered, feeling Tony’s cock throb, hot and hard, in his hand.

It felt so good to touch him. He hadn’t before, and now, he couldn’t imagine not. The feel of Tony
in his hand was intoxicating. Steve repeated the motion. Then again, flicking his wrist around the head the way Tony had done to him, watching the King’s eyes widen and darken and feeling his cock twitch in Steve’s hand.

Steve wanted more. To see more, feel more, touch Tony the way Tony touched him. Suddenly, the image of his own lips wrapped around Tony’s cock appeared unbidden and fully formed in his head, and he felt his mouth water as saliva pooled. He wouldn’t be able to do what Tony had done, but he wanted to, wanted to know what he would feel like, filling his mouth. What Tony would taste like on his tongue. He didn’t let himself hesitate, just bent his head down and took the head of Tony’s cock in his mouth, sucking lightly at the delicate skin and salty fluid. Tony’s whole body jerked, and his hand shot out to grab Steve’s hair, winding a fist into it.

“Fuck!” Tony cried out, neck arching and mouth working into a wide oh of surprise. “God, that’s—fuck! I can’t, I can’t,” he panted, and tugged Steve’s head until his cock popped out with a wet, sucking sound, leaving a trail of spittle down Steve’s chin. “Fuck,” Tony bit out again, looking at Steve. “I can’t, I’ll—I’m so close. God, Steve. Fuck,” he rasped, running a hand through his sweat slicked hair and then down the front of his tunic. “Need you. Now. Need to be inside you.”

Steve nodded and threw a leg over one side of Tony’s stomach, straddling him. He could feel the hard, round head of Tony’s cock against the seam of his ass, leaving a damp path as it sought entry. Steve reached a hand behind him and wrapped it around Tony’s cock, lifting himself up on his knees and slowly guiding the head to his entrance. He sank down, just a bit, eyes going wide as he felt his hole stretching to accommodate Tony’s cock.

Tony grunted, eyes closing as his cock breached Steve’s hole and slid inside. His hands reached out to rub up and down Steve’s thighs. The angle was so different, Steve thought, almost distantly. Sharper. His walls clenched at the invasion, and he breathed out, trying to relax as he slowly lowered himself down the length of Tony’s cock. The burning stretch, the dense pressure building deep inside, the throbbing drumbeat at the head of his own cock, all of it rolled together. Wave after wave crashing into him until he could barely catch his breath, and then the head slipped past his hole, and he sank down the full length of Tony’s cock with a bright stab of pain followed by a roiling burst of pleasure. The breath punched out of him. Under him, Tony groaned, his mouth opening and closing, and the hands that gripped Steve’s thighs spasmed and scabbered for purchase as Steve took him in.

“God, fuck, Steve,” Tony gasped, eyes rolling back in his head as his hips bucked and fingers dug into Steve’s thighs. “Oh my God. Ngunnngh,” he moaned, tossing his head back as his eyes went wide and unfocused. “Fuck.”

Steve started to gently rock his hips, lifting slightly as he rode Tony, slowly at first, then harder, gyrating his hips as he lifted himself up and sank back down. He shifted slightly, angled his hips experimentally and thrust down, and oh! His mind whited out. A shout tore from his lips, then a moan as he repeated the motion. His own cock tingled and throbbled where it bobbed in front of him, dotting Tony’s tunic with fluid and occasionally rubbing at the soft material as Steve moved.

“There you go. There you go, Steve, good. You’re almost there. Good God, you’re glorious. Look at you. Going to come on my cock for me. Fuck, you’re beautiful,” Tony breathed out, rubbing his hands over Steve’s thighs and watching with an expression of almost awe as Steve worked his hips harder, faster, clenching his muscles as he slid down Tony’s length and earning another string of curses and nonsense words.

Steve tipped his head back and raised himself up until he felt the head of Tony’s cock catch on his rim, then slammed down, hitting the spot deep inside himself. It was like going under water for a
very long time and then finally breaking the surface and drawing in a breath. The pleasure, the release, the exaltation radiated though his whole body from that single point. Warm, white streams of fluid spayed across Tony’s chest as Steve worked his hips in a sloppy, faltering rhythm, mouth open to a silent shout.

He collapsed in a heap, just barely catching himself on his arm before falling on top of Tony’s chest. His muscles where quivering with exertion, vibrating and pinging like he had run a great distance, yet he felt loose and boneless at the same time. He was breathing hard. Sweat coated his brow. Tony was running his hands up and down his chest and shoulders, his name and other words that Steve couldn’t quite process but understood as good falling from Tony’s lips. Tony cupped Steve’s jaw in his hands and pulled Steve’s eyes to his.

“You were perfect, Steve. So good for me. You did so good. Relax. I’ve got you,” Tony murmured, hands still roaming across Steve’s skin where he shook.

Then, Tony was shifting under him, and he felt Tony’s cock slide out, still hard and full. An awful, burning humiliation broke open inside him, making his stomach clench and loosen like it was a fist opening and closing. Tony hadn’t come, and he had, and this was…it was terrible, though he couldn’t explain why. Tony moved to Steve’s side, tipped his hand under Steve’s chin and gently pulled Steve’s head to look at him.

“You were perfect, Steve. Absolutely breathtaking. I’m going to use you now. Fill you up and come inside you,” Tony told him, as if he could see into Steve’s head the way he could see the chessboard. Steve nodded slowly and dropped his head to the bed as soon as Tony released him. He thought he might have said please.

Tony lifted Steve’s hips and stroked a hand down Steve’s spine, then splayed his fingers wide at the base of Steve’s back and left them there. It felt good. Comforting. Like being held. He felt Tony thrust in, hard and deep. Tony wasted no time in finding a rhythm, just started ramming in and pulling out at a punishing pace, making a wet, slapping sound as his balls bounced against Steve’s ass on each thrust. It didn’t take long. Or, Steve didn’t think it did. His mind seemed to want to drift, like he was floating on the sea back home, the waves lapping at him, lifting and sinking with the tide. Soon enough, he felt a warm wetness fill him, and that was good, too. Tony gave a few, final thrusts, then bowed forward until his head touched the curve of Steve’s back. He lay there, breathing hard, hands wrapped around Steve’s stomach while his cock softened inside Steve.

Steve let out a sigh when Tony finally pulled out. He rolled over and curled on his side to watch Tony, who sat on the edge of the bed, hands on his knees, chin dropped down to his chest, breathing heavily. Tony tipped his head back and squared his shoulders, letting his eyes fall shut before sucking in a deep, bracing breath and pushing himself off the bed. He tucked his cock back inside his breeches, pulled his stained tunic off his head and tossed it to the floor. Then, he padded over to the basin, wetting a towel with the water in an iron pot that sat beside it. He walked back over the bed and sat down, drawing his knee up underneath him while he regarded Steve.

Steve realized he had never actually seen Tony naked, and openly studied him.

“Like what you see?” Tony asked with an amused quirk of his lips.

“Travesty you’re not naked all the time, too,” Steve replied. Or thought he did. His voice sounded odd. Slurred, like the words had been blended together and not quite come out right. Tony grinned, biting his lower lip for a moment, then let out a bright, ringing laugh.

“Oh, now he flatters me,” Tony muttered, though his tone was light, and his eyes were crescents,
soft and crinkled at the corners. “Is this all it takes to loosen your tongue to compliments? I must admit, if so, I would say that I’ve never been more committed to being showered in praise in my life,” he said, brows rising as the corners of his lips tugged up into a smile.

He bent over and wiped the towel over Steve’s stomach, down his cock and around his balls, then between Steve’s legs and over his ass until he was clean. It was warm this time, Steve noted, remembering the King’s promise and feeling strangely touched at the gesture.

“Should I go?” Steve asked. At least this time, the words managed to sound like words, and his hazy mind was slowly coalescing.

“That even physically possible?” the King asked with a laugh. He reached out and ruffled Steve’s hair, then smoothed it down again. It felt oddly intimate, though Steve didn’t know why.

“Stay. Sleep. I have work, but you have more than earned your rest. Ah, wait. Here, I have something for you,” Tony said, clapping a hand on his knee was he stood. He walked over to a small chest that sat on a low cabinet, opened it and strode back over to Steve with something in his hand.

“For you,” Tony announced and held out a wide, golden collar cut in an intricate pattern of lines and shapes that looked like flames in the firelight and inlaid with a ruby the size of a small bird’s egg. He produced a small key and reached around Steve’s neck to undo lock on the collar Zola had given Steve, then fitted the new collar around Steve’s throat, where it hung, heavy and gleaming.

Steve swallowed thickly and felt the new weight of it, heavier than it had any right to be. He wanted to run his hands over it. He wanted to claw it off.

“It’s beautiful,” Steve managed, finally, his eyes suddenly stinging and filling with pressure.

“It belonged to someone else, once. A long time ago,” Tony told him. He brushed a hand over the ruby, then down Steve’s chest until it settled just over Steve’s heart, which leapt in his chest, pounding so hard that Steve was sure he could see Tony’s hand pulse with it. The air in the room had gotten thick. Heated. It crackled with something, alive, waiting, breathless, like the air before a storm. “Someone special.”

“Who?” Steve asked, curious.

“Their true name is lost to time. The one they had, the one that could be spoken,” the King replied in a low, rough voice, eyes lowering for a moment before he lifted his gaze to hold Steve’s. “Was Raj’Inama. The King’s Prize.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read, commented and left a kudos on this fic. I really, really appreciate it.

If you want to see the “inspiration” outfit for this chapter, head on over to my tumblr: sabrecmc.tumblr.com. The internet is a most helpful place, lol.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The bird pecked determinedly at the crumbles of bread, leftover from their supper, that Cam helpfully tossed towards the edge of the balcony, occasionally fending off another feather friend who attempted to abscond with the largesse with loud, angry squawking that for some reason made Steve think about Colonel Phillips, though he doubted the man would appreciate the comparison.

He looked down at the parchment in his lap and brushed the charcoal dust off the drawing. The images of a figure bending low, hand extended as crumbs fell and a small, black bird peering up with keen interest were little more than outlines in the midst of broad strokes and the suggestion of movement, but it was a start.

“Is that me?” Cam asked, leaning over Steve’s shoulder to study the drawing.

“It will be,” Steve promised him.

“No one’s ever drawn me before,” Cam told him. “Is that the King?” he questioned, pointing at the parchment underneath, where the corner of a more finished sketch stuck out, revealing the side of Tony’s face, head bent, looking down. In the sketch, he wasn’t looking down at anything, but Steve had drawn the expression from memory two nights ago in a frenzy of…something. “You’re good. You should show it to him.”

“Maybe,” Steve said noncommittally, and stacked the bits of parchment together so the one of Tony disappeared. He glanced up, looking out over the balcony to the castle wall beyond. Shift change. Four times a day. Bowmen, with swords at their hips, in addition to longspearmen at the main gate where a jumble of wagons, horses and people with large baskets of goods slung over shoulders or held atop their heads came and went from the castle proper into the city below.

“Think the King will call you back tonight?” Cam wondered. “They left today. Those people who were visiting. I think he will. Maybe he’ll need my help again, too.”

Ten nights of feasting and feting the emissary from Carvahlla and his retinue had kept Tony busy with matters of state, and the rest of the compound occupied with providing entertainment after the official parties and dinners were over. Cam was an endless source of gossip, and with little else to occupy him, regaled Steve with story after story he picked up from the other attendants. The Ambassador brought his own concubine, a small, plump woman with dark hair down to her knees, who kept a pet monkey on a gold leash and painted her skin in elaborate designs, and to hear Cam tell it, sometimes wore only that. Two of the Ambassador’s retainers preferred each other, but didn’t want the Ambassador to learn of the relationship lest one lose his post, so engaged the concubines in their subterfuge. Lord Barbrey only wanted to watch. Lady Sybel liked to mount men. Lady Claudia came so loudly, the servants thought she was being murdered. Lord Marbrand fell asleep in the middle of the act, so soundly that the poor concubine thought the man had died and woke him with her scream of horror.

Nothing of the King, though, not that Steve had asked, though Cam delighted in volunteering more information than Steve particularly cared to hear, so he assumed the boy would have shared anything about the King. Steve reached up and ran his fingers over the collar around his neck.
“I don’t know,” Steve said to Cam with a slight frown furrowing his brow. He looked out at the horizon, where the sun blazed, making everything hazy and bright. It was a lie. Tony would send for him. He was sure of it. The boy had not even woken from the bed he loved two nights ago when the King came to their rooms in the deep hours of the night, resplendent in his finery in a way Steve had never seen him, every inch the king he was, down to the golden crown in his head. Even now, it seemed almost a dream, hazy and soft at the edges, the way the sun made the mountains in the distance.

I’ve missed you. Raj’Inama. Tell me that you have missed me.

Had he said it? He couldn’t remember. He remembered Tony’s mouth and hands and the feel of the crown, cold, then warm, pressing into the base of his skull as Tony took him, everything silent save for their ragged, mingled breaths, faint brushes of flesh and the words Tony whispered into Steve’s skin. Steve’s gaze dropped down, and he scanned the wall again. The shift change was almost done. The sun was low, still bright, but starting to dip towards the horizon. Soon, it would be dark. The castle gates would close. The guards would be watchful, but less so, with the gates shut. It was possible. For him, at least.

A good Bowman’s range was no more than four hundred paces, and at night, far less with any kind of accuracy. Within the zigzag of buildings and homes that crept down from the castle walls, even less. The castle walls were stone. Old stone, which meant grooves, which meant places for hands and feet. The guards kept their gazes outwards, attune for threats, not from escape. The gifts Tony had given him could be traded for passage home, if he could make it to a deepwater port. Or he could join a cog’s crew. He could do it, he thought. For Cam, though…

He’d asked about the punishment, idly, casually, as if it was merely curiosity, and Cam had stared at him, wide-eyed, head shaking. Flogging. If you were lucky. Hobbling, if you weren’t. A hobbled slave could not work, and a slave who could not work, did not eat. Would Tony do that? He thought there was a part of Tony that could be terrible in his anger, but cruel? He wasn’t sure.

Could he really ask Cam to take such a risk? And if he left the boy behind, what would become of him? Zola would retaliate, if he could, Steve knew, if only to deter others from such attempts. The boy would pay the price for Steve’s bid for freedom, and that was a cost too high to bear. Surely, in time, Tony would tire of him. Perhaps then, he could convince Tony to allow him to contact his friends, arrange some kind of recompense for his freedom, and the boy’s. Something.

“He will,” Cam assured him with his usual certainty as he brushed the crumbs off his hands. “He likes you.”

As if on cue, Steve heard the click of the door lock, and put his charcoal down, turning the parchment over in his lap. He stood as Zola swept out onto the balcony a moment later, with two of his guards standing silently behind him. Steve watched Zola’s gaze dart to the collar around Steve’s throat, a flicker of distaste and something darker, deeper, crossing over the man’s face before he carefully schooled his features into something that approached the unctuous, fawning look he’d adopted of late when interacting with Steve.

“As you know, His Highness has been recently occupied with our foreign guests, but as they are departing, he is once again in need of a diversion, and has requested your presence this evening,” Zola told him with a small bow of his head. Steve figured that little show must have cost the man, but they were waging this private war of thinly veiled words and shows of deference the way others might look for weak points in armor to land blows.

It wasn’t a request, of course, so Steve just nodded, while Cam grinned widely.
“It would behoove you to consider the recent demonstration of our more...elaborate options to please the King,” Zola continued with a slight moue pursing his lips. “The King is a...complicated man. Simple pleasures...well. He has not mentioned anything, true, but who knows how long such things might keep his interest, particularly after the many delights shared by the Ambassador and his party? Just something to think about,” Zola said, giving another small nod of his head, though his eyes were hard and gleaming with dislike.

Steve watched the little man scurry out, then looked over at Cam.

“What did he mean?” Cam asked with a frown. “What demonstration?”

“Nothing,” Steve said. “Nothing for you to worry about. Would you ring for a bath?” Steve requested, because he knew that would distract the boy from his question. It worked, of course. Cam grinned and skipped off to call for hot water and arrange Steve’s bath with the pomp and circumstance of a naval commander.

Steve had sent the boy away on some errand he couldn’t even remember the moment Zola and two of his overseers arrived with the man in tow. He didn’t like thinking about it. The glassy-eyed, expressionless look on the man’s face told him more than enough. Steve had protested, of course, though it fell on deaf ears. Steve was not to be touched, but Zola could punish and threaten in ways that were far less straightforward than Steve ever imagined. Don’t worry, Zola smirked. He likes it. Steve doubted that was true. Steve doubted the man liked or disliked much of anything, not anymore. Whoever he had once been had long ago been wiped away, and now the man had gone somewhere else in his mind, the same way those poor souls Steve remembered seeing after they liberated one of Shmidt’s camps had simply left themselves or gone so deep inside, they couldn’t find their way back.

He shivered and closed his eyes. At least he now knew what the things in the cabinet were for, though the knowledge wasn’t especially comforting. Would Tony want him to do those things? Zola seemed to think so, but Zola’s words were poison, Steve knew.

Tony liked him. The why of it, Steve wasn’t sure of, but he knew it was true. Tony liked him, as he was, not that servile creature Zola wanted him to be. He thought Zola might know that, too. He thought it might worry Zola, just a bit, that he did not know the King as well as he thought he did, and something about the collar Tony had gifted Steve with did more than just worry Zola. It unnerved the man. Deeply. Though, Steve couldn’t fathom why. Whatever the reason, Zola had no interest in the King’s continued happiness with Steve, of that much he was certain.

He walked out, wrapped his hands around the edge of the balcony and looked out at the castle surround again. Watched the guards dutifully stand at attention as a patrol walked by. There would be three patrols, he knew. The other would follow along in another half hour. A long enough break for two people to slip out, unnoticed in the throngs of merchants and servants going in and out of the castle. Stolen robes, simple ones, not like the lush, embroidered silks that filled the closet here. Scarves to hide the collars. Something to cover his head. His blonde hair stood out too much here. It could be remembered.

“Bath’s almost ready,” Cam announced from behind him.

“Thanks,” Steve replied, turning his head a bit to nod at the boy. Could he ask Cam to do it? Or leave the boy behind? It would be easier, without him in tow, obviously, but Steve’s heart lurched at simply abandoning the boy to his fate at Zola’s hands. Perhaps if he left a note for Tony, asking him to look after the boy? Tony seemed to like Cam well enough, after all. Surely, whatever anger he held at Steve wouldn’t transfer to the boy. He sighed. Tipped his head back and looked up at the sky, the kind of blue just now starting to grey with the departure of the sun and dappled
Leaving the balcony and the disappointed bird behind, he padded across the thick carpets to the bath, tossed his robe aside and sank into the steaming water. Maybe the heat would clear his head, he thought without really believing it as he leaned back against the tub’s rim and studied the ceiling without really seeing it.

He didn’t want to become like that man who Zola brought here for the demonstration. He didn’t want to be this man, who ate ripe fruit and took long baths and waited to please a king. But, what said he couldn’t serve here, after Tony lost interest? Perhaps there was some way out of this that fell short of life or death. The war back home was over. What was a soldier without a war? They needed soldiers, here, too. Tony knew he had a good mind for it. Perhaps he would grant Steve his freedom in return for his agreement to join Tony’s army. Maybe Tony would even seek his counsel from time to time. He could be useful. Contribute something again.

Steve tried to see it in his mind. Putting on armor again, taking up a sword, carrying the King’s red and gold banner on a shield instead of a star, and saw only Tony, sitting at his worktable with some contraption in front of him, the light dancing in his eyes, soft and heated, as he looked at Steve.

The patrols are every half an hour. Cam has nearly free run of the compound. No one would notice a couple of missing robes from the laundry.

It’s a huge risk.

I think not doing it might be, too.

“I think you should wear something fancy tonight,” Cam mused as he brought a pile of fluffy towels in and set them down on the steps by the tub. “So that he’ll know you missed him.”

“You choose,” Steve said. So that he’ll know I missed him, Steve’s mind echoed. He gripped the edges of the tub and pushed himself out, sending puddles of water to the floor.

“Really?” Cam asked, wide-eyed and mouth agape.

“Nothing too…you know,” Steve amended with a slight frown, grabbing a towel for his waist.

Nothing-too-you-know ended up being a diaphanous, sand-colored, flowing material that was completely open at the sides, but draped down his front and back from beaded layers of fringe that circled his neck and shoulders. A bracelet for his wrist. Matching circles of gold at his ankles, with chains of tiny twists of gold and brightly colored beads that hooked in a ring around his big toe.

“There,” Cam pronounced when he stood up from buckling the chain around Steve’s right ankle into place. “Perfect. The King’s going to love it. You should let me dress you all the time. Like your…what do you call it? For the knights? Squire. Did you have one, when you were a soldier? I could be like your squire, but for here, ‘cause you kind of really need it.”

“I didn’t have a squire. Exactly,” Steve replied, tilting his head to one side as he took in his image in the tall looking glass.

“What’s not exactly a squire?” Cam asked.

“An opinionated young man, bit older than you, who followed me around and generally ignored my requests and did what he wanted. So,” Steve laughed, shaking his head. “I guess you’re pretty much like not exactly a squire, then.”
Cam grinned in return, clearly delighted at the idea, though Steve privately thought this was about as far from squiring as one could get. Still, he saw no reason to dampen the boy’s enthusiasm. Steve looked his reflection over one last time. He barely recognized the figure staring back at him, half nude and decorated to tantalize. The material brushed across his cock like a light caress when he moved. He would be half-hard by the time he reached Tony’s chambers, most likely. He assumed it had been designed that way. It was sheer enough and fine enough that little was left to the imagination, and he supposed that was the point, too. Tony would see him like this and know that this was something Steve had done for him, and that would please him, Steve knew, not just because he liked how Steve looked, but because Tony liked the idea of Steve wanting to please him.

It’s strategy, nothing more, Steve told himself as he studied his reflection.

He’ll tell me I’m beautiful, some other part of himself whispered. In that dark, honeyed voice of his, with his eyes burning soft. He’ll call me his and look wondrously upon me, as if he is surprised by it all.

“Ready?” Cam prompted. Steve nodded and watched Cam ring the bell by the door to alert the guards. A moment later, the door was thrown open and the guards stepped back to allow Steve to pass. He gave a quick look to Cam, who beamed at him, then walked out into the hall and fell into step between the two guards as they walked. Neither touched him, he noticed, and again found himself wondering about the collar Tony had given him and what it signaled. He should ask Cam. The boy had a knack for rooting out gossip, and surely, someone would know whatever story was behind it.

By the time they reached the long hallway outside Tony’s chambers, Steve’s skin was hot and tingling. His heartbeat echoed in his chest, and he could feel his breath coming faster than before, though not from the walk. This is anticipation, he acknowledged. He had missed Tony in a strange way. There was security in Tony’s attentions, of course, but beyond that, he enjoyed their strange repartee. A different kind of battle, but a challenge he found he almost relished, would have relished had it not been for their vastly different positions.

One of Zola’s guards knocked on the door to the King’s chambers and it was swept open by the tall guard Steve recognized from before, and he was ushered in without a word. The rooms were quiet, the bed still made and a fire blazing in the hearth. Torches lit the room, casting shadows on the walls and making Steve think of the shapes Sam could make with his hands, all manner of birds and creatures writ large on the drape of a tent or the rock of a cave, with the sounds to go with them, bringing them to life. Sometimes, he thought Sam was one of those shapeshifters his Gran used to tell him stories about while she snapped peas, crack after crack, until it sounded like footsteps. Sam could charm the birds from the trees, talk to them, get them to ferry messages for him in tiny scrolls wrapped around their feet. Cam would like that, Steve thought, and for a moment, the homesickness that had been lost to survival somewhere in the belly of a nightmare ship reared its head.

A noise from somewhere to his left shook Steve from his reverie, and he turned to see Tony standing in the opening between his bedroom and workshop, wearing a tunic with the sleeves shorn near the shoulders, simple breeches, bare feet and streaks of soot or dust of some kind covering his thighs, stomach and arms. It was such a contrast to the man who appeared in Steve’s room, dripping in jewels and gold-threaded silks, and yet, Tony seemed somehow more like this, though Steve could not find the understanding of why that would be so.

Tony gave Steve a long, slow look, up and down, head tilting to the side, lips parting into the start of a smile as he took in Steve’s appearance.
“Your Highness,” Steve heard himself say, then dropped his gaze as a flush crept over his skin at Tony’s scrutiny. His hands fisted against the exposed skin of his thighs. He resisted the urge to fidget where he stood and held himself still, waiting. His head might not know what it wanted from Tony, but his body had no such qualms. Heat, wild, stirring, flames of it, curled low in his belly and flicked against his insides. His cock was making a nice tent of the fabric, drawing up and jutting out from between his legs. Soon, there would be a wet spot soaking through the material, and that thought was both horrifying and arousing at the same time. Tony would see. Tony would know.

He felt, as much as heard, Tony walk over to stand in front of him, suddenly deeply attuned to the other man’s presence. He lifted his eyes and tried to focus on Tony. Steve could smell him, sweat and metal and Tony. His nostrils flared, and he sucked in a breath, and thought for a moment that he could taste him again, the way he had that night, musky and salty with sweat and slick with oil. The hairs on his arms and the back of Steve’s neck stood on end, the way bales of hay sometimes leapt with small bursts of lightning and would catch fire if you didn’t wet them. His cock throbbed and pulsed at the thought. He could feel the thread of moisture spurt out of the tip and watched Tony’s eyes drop down. His tongue came out to wet his lips, and Tony’s eyes followed the movement, going dark and heavy-lidded.

“I missed you,” Steve said, without prompting, no longer surprised that it was true in its own way. His voice was a rough, scraping sound, a whetstone gliding over the face of a sword.

“I see that,” Tony said, the edges of his mouth tugging up and warmth lighting his eyes. “I missed you, too. All these people, listening to me, complimenting me, doing what I told them without objection.”

“Must have—” Steve began, then broke off as Tony’s hands came up to wrap around the curve of Steve’s waist where the skin was bare. “Been difficult for you to endure,” Steve managed, swallowing thickly around the last as Tony’s hands moved up, light fingers tracing over Steve’s ribs, then down his arms, threading through his hands and over his thighs.

Steve made a strangled sound in his throat as Tony reached back and cupped the globes of his ass, kneading the soft flesh and pulling him apart just enough so that he felt the tug at his hole, the cold burn of air, the jolt of being exposed, before releasing him and settling his hands on Steve’s waist again. The pads of Tony’s thumbs were rubbing circles into Steve’s skin on each side of his stomach. Steve’s cock twitched and rose, pressing against the fabric of the drape, lifting it, like some kind of strange show, revealing him a little at a time.

“Oh, yes. Very, er…hard,” Tony grinned, then reached up to cup a hand around Steve’s cheek. His thumb traced the seam of Steve’s mouth, then back again, stopping in the middle and giving Steve’s lip a slight tug down. Steve’s mouth opened on a question, and Tony’s thumb slid inside, over Steve’s tongue, then out again to wet Steve’s lips. Steve was so startled, he just stared dumbly for a moment, mouth agape, and Tony pushed his thumb back in, past the edge of Steve’s teeth, and held it there on Steve’s tongue. Not deep enough to be uncomfortable, but deep enough that it was almost uncomfortable, and the threat of it, the closeness to it, made the heat in Steve’s gut coil, tightening like a spring.

Tony hummed, a pleased note, then tipped his chin up just slightly, encouragingly, and thrust his thumb into Steve’s mouth again, rubbing it along the flat of Steve’s tongue, then around, swirling it and sliding it deeper before drawing it slowly out again, leaving the tip dangling from Steve’s bottom lip.

“Beautiful,” Tony murmured, almost absently, his eyes still locked on where his thumb still held
Steve’s mouth. A shiver cooled Steve’s skin, even as warmth bloomed deep inside. Hesitantly, he flicked the tip of his tongue against Tony’s thumb and watched the King’s eyes darken to black pools in the low light, his mouth parting, a shaky breath rattling through his chest. “My treasure,” Tony said softly, voice thick and ragged as he dropped his hand from Steve’s mouth down to twist the fabric around Steve’s cock where it jutted between them. He stroked his hand up and down over Steve’s cock through the soft fabric, and it was like lightning across Steve’s skin, rough and gentle at the same time. His hips jerked, seeking Tony’s hand. “Let me take care of you.”

Tony’s hand fell away from Steve’s cock, and he made a strangled sound that was almost a whine, earning a pleased smile from Tony. He grasped Steve’s hand and led him to the bed, pushing him down with a gentle nudge and climbing between Steve’s legs, palming Steve’s cock through the fabric again, not stroking, just holding him with a firm pressure that made Steve want to buck up against his hand. He didn’t, though. He held himself still. Waited. Soon, Tony’s fingers started to work him, massaging, kneading, gliding up and down over the soft fabric, the heel of his palm digging in, then relaxing.

Steve groaned. His back and neck arched. He could feel his throat working as he struggled to keep from shouting. Pressure coiled deep and low, filling him and leaving him empty at the same time. He wanted more. Wanted to feel, touch, taste, wanted all of Tony. He could want that in here. He could allow himself to want it, in here, just for a little while, in the dark hours when he belonged to Tony.

Tony’s efforts were harder now, more forceful. Steve flattened his back on the bed and ran his hands over his stomach and chest, tugging at the fabric. He wanted to feel Tony’s hand on him. He wanted to feel Tony. Reaching out blindly, he grabbed for Tony’s shirt, pulling it up and rubbing his hand over Tony’s stomach. He could feel the muscles bunch under his fingers, the crisp, wiry hairs that dipped below Tony’s breeches.

“Can I…” Steve panted, blinking up at Tony, who had slowed his hand at Steve’s touch and gone almost rigid. “I want to see you. Please.” He hadn’t really seen Tony, he realized, and suddenly, he wanted that more than almost anything. To see, to touch, to feel. Skin on skin. Maybe it was improper. Maybe one didn’t touch the King, but he wanted to. He wanted to so badly.

Tony nodded, once, and his hand left Steve long enough to pull his boots off. They hit the floor with twin thuds. He was tugging his shirt over his head when Steve managed to clear the cobwebs from his head and sit up to help. He pulled Tony’s shirt off and tossed it to the floor, then framed his hands on Tony’s stomach, moving them slowly up the curve of Tony’s chest, over his nipples and across his shoulders, then down his arms. Tony held himself still, breaths coming in shallow pants, eyes wide on Steve.

He was leaner than Steve. But, well-muscled, with tight, corded arms used to holding a hammer or pulling a tension rope. His skin was the deep golden color of the sandstone mountains that they carved to build his castle. His stomach was flat and covered with a dark trail of fine hairs that spread upwards, over his chest and circled the dark pink nipples. Steve let his hands roam, exploring. The pulse point in Tony’s neck leapt, fluttered under the delicate skin there.

Steve tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. He lifted his eyes to Tony’s and found himself mesmerized by the intensity of Tony’s gaze, hard with desire, yes, but something else floated there, tentative and yearning.

Steve’s hands fell to the waist of Tony’s breeches and hovered there for a moment. He watched Tony’s throat click and there was a small, subtle shift of his body that Steve took as permission. He undid the stays with shaking hands and spread the flaps apart, taking Tony’s cock, already red
and straining, into his hand. Wrapping his hand around the shaft, Steve could feel the heat of it, the blood pulsing through the thick vein on the underside, the small drops of moisture slowly trickling from the head. He heard Tony grunt, low and breathy, and felt Tony’s cock swell as he held it.

“Oh, Steve,” Tony husked out, barely a word so much as a moan, but something in Steve exulted at the way it sounded, his name falling from Tony’s lips. How overcome Tony sounded, just from this. He rubbed his thumb through the fluid at the head, spreading it around until the tip of Tony’s cock glistened with it, while Tony made sharp, punctuated noises that seemed to burst out of their own volition. “God, I—fuck,” Tony broke off, hips juddering into Steve’s hand. “Stop, stop, I need—” Tony sucked in a long breath and reached down to pinch the base of his cock. He tipped his head back and let out the breath in a long hiss, then brought his hand up to cup the side of Steve’s head, running his fingers through Steve’s hair in a sort of soothing gesture, though Steve wasn’t sure which of them needed it more.

Tony laughed, low and rough and out of breath, and he closed his eyes for a moment before opening them to look at Steve. His gaze was warm, full of a gentle fondness that made Steve’s chest tighten and his stomach curl.

“You’ll be my undoing, I swear,” Tony chuckled, ripe with self-deprecation. “My head is full of you, even when you’re not here. Sometimes, I think I—” he stopped, looked away. “Tell me you think of me when you’re not here,” he whispered, voice harsh and tight, his eyes on the hearth, catching the glow of the fire.

“I think of you often, Your Highness,” Steve replied honestly.

Tony laughed again, different this time. Not a good laugh, Steve’s mind registered. There was something sour underneath it, the sweet-rot of decay hiding behind a wall, but then Tony scrubbed a hand vigorously over his face and turned back to Steve, and whatever it was disappeared so quickly, Steve questioned if it had been little more than a trick of shadow. Tony went up to his knees and pushed his breeches down his hips, then sat back down and shimmied them off, kicking them onto the floor, so he was nude, all bronze and dark browns in the firelight, cock full and hard as it curved against his hip.

He studied Steve for a moment, then smiled the soft, half-smile that crinkled his eyes and placed a hand on Steve’s chest, pushing him back against the pillows. Tony stretched over him to reach the warm oil on the table by the bed and slicked his hands with it, then slowly lifted the material that draped down Steve’s front up until it bunched at the center of his chest. Steve let his knees fall open in offering and shifted his hips, raising them in anticipation. Tony’s lips twitched, and his eyes found Steve’s, even as Steve felt the tip of Tony’s finger find his hole, circling the sensitive ring of muscle before pushing inside.

This time, Steve kept himself relaxed, remembered to breathe and held Tony’s eyes, though he couldn’t help the heated flush that he could feel spreading up his neck and cheeks. His eyes fluttered and watered, and he swallowed, licking his lips as Tony thrust his finger in and out. Tony’s other hand found Steve’s cock and started stroking it, long, slow pulls that mimicked the rhythm of his finger. When he added a second finger, the strokes picked up their pace, the grip tightened and Steve’s breaths started coming in short, ragged pants.

“I could watch you all day and never tire of it, I think,” Tony commented, almost idly, except for the slight tremor in his voice. “Beautiful.” Steve bit his lip, then threw his head back and moaned as Tony’s wrist flicked around the head of his cock.

“I tried—I wanted,” Steve stammered, breath coming in rapid bursts. “I wanted to draw you, but I
couldn’t—I didn’t know. I tried. But, this, you’re—Oh, God,” Steve groaned as Tony’s thumb pushed the seam of skin on the head of his cock apart and rubbed. “You’re so much better. Like this. So much better than I—than I thought. I like,” Steve broke off, bodice going taut as pleasure thrummed through him when slid a third finger inside, thrust deep and curled them upwards, hitting the spot that made Steve’s vision go white.

“What do you like?” Tony asked. “Tell me.” Steve made an unintelligible sound and felt Tony’s hand on his cock slow nearly to a halt. He groaned, thrust his hips against Tony’s hands, trying to find the friction he needed. “Tell me,” Tony insisted again, voice going hard, urgent, like it mattered.

“I like you like this,” Steve gasped. “I like feeling you. Touching you. When you’re—when you’re Tony. I like when you’re Tony,” Steve ground out through clenched teeth, though the thought barely made sense in his own head. “I—please,” Steve panted. His hips pressed down trying in vain to meet Tony’s fingers. He looked up beseechingly at Tony, who was gazing down at him with a strangely tight expression that slowly melted away into something so soft and tenuous, it seemed fragile, like a single word or movement and cracks would appear. “Please, Tony.”

Tony’s fingers left him and Steve groaned, a wide gulf of emptiness seeming to open inside of him at their loss. Tony leaned over him then, one hand braced on the side of Steve’s head. Another plea caught in Steve’s throat as he looked up.

“You want me to be Tony,” Tony murmured, voice soft and filled with something wondrous that Steve couldn’t name, but made warmth bloom in his chest and his throat tighten.

“We, Tony,” Steve repeated.

He wasn’t sure what he was asking for, but it seemed to be enough. Tony’s other hand threaded through Steve’s hair, pushing the sweat-soaked strands back from his forehead, then dropped down to trace the curve of the collar around Steve’s throat. Steve watched him let out a rough breath, catching his bottom lip for a moment and shaking his head, eyes closing for a long moment as he drew in a tremulous breath. Steve could feel Tony’s cock against his own and unconsciously canted his hips toward it. Tony swallowed thickly, opened his eyes and looked down at Steve. Slowly, his head dropped so his forehead rested against Steve’s. Tony’s hand gripped Steve’s cock and brought it to his own, holding them together as his hand stroked both of them.

It didn’t take long. Sensation rushed through Steve like a wave, emanating from where Tony’s cock rubbed against his, wrapped in the heat of Tony’s oil-slicked hand. Steve’s hips bucked and he thrashed his head from side to side against the press of Tony’s forehead, and then he was coming, hard, hips jerking, body going rigid as he spasmed, coating Tony’s stomach with thick streams. Tony stroked him through it, whispering soft words in the space between them that slowly filtered into Steve’s pleasure-addled brain.

_Gorgeous. Perfect. So good, Steve, so good. Look at you, my treasure. My beautiful one._

_Raj’Inama._

Tony finally pushed himself up to his knees when the wracking tremors stopped running through Steve’s body. Steve looked at the mess on Tony’s stomach and thighs and felt an odd surge of pride. He liked Tony like that, messy and dripping of him. Tony caught his eye, then ran a finger through a streak of it and brought it to his lips to taste, tongue darting out to lick it from his finger. Steve’s eyes widened. He sucked in a breath and felt his toes curl into the coverlet, making the glittering bands on his feet clink lightly.
Tony grinned, raised an eyebrow, and scraped his fingers through the mess, then reached down and smeared it over Steve’s hole, pushing some of it inside him, and God, fuck, Steve thought he was going to die, because it was filthy and terrible, and surely he was meant to hate it, but it did something to his mind, the thought of it, and he couldn’t think of anything else. He blinked. His mouth fell open into an O, but no words came out. Tony repeated the motion, gathering more of Steve’s cum and pushing it inside him, coating his passage.

“I want you to think about it,” Tony said, voice pitched low, but there was an air of teasing underneath it that made Steve feel that Tony could see into his head and knew his thoughts, even the ones he didn’t want to think. “How I’m fucking you on your own cum. How I’ll fill you up with mine, and when it leaks out of you, it will be both of ours.”

The air punched out of Steve’s chest and a low, keening wail filled his ears that he only realized belatedly was coming from him.

“Please, Tony,” Steve heard himself say, and let everything else fade away. It was just him and Tony. Just this. In here. There was only this. Only them.

The rounded head of Tony’s cocked teased at his hole, catching on the rim a few times before starting to press inside. There was the long moment of burning stretch, the feeling of being split open, and then it was over as Tony slid inside him with a shallow, easy thrust. Tony stilled, and Steve watched his eyes drift shut, mouth parting in a soft gasp.

“Tony,” Steve moaned, the word sounding like it was being stretched apart and somehow falling to pieces on Steve’s lips. Tony opened his eyes and looked down at Steve, holding his gaze as Steve felt his body clench at the invasion, then slowly relax.

“My beautiful one,” Tony husked out, breath going harsh and ragged. “I’ve got you. Shhh,” he soothed, rubbing his hand up and down the inside of Steve’s thigh. He pushed deeper then, slowly, until he was fully ensconced. Steve heard Tony give a satisfied grunt, and felt him pull out a bit before thrusting back in. Quick, shallow thrusts, then a slow, deep one that sent a tingling burst of pleasure coursing through Steve’s body from deep inside.

Tony’s thrusts stuttered, going jerky, and irregular. He let out a sharp cry, and Steve felt a warm wetness fill him. Tony’s hips pumped a few more times as he spent himself. He collapsed on top of Steve’s chest, breathing heavily, a ring of sweat across his brow. He stayed like that until Steve felt his breathing slow and heart stop pounding a rabbit-like beat into Steve’s chest. Steve could feel Tony soften inside him, but had no desire to hasten his leaving. There was something strangely comforting about this, with Tony as undone as he was. He wrapped his arm around Tony’s back and rubbed a line up and down Tony’s spine. He felt, as much as heard, Tony give a low laugh that sounded almost like a hum.

Tony finally pulled out of him, and Steve had to resist the urge to sigh. He rolled to Steve’s side and pressed a kiss to Steve’s shoulder, one hand smoothing down the beads and fabric. A moment later, Steve felt the bed give as Tony got up and went to the wash basin to clean himself off. He returned with a warm, damp towel and wiped the mess from Steve’s stomach and thighs, then dipped it between Steve’s legs, giving Steve a sardonic, playful look as he carefully wiped the cloth up the crease of Steve’s ass, catching the drip of fluid as it leaked out of him.

Steve swallowed, remembering Tony’s words, about how it was their mingled seed pouring from him, and felt a pulse of want spring from deep inside to the end of his cock, which gave a slight twitch. Tony grinned, because, of course, he knew what was in Steve’s mind, but just finished cleaning him and tossed the cloth to the floor near his pile of clothes. He sprawled out next to Steve on the bed and pulled the blanket from the end of the bed up over both of their legs. A hand
fisted on Steve’s chest, and he felt Tony’s head come to rest on his shoulder, breath warm on his skin.

“I am supposed to be reading through that stack of ledgers Rhodey has been haranguing me about,” Tony told him, nodding a bit towards the desk, which held all manner of books and parchments. His voice was rough and worn sounding, but even then, Steve could hear the happiness in it. “But, you are far more interesting than army requisition reports.”

“Why are you reading requisition reports?” Steve asked, curious.

“Rhodey thinks something is off about the accounting. I have a bit of a head for patterns and numbers, that kind of thing,” Tony replied. Steve could feel Tony’s lips curving into a smile against the knob of bone at his shoulder. A bit of a head for patterns and numbers, Steve thought with a mental shake of his head. He would just bet Tony did.

“I could help. Read them, I mean,” Steve offered.

“Are you so bored in your quarters that you would want to peruse dusty old accountings?” Tony replied with a bark of laughter. “The books on your shelves looked far more interesting. I wouldn’t want to keep you from those,” Tony said, a smile curving its way along Steve’s shoulder. “I like you too much to ask it of you, anyway. You’d regret your offer in no time, believe me. I haven’t even opened the damn things and already, I regret it.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Steve insisted. “I’d like to… help. I guess. I am used to doing more than sitting around and…” he trailed off, then gave a quick glance over his shoulder and caught Tony’s sardonic smile.

“Sitting around, and waiting to pleasure your King?” Tony finished for him. “Yes,” Tony said, drawing out the word. “Such a difficult life. Untold luxuries and amusements at your fingertips. How terrible for you. I see that now,” he teased, eyes bright and dancing with the firelight. “I shall see that you have all the thankless tasks that you desire, then. Old ledgers to read. Stacks of them! How is your penmanship? You can transcribe the treatises the moths seem to like best. I’ll ask Pepper if she has some silver that needs polishing. How are your, er…polishing skills? Do you know how to rub just so? Very delicate business, that. Wouldn’t want to do it too hard. Or too softly. Takes a fine hand to…get that just right. Perhaps, when you’ve had a bit more practice…work your way up, so to speak.”

Steve shot him a glare over his shoulder and felt Tony’s body shake with laughter where he curled against Steve’s side.

“You’re making the face again,” Tony observed. He sounded delighted.

“It’s…just my face,” Steve protested.

“I like your face. And all of its expressions, even the mutinous ones,” Tony replied. “I think I might like those best. Odd, that. You’re so easy to rile, though. I shouldn’t take such pleasure in it, I know. You must have driven your commanders nearly mad.”

“Nonsense, they loved me,” Steve deadpanned. “Well. One of them did sort of throw a mortar at me.”

“Excuse me?” Tony demanded, pushing himself up on his elbow.

“Not—not really. It was a dud, though, I didn’t know it at the time,” Steve explained.
“And what was the point of that little exercise?” Tony asked.

“To see what we’d do, I guess,” Steve replied.

“How well and how quickly you dive for cover?” Tony asked, clearly bemused. Steve shrugged his shoulders. “So, do tell. What did my stalwart soldier do?”

“Jumped on it,” Steve replied.

“Jumped on it,” Tony repeated flatly. “You jumped on a mortar that you believed would kill you. Why would you—” Tony began, then stopped and glanced away, then lay back down next to Steve with a long sigh. “To save them. Of course. Of course, you would. God,” Tony said, shaking his head and scrubbing a hand over his face. “You wonderful, brave idiot.”

“My commander said much the same. Except with the wonderful or brave parts,” Steve replied with a low chuckle.

“You said that you draw,” Tony reminded him after a long moment of quiet. “Before. You said… you tried to draw me.”

“I—yes. I draw. Some. I’m not—it’s just a pastime. Nothing more,” Steve rushed out. He could feel embarrassment heat his face, but there was little he could do to hide it.

“And you draw me,” Tony repeated.

Steve nodded, and Tony fell silent for long enough that Steve thought perhaps he had fallen asleep. Finally, he heard Tony clear his throat from next to him, and Steve felt a fissure of tension run through Tony’s arm where it was wrapped around Steve’s stomach, the finger splaying, then contracting, digging into Steve’s skin just a bit.


“Well, that’s one way to put it,” Tony said with a rough bark of laughter. “I’ll have to tell Rhodey. I’m not making an ass out of myself, I’m just being expressive. He’ll love it. And who else do you draw?” Tony asked after the laughter cleared from his face. There was curiosity in his tone, but a subtle tightness lacing the words as well, as if he did not like his own question.


“Your…family. You must miss them,” Tony said quietly. He wasn’t looking at Steve. His eyes on the canopy overhead, mouth pursed, as if he had never noticed it before. “It could be possible…perhaps, to have them visit or…even stay, if they were inclined.”

Steve sat up and peered down at Tony, who was tapping at his chest with one hand while the other mimed the same rhythm into the blanket.

“You would do that?” Steve asked, so astounded by the offer that everything else simply fled from his mind.

“Why not? It would…please you, I think, to have this,” Tony replied. He was looking anywhere except at Steve, eyes darting and dancing around the room the way a top spins across a floor.

“My mother died years ago. My father when I was a babe,” Steve told him. “I don’t have any siblings.”
“Ah,” Tony said, forehead creasing with a frown. “I am sorry to hear that. I thought, perhaps—but, clearly no, I—”

“Tony,” Steve breathed out, shaking his head as his brows drew together.

“Yes?” Tony queried, finally looking up at Steve.

“Thank you,” Steve said. Without thinking, he turned and braced his arms on either side of Tony’s head, leaned down and placed a kiss to Tony’s brow. He felt Tony tense, almost as if in surprise, then go languid under him as he pulled back and gazed down. Tony’s eyes were wide, clear, his mouth parted in a silent gasp. You should find out what he likes and do that, and then he’ll like you more, Steve thought, remembering Cam’s words.

He pressed his mouth to Tony’s, catching a puff of warm breath on his lips, the scratch of beard on his chin, and the hint of taste just beyond Tony’s lips. He had no idea what to do, he realized. For all they’d done, Tony had never really kissed him, and that left his sole experience with the tavern girl Bucky sent his way with cheap ale and what Bucky later called a heart full of patriotism, though Steve didn’t think it had been her heart Bucky had been eyeing.

Steve started to draw back, then felt Tony’s hand slide up through his hair to hold his head, a gentle pressure holding him in place, while Tony’s other hand came up splay against Steve’s cheek, and then Tony was kissing him, full and open and hot, and Steve had enough time to think that it felt a bit like falling, though the kind of fall where you would never land. Where you flew.

Tony’s tongue darted out and traced the seam of Steve’s mouth, then delved inside, flicking and curling against Steve’s own, sliding along the edge of Steve’s tongue, in and out, then swirling around and around, and drawing Steve into his own mouth with a soft groan. The hand in Steve’s hair rubbed encouragingly as Tony’s mouth angled against Steve’s, centering on the tip of his cock. The kiss shifted, deepened. Steve ground his hips against Tony’s and felt the answering thrust of Tony’s cock sliding next to his own between them. Steve moaned into Tony’s mouth, a wet, breathy sound, and Tony nipped his bottom lip, then sucked at it, before licking his tongue across the mark.

Steve finally tore his mouth away, panting for hair and managing to bang his nose against Tony’s in his haste. He dropped his head to the curve of Tony’s neck and tried to get air. Tony was stroking his hands through Steve’s hair and down his neck, over the collar, smoothing the heated skin. Still struggling for air, Steve pulled back and looked at Tony. His eyes were dark pools, fixed on Steve with the same intense, half-lidded look Steve had seen before, that he had thought was curiosity, but looked now like something else entirely, something he had seen on a thousand faces as they waited to see who would walk over the hill and return to them. Longing, Steve thought. For something you were afraid to name.

“I like how you show your gratitude,” Tony said. The look was gone, a smirk that didn’t quite meet Tony’s eyes replaced it. “Please, feel free to express your appreciation—“

“It was thoughtful of you, Tony. I mean that,” Steve interjected, cutting Tony off and wiping the smirk away.

“I—I know you do,” Tony said. “My own parents died when I was barely in my teen years. It is hard, that. Losing them when you are old enough to be expected to pick up everything and go on, but young enough not to really know how,” Tony observed.

“How did they die?” Steve asked. “Sorry, that’s…I don’t mean to pry. That’s not my—“
“It’s alright. The story is fairly well known, anyway. Their ship went down on their way back from a trip to Lyema,” Tony replied. “A simple pleasure cruise up the coast. They weren’t even out of our own waters. The naval ships accompanying them had to keep to the sea, but my mother loved to watch the shore go by and wave to the villagers and crofters who came out to toss flowers into the sea, so they took the cog. No one knows what happened. An unmarked shoal. Some defect to the ship itself. I don’t know. All they found was wreckage.”

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Steve said. He glanced over, the turned and pushed himself up on his elbow. He reached over with his other hand and threaded his fingers through Tony’s, where Tony’s hand was back to tapping a nervous rhythm on his chest, though he seemed unaware he was doing it and almost startled by Steve’s touch.

“It was a long time ago,” Tony replied.

“Time helps us be better at dealing with loss. It doesn’t make the pain go away,” Steve said. Tony breathed out a huff of air, stretched his neck out and looked up at Steve. A small, soft smile formed, the one that made his eyes into crescent moons, and he reached up a hand to cup the side of Steve’s head. Steve leaned into it, letting his eyes fall shut for a moment. When he opened them, Tony’s expression seemed to have broken open into something else, something awed and almost reverent, before it was gone and Tony jerked his hand away as if he had been burned.

“I—uh,” Tony began, clearing his throat and looking up at Steve with a quick, darting glance before going back to looking at the canopy. “I have noticed your…melancholy. Upon occasion,” Tony continued. “I—I had thought perhaps your family, but…no, obviously, I was wrong.”

“I…do not mean to be melancholy,” Steve said, dropping his gaze down to where their hands were linked in the center of Tony’s chest. He wasn’t sure what else to say. He didn’t even know what he wanted to say. Tony’s offer was still rebounding through his head, and nothing seemed to want to make sense anymore. Tony seemed to have followed his look and squeezed Steve’s hand.

“It was not a criticism, my treasure,” Tony said, his tone gentling, bringing Steve’s eyes to his face as he raised their intertwined hands and brushed a kiss across Steve’s knuckles. “It is just that I…I think your happiness would be breathtaking to behold. I would wish to truly see it.”

Steve looked away, his eye catching on the doors, where the silent guards stood in shadows so deep he could only make out the play of the fire on their armor in long, glowing threads. On the other side of the doors, there was a whole world he hated. Or, thought he did. Were they all terrible, like Zola and Hammer and that Stane person? Would Tony really choose to surround himself with such people? It was like trying to read a book with half of the page missing. He looked back at Tony, finding his expression soft and almost sad, as if the melancholy he accused of Steve had found a new home. In here, the book was so easy to read, to enjoy, to let the story play out. But, in here was not real.

Tony’s real, though, his mind supplied. Tony’s real and his offer to bring your family here was real and his kindness to Cam is real and so many other things are real. What else needs to be real to be true?

“I also happened to have the opportunity observe the Ambassador’s soldiers as their party was visiting these last days,” Tony said, clearing his throat again and sending a quick look Steve’s way. “They seemed very close and shared a true camaraderie. Rhodey assures me this is often the case with soldiers,” Tony began, voice sounding almost pinched, it was so clipped and precise. Steve frowned in confusion at the turn of the conversation. “It occurred to me that you, being a soldier, were perhaps worried about the fates of your fellow soldiers. Most are not so fortunate as
to end up where you are, after all, and this must—I can see as how it would trouble you. It would soothe your mind to know that they were well,” Tony said in a careful, measured tone. “You would be able to put those concerns to rest and--and move on.”

Steve shifted and turned his head to face Tony.

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked.

“Your fellow soldiers. From when you were captured. I could have them located. I’m not saying it would be easy, but…it is possible. They could be brought here, even, if it would please you. Places could be made for them to serve, and your mind would be at ease, then, I think,” Tony said. “You will write down their names and descriptions and the details of your capture. If they can be found, we will find them, and I’ll arrange for their purchase,” Tony told him with a firm nod, as if the matter was settled. Steve stared at him, all the words taken from his mind as if his head had been tipped over and the words spilled out into a useless jumble.

“You…” Steve started, brow drawing together. “What? You would—you would bring them here?” Nat, Sam, Clint. The twins. His heart constricted. It wasn’t what Tony meant, of course, but it was so close to it, Steve’s head filled with images so fast he could barely track them. I don’t want them here, he thought, though even as he thought it, he recognized the lie. I don’t want to want them here, though. They can’t be here. I can’t be here.

“Of course,” Tony replied, pulling back to look at Steve. His gaze softened. “Of course, I would. You’ve not told me how you came to be here. Conscripted from Andoria, I would guess, from the look of you. The Juntas are always pillaging for soldiers on those shores. God knows, they go through their own fast enough to need the conscripts. Or Cymeza, perhaps?” Tony asked with a slight frown. “The Ettans get half their slaves from there, though I don’t see how you’d have learned what you leaned on a Cymezian battlefield. I hear they make mortars of hardened sheep manure they light on fire. God, I bet that reeks. Hell of a deterrent effect, I suppose. Anyway, if any of them are even half the man you are, then I should think we would be better served with them here than under the sun in the fields or in the dark of the mines or one of those God-forsaken fighting pits Stern runs. I thank whatever God there is that you were able to avoid such fates, but this would prey on your mind, I think, that you were able to come here and your friends were not, however misplaced such reproach may be.”

Steve stared down at Tony for a span of heartbeats.

“There were no other soldiers with me. There was a battle. I survived. I don’t know how many others did. Raiders found me, floating in the sea. I was clinging to a piece of flotsam, barely alive,” Steve told him, looking away. It was such an easy, simple explanation. Told everything and nothing. Not so different than the one he had shared with Cam.

“Raiders?” Tony echoed, pushing himself up on his elbow. A furrow of concern creased his brow, Steve noticed when he looked back at Tony. “I…did not know that,” he said. His frown deepened. “But…they would have seen your value. Of course. Surely, they would have noticed. Been careful with you. Treated you well.” He looked to Steve, as if for confirmation. Steve returned his gaze, but held his tongue, which seemed to say enough. Tony sat up and pushed a hand through his hair, dropped it to his side, then reached up and scrubbed it over his mouth in obvious agitation.

“You are here now,” Tony said, voice flat and hard, staring at the far wall, almost like he was speaking to himself. “Whatever…circumstances that brought you to me, you are here now, and you are safe. No one will harm you. You will want for nothing.” He craned his neck to the side and looked down at Steve. “Is it…is it these memories that cloud your mind? I would take them
from you, if I could, but all I can do is try to replace them with better ones. Ledgers and dusty manuscripts, even, if that is what it takes,” Tony said with a wobbly half-smile, though his eyes, when he looked down upon Steve, held unspeakable tenderness. “Perhaps, in time, other things will come to mean enough to keep those thoughts at bay.”

“I miss my friends,” Steve said. He felt his chest pull at the words, like there was a hanging thread there, tugging at a seam, threatening to rend it apart. “I miss my home.” Tony flinched at the words, his face going tight and pinched for a moment, before he schooled his features.

“This is your home,” Tony said, his gaze going hard. “Whoever it was you left behind…whoever you—you are mine, now,” Tony grated out, the words almost seeming to have barbs to them. “Still,” he continued after a heartbeat of heavy silence, his voice seeming to soften with half a sigh as he breathed out the word. “I am not…unmoved. It is natural that you would miss where you are from. Perhaps, one day…one day, in the future, it might be possible, perhaps, to arrange a visit,” Tony said with a shrug, pursing his mouth a bit as he did, as if the words tasted sour, and Steve knew what it cost him to even suggest such a remarkable thing. “A king must make official visits from time to time. There is no reason for you not to accompany me.”

“You would take me with you?” Steve asked somewhat incredulously. He hadn’t even thought of anything like that. Such a thought had not even entered his mind. He had looked at his life here and seen only these walls, and now, Tony was offering something else entirely, as if it were a given that Steve would be a part of this future. He could not, of course, return home as Tony’s concubine. Just the thought of it was horrifying. But, that Tony would even consider such a thing was, Steve could acknowledge, incredible in its own right, let alone that he would propose it seemingly because he thought it would make Steve happy.

“Of course. Many concubines travel with their households,” Tony said easily, seeming to relax at Steve’s obvious amazement. “In fact, in a few months or so, I hope to make a journey to pay a visit on our army encampment to the East. General Ross has been slow to embrace some of my newest inventions, and I think a demonstration is in order. You will join me. It will be good for you to get out of this place, see the countryside. The Red Mountains are remarkably beautiful in their own way. There are ancient figures carved into the stone around the base by some long-lost civilization. Winged lions, warriors, a giant tortoise, even. You will enjoy the diversion, I believe.”

“I would like that,” Steve replied carefully. He would like that. To get out of the city. On such a trip, they would be surrounded by guards, yes, but not by walls. Not by miles of sprawling civilization between him and some semblance of freedom. It was an almost impossibly perfect opportunity. No scaling walls or slipping past guards. Just walking off a bit too far one day and disappearing into the mountains or forest, something he and his team had done countless times. He could live off the land until he found a friendly ship’s captain or one greedy enough not to care that the payment came in the form of a slave’s collar. It wouldn’t be easy, true, but it would be easier. “May Cam come, as well? I think he would like it,” Steve asked, trying not to give away any of the sudden well of nerves that opened up inside his chest.

“I don’t see why not. You’ll need an attendant, anyway,” Tony replied.

A few months. He only had to keep Tony’s interest for a few more months, only had to do this for a little longer, and he could be free. Why was joy not singing through his veins at this gift? Why did his stomach feel hollow and his throat so tight? Why could he not seem to swallow?

“Thank you,” Steve said quietly. He turned onto his back and stared up at the canopy without really seeing. Instead of swirls of red silk, he saw the wave of Natasha’s hair. The threads of gold
gleamed like strands of fire arcing over his head from Clint’s bowmen. The shadows moved like wings around spirals and swirls of runes and marks too old to have a word for them.

“Tell me of it. This place where you are from,” Tony ordered, though his tone was gentle. “You should speak of it more. Your past is not forbidden, Steve, just because your future is here.”

“We have…there are lakes that freeze in the winter,” Steve began haltingly, then stopped and drew in a breath. He blinked at the canopy, and it was just fabric again, nothing more. “You can walk on them and see the fish swimming below. In the north, the mountains reach up to the clouds and have snow on top all year round,” Steve recalled, the words flowing easily as his mind called up the images. “You could go south and find green fields as far as the eye could see. Tall stalks of wheat and corn. That’s where my mother grew up. On a farm, the seventh of eight children, though only five made it out of infancy. She said on a quiet night, you could hear the corn grow.”

“Hear the corn grow? You jest with me,” Tony smiled.

“No, no, it’s true, I swear,” Steve said, shaking his head and feeling a wistful smile form. “The stalks would make a sort of breaking sound. It scared her when she was little, so her father told her it was just the fairies, come to do their magic so they would have a good crop by spring, and you knew it was them because they’d leave circles behind in the stalks. Great big ones in all kinds of patterns, but her father said not to be afraid because that was their way of telling the other fairies they’d already taken care of these crops. I always liked listening to her tell that story.”

“It sounds beautiful,” Tony replied softly. “Where is this place that you long for so much?”

“Across the Dark Sea,” Steve told him. “In the new world. A place called York, though it used to be Yyrck when the settlers first arrived.”

“That is…a long way away,” Tony observed, though it was not a refusal to travel there, Steve noted. “Is it true,” he asked after a pause. “About what happened there? What you were fighting?”

“ Hydra,” Steve said and felt a shudder wrack its way down his spine to settle in his gut like a stone.

“Shmidt,” Tony added, voice tinged with tension. “We heard tales. Even here. Rumors, really. Stories carried across the waters by sailors and trader, most of which couldn’t possibly be true, but…the camps…”

“Yes,” Steve affirmed.

“They called for aid,” Tony said and looked over at Steve. “At the last. General Fury sent a letter that traveled half the world to get here. I wanted to…send something, of course. Some kind of assistance. Food, even, or—I—Obie was right about it, though. We’re far too extended as it is, and…it—it was so very far.”

“We could’ve used the help,” Steve said. It came out more bitterly than he meant it to, but he had stared across fields of burning men and knew what bone looked like when it turned to ash. “I can’t blame you for not wanting to send your men to die in a war a world away. Had I been here, I may have given you the same advice. But, Hydra…it’s a threat to everyone. They won’t stop. Cut off one head—”

“And two more grow in its place. Yes, I know,” Tony broke in, going quiet for a long time as he let the words hang in the air. “Our last reports said Shmidt’s forces were defeated and Shmidt
himself dead,” Tony prompted after a moment. “A terrible battle at the mouth of a great river. Some kind of conflagration. Something of Shmidt’s devise, I would guess. His weapons…I’ve only heard tell of them, but, some kind of—of compound that burns even when wet? This—this was what you were fighting?” Tony demanded, voice rising. He sucked in a breath like he was readying to say more, then abruptly shut his mouth and looked away.

“I’ve never seen the like,” Steve admitted. He lay back down and scrubbed a hand over his face, though kept his other hand bound with Tony’s. Steve breathed out through his nose, tasting the acrid burn of phantom smoke in the back of his throat. He felt Tony’s hand tighten on his and flexed his fingers into a squeeze in response.

“It’s over now. Your war,” Tony said.

“My war. It was never my war. War doesn’t belong to soldiers. It belongs to kings and despots and those who want to take what they cannot earn. War will never be over, not as long as there are men who crave power,” Steve ground out, then stopped himself and sucked in a breath. “Sorry, I ___”

“A philosopher, too? How fortunate I am,” Tony teased. “War is a necessary evil, my soldier, but it is an evil. That should never be forgotten,” Tony said, voice going quiet. “Not all men wish to wield power for their own sake’s, though, you know. It is a…terrible privilege to have that kind of responsibility for the lives of others.”

Steve looked up at the swirling threads of the canopy where shadows from the fire played, and thought of Fury, asking him to carry the star shield. We’re losing, Captain. The people know it. Sense it. They need to believe in something. Help me give them this. So they will fight on and die faster, Steve had demanded. So they will remember why they’re fighting. They’re not fighting for me, Steve remembered protesting. No. But, they would. They would fight for you, Captain. I don’t want them to. The best soldiers never want it, son. They just do it anyway.

“The hour grows far too late for this kind of talk,” Tony said around a yawn. “Sleep. We will argue more about how to make the world better on the morrow.”

As soon as Tony said it, Steve felt the weariness seep into his bones. His mind was still weaving cobwebs with Tony’s words, but his body was winning the battle. It wasn’t long before he drifted off, Tony warm by his side.

He wasn’t sure what woke him. Movement or a noise or the dawning realization that he was alone in the bed. Steve blinked the sleep from his eyes and squinted into the darkness. The fire was down to embers, and the torches burned low in their cradles. He sat up and glanced around, gaze landing on one of the large, stuffed chairs by the fire, where a figure sat in shadows.

“Centuries ago, so the story goes, some ancestor of mine had a concubine whom he favored above all others. So overcome by his devotion, the king took his own heart, wrapped it in gold and placed it around the concubine’s neck,” Tony began in a low rasp. Steve tried to find Tony’s face in the dark, but couldn’t see anything except a maw of darkness. He thought that might be by design. “No one, you see, save the king, could speak the concubine’s name, so they called the concubine Raj’Inama. The King’s Prize. No one was allowed to look upon the concubine’s face unveiled, or suffer blinding, and to touch meant the loss of the hand. An old story,” he continued, voice rising a bit in the telling. “Romanticized over time, no doubt. Probably very little of it true, and certainly, even if some of it carried truth, we are not so barbaric today. But…you are mine. You—you please me. In a way that I did not expect to ever find. I thought I had, once before, long ago, when I was a stupid boy. I’ve no doubt that’s why Zola chose you, though he had little idea what he was giving me.”
Steve stared at the dark shape, then looked away, towards the windows, where the circle of silver moon filled the glass.

“I could not sleep. I find myself...unsettled,” Tony added into the heavy silence.

“By what?” Steve asked, looking around again as if the answer would materialize.

“I was thinking of...what brought you to me,” Tony replied. “I do not care to think of you like that, and yet, that is all that seems to fill my head. Raiders are the bane of my existence these days, and yet, I have never hated them quite the way I do in this moment. I should concede to Obie’s plan to hire privateers to protect the guild ships. It is the smart thing to do. The whole council agrees. And yet, all I can think of is how pleasing it would be to send my navy to destroy them, ship by ship, until they are scourged from this earth. It should probably bother me how badly I want this. Perhaps it will, eventually.” His voice was calm. Almost too calm, Steve thought, for it did not match his words, and that was somehow worse. It vibrated, low and steady, the way the ground shakes under the pounding of hooves, and warned you that something terrible was on the way.

“Your fleet is spread too thin to trail merchants up and down the coast,” Steve said, swallowing thickly around the words while his stomach seized up. This wasn’t strategy or war. This was anger. On his behalf. It had been so long, he almost didn’t recognize it, the feeling that someone else shared the horror at an experience.

“True,” the King acknowledged in the same emotionless tone. “But, if the guilds can’t trade, then they can’t make money. If they can’t make money, they can’t pay my taxes and I can’t build my ships or pay my soldiers, so we are at something of a stalemate. Obie says, hire privateers. Let them keep the bounty from any raider vessel they pillage. Little better than legitimized raiders themselves, truth be told,” the King ground out in a voice laced with frustration and weariness. “You don’t approve?” he asked, after a long moment of silence. There was a challenging lilt in the question, coated with an air of surprise, though not displeasure, Steve thought. “I don’t like it much, either, but Obie is the one who generally handles the guilds, and his counsel is usually correct.”

“Raiders are using your own ports to offload their cargo. I used to watch them. Sometimes. When I could see the ships,” Steve told the King in careful, punctuated words. He didn’t like the memory, hot and sweat-soaked and tainted with a desperate thirst that even now clawed at his throat, but even terrible knowledge could be useful.

“That’s not possible,” the King said sharply.

“They fly the banners of the guilds or whatever unfortunate they last met when they are in port, but their ships are light and fast when they aren’t burdened with their spoils. Different than the merchant vessels. They just bribe the portmasters to look the other way,” Steve explained. “Seize the goods. Use the profits for the letters of transit. The guilds will be happy with their market not being undercut, if nothing else. Commandeer the ships, fill them with your navy and use those to guard your merchants on their routes.”

“Raiders. At one of my ports,” the King repeated in a dull, tight voice. “And you saw this? You’re sure? You’re absolutely sure?”

“It’s where they docked to sell me to Rumlow,” Steve replied.

“Rumlow? Who the hell gave Rumlow permission to open up again?” Tony demanded. “That’s where you—Steve,” Tony breathed out, sounding almost wounded.
“How did you think I came to be there?” Steve asked.

“By way of Etta or a caravan from Ghoad or, I don’t know, the slaver ships from Borentz,” Tony grated out. “That’s how most end up here. I thought.” He was up now, moving around the room on hurried feet, lighting a candle on his desk. He stood there a moment, head down, chin resting on his chest, hands fisted on the desktop where he burrowed his knuckles into the wood. “I will handle this.”

Tony walked over to the bed, shrugged off the robe he was wearing and climbed in, kneeling next to Steve. Hands cupped the sides of Steve’s face and tilted it until he was looking up at the outline of Tony’s face. Steve’s mouth went dry. His throat clicked as he tried to swallow. He wished he could see Tony’s expression, but the dark hid it from him. Reaching up, he wound his hands around Tony’s wrists and rubbed his fingers over the delicate skin on the insides. He could feel the tension vibrating under Tony’s skin, hear the slow, harsh breaths, and had the thought that Tony could be terrible in his anger, though it wasn’t a thought that scared him, not anymore.

“I will handle this,” Tony vowed again. Steve squeezed Tony’s wrists, then traced the path up Tony’s arms, over his shoulders and neck to take Tony’s face in his hands. He heard Tony sigh and felt the hands disappear from his face. He dropped his own arms and shifted over so Tony could lie down next to him. It was a long time before he heard Tony’s breathing steady, and even then, Steve could not find sleep. He was too rattled by everything that had happened this night, from Tony’s offers to the realization that Tony might not know as much as Steve credited him with knowing. He frowned at the thought. They were far from the port. It was certainly not something Tony himself would regulate. Did he truly not condone Rumlow? How could he allow Zola to do what he did? Did he, though, Steve wondered, remembering the dismissal of Lucien. Was it possible other things were kept carefully hidden from Tony as well?

Lord Stane commands me to keep him happy and pleasantly occupied. That was what Zola had said. Steve had not looked past the words when he first heard them, but now…pleasantly occupied. Pleasantly occupied and diverted from noticing the goings on of a kingdom that was largely run by bureaucrats and moneychangers and men like Zola and Stane? Hydra had grown under Fury’s own nose back home, had it not? Good men are sometimes the last to see evil when it wears the face of a friend.

No answers came to him, though not for lack of the attempt. The morning sun was already starting to rise before he finally drifted off.

“Seriously?” a voice demanded, drawing Steve from a dream that whisked away the moment he opened his eyes. He looked up and saw a dark-skinned knight wearing the King’s crest on his breastplate standing at the end of the bed. The man kicked the bed, making it shake. Curled up against Steve’s side, Tony grunted, blew out a snort of air and burrowed his head into Steve’s chest. Steve stared at the man, who raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms in front of him. “I’m going to keep kicking until His Highness wakes up!” The last was nearly a shout. Tony blinked awake, smiled a bleary, sleep-worn smile up at Steve and rolled onto his back, stretching his arms over his head.

“Good morning, Rhodey,” Tony said. His voice was rough from sleep, but whatever disquiet had taken him during the night seemed to be gone. He turned to Steve. “Steve, meet General Rhodes. Rhodey, this is Steve.”

“You missed my report. I assumed that was because you wanted to hear it in private and not in front of the Council,” Rhodes said.

“That is…exactly why I missed your report,” Tony agreed, puffing out his bottom lip and nodding.
“I’m very excited for your report. I’ve thought of little else, in fact, since you told me of it.”

“Really. Uh-huh. What’s it about?” Rhodes asked, cocking his head back as he regarded Tony. Steve traded a look with Tony, who seemed at least slightly chastised. “That’s what I thought.”

“The guilds, the ships, the navy, our reserves,” Tony retorted good-naturedly. “I did pay attention, Sourpatch, don’t get mad. I’ll have you know that Steve and I spent the night debating the finer points of a possible strategy involving commandeering and plundering raider ships.”

The man, Rhodes, paused and dropped his arms to his sides, brow drawing together into a frown before he shook his head.

“If that’s a euphemism, I’m kicking the bed again,” Rhodes warned, then turned and stomped off towards the workshop. “Would you put some clothes on for God’s sake?” he called over his shoulder.

Tony glanced over at Steve and gave him a long, considering look. Steve realized he was still wearing the outfit he’d worn the night before, and looked past Tony to the workshop beyond where the General was standing, clearly waiting for Tony.

“I really do need to meet with Rhodey. He needs to hear what you told me last night,” Tony told him, leaning over to place a quick kiss on Steve’s arm. *I will handle this*, echoed in Steve’s head. “I’ll have food and clothes sent up,” Tony assured him, drawing Steve’s gaze back to him. “Yes, that last part still pains me,” Tony grinned. “You should stay here today. Rhodey may wish to question you further. Make use of the gardens or the library, if you want. No one will disturb you.”

Tony crawled out of bed and wrapped his robe around himself, then looked back at Steve. He reached out a hand and stroked the backs of his fingers over Steve’s cheek, shook his head a little, eyes going soft and folding at the corners, then dropped his hand, turned and left.

The King wasn’t wrong. No one bothered him. Shortly after Tony left him in bed, a flowing robe and soft, loose pants arrived, along with leather-soled slippers, and a platter of food. He hadn’t realized how ravenous he was until the food appeared. He’d devoured half of it before it occurred to him to stack a plate with the choicest of what remained and bring it to Tony, who looked startled when Steve slid the food next to him as he sat at his worktable, but nevertheless picked up a slice of honeyed bread and seemed to chew it absently as he and General Rhodes talked. Rhodes had peppered Steve with questions, though once the discussion turned to taxes and permits, Steve had slipped out without either of them appearing to care.

The gardens were lovely. Trees dripped long sleeves of branches down to the ground. Vines climbed the walls, laden with fragrant flowers in all manner of colors. A large fountain bubbled in the center, with a statue pouring a continuous stream of water from an upturned vase in the center and dolphins leaping from her feet. Steve sat down on the edge and looked inside, where a collection of coins lined the bottom. He wondered at their purpose. To his right, laughter erupted, and he turned, watching a group of courtier’s children enjoying a puppet show where a hapless knight appeared to be attempting to take on a dragon, who seemed to want to sleep far more than it wanted to provide its head for the glory of said knight. It kept refusing to fight, shaking its head and curling up to loud snores, much to the delight of the children.

He caught one of the governesses looking at him. She nodded, almost deferentially, dropping her eyes and bowing her head, then looked away.

In a few months, he would leave this behind. Find a way through a wilderness he did not know.
Chance death or worse, for both him and Cam. Crawl into the belly of a ship again and take his chances to cross an angry sea. Go home.

Be free.

It was a huge risk.

Since when is Steve Rogers so against a risk, a familiar voice asked, so loudly and clearly that Steve’s head jerked to the side, though, of course, no one was there. He could almost see Bucky, though, flopped on the curve of stone around the fountain, frowning at him with that knowing smirk. Last I checked, you never met a risk you didn’t want to see one higher. You know what I think?

Cam…

Can make his own choices, Bucky’s voice insisted. Quit using him as an excuse.

I can’t stay here, Buck. I can’t.

Yeah. This is really horrible, the Bucky in his mind snorted, reaching into the fountain and pulling out a copper coin. No one trying to kill you. No going hungry. No sleeping with your head on a rock and bugs crawling all over you. And all you have to do is make the King happy. Just you and me here, now, Steve. You going to try to tell me that’s a hardship?

I have to go back.

What are you trying so hard to get back to? War’s over. I’m gone. Team’s disbanded. What’s left there for you? Fury using you for a prop? You really want to run back to that? Look, it’s always been about someone else with you. Always about what you should do. For them. All those people you think need you. Where are they, Steve? You know where they are? They’ve all moved on. They buried you and now, they are building their lives on your grave, that’s where. Maybe, this once, you let this be about what you want, and to hell with what’s right.

This isn’t me.

What was it the boy said about the Ambassador and his painted concubine?

What?

What did he say about the Ambassador and his concubine?

She had a monkey. On a golden leash.

What did the boy say?

It did tricks. Made the children laugh.

What did the boy say?

This isn’t me. It isn’t, Buck. That isn’t me.

What did the boy say, Steve?

It did tricks. Made their children laugh.

Steve turned back around and stared up at the Tower where Tony’s windows split the stone,
remembering Cam’s words. The Ambassador brought his concubine with him, with her monkey on a golden leash, and their children, two girls and a boy, who liked to feed the deer that populated the King’s gardens and splash in the fountain. The Ambassador eschewed all company, save for hers, when not engaged in his duties. She played the lute and laughed as loudly as a sailor, and her maids said the Ambassador liked to plait her hair while she read stories to the children.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the image of Bucky lounging on the fountain was gone. Over his shoulder, the knight hurled insults, the dragon yawned, and the children laughed with glee.

A shadow fell over him, and he turned, unsurprised to find Tony standing there. It was almost expected, as if he had been waiting for Tony to appear just there, where a moment ago, he had seen Bucky so clearly. He had changed into a dark red tunic with a wide golden sash at the waist over black breeches and high, leather boots. A simple gold circlet sat on his head, but he looked the part. Out here.

*I will handle this.*

Maybe out here wasn’t so very different from in there. Maybe it was. But, maybe it didn’t have to be.

*They’ve all moved on.*

“They’re for wishing,” Tony said, leaning over and peering into the fountain. “The coins. People have been doing it for centuries, long before someone built this monstrosity. There was a spring here once, supposedly. They say it appeared in the middle of a drought and ran for forty days before it went dry. Saved the village. People brought homage to the site. Bits of food. A cup of wine. Jewelry. Coins, eventually, and made a wish to whatever it was that sent the largesse in the first place. We collect them, of course. Alms. For the poor. Here,” Tony said, reaching into the pocket of his tunic and pulling out a gold coin. He held it in his palm, outstretched to Steve. “Take it. Tradition,” he shrugged, lips quirking up as if the quaintness of it amused him.

Steve took the coin from Tony’s hand, turned and dropped it in the water. It made a soft plink as it landed and sank to the bottom, where it gleamed amidst the darker coins.

“What did you wish for?” Tony asked softly, closer now, so Steve could feel his warmth, the brush of his hand through the hair at Steve’s nape, the weight of his fingers as they settled atop the collar. Steve swallowed. Felt the collar bob against Tony’s hand.

“I don’t know,” Steve replied.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re interested in the inspiration for Steve's outfit, head over to my tumblr (sabrecmc)! Bless the internet, honestly.

Thanks again for reading and commenting. I really do appreciate it.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Vestigus argues that valor is superior to numbers,” Tony said as he rolled a small metal cylinder against a hot iron that was clamped between two pincers atop his worktable. “You’re this close to rolling your eyes, aren’t you?”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“I saw that. You know, Vestigus wrote the seminal treatise on warfare after years of study—“ Tony started, interrupted by Steve’s snort of laughter. “Years of study. Involving every major, recorded battle.”

“Tell you what. You take a hundred of the bravest men you know and give me a thousand cowards, and we’ll see how we do,” Steve offered as he flipped through the pages of the book Tony had dropped on the ottoman in front of the large, down-cushioned chair that had appeared, without comment, in the workshop one evening a fortnight ago. “I’m not saying there isn’t something to be gleaned from a study of history, but Vestigus never fought a single battle. Half his source material is second or third hand accounts of commanders more concerned with preserving their own glory than giving any kind of accurate assessment.”

“You might find his thoughts on soldiers to be illuminating,” Tony told him, stopping what he was doing long enough to peer across the room at Steve over the glow of the flame-hot soldering iron. “I would suggest perhaps beginning with Book Three, Chapter Nine.”

Steve turned through the massive volume until he reached the suggested page, then shot a frown at Tony, who caught his bottom lip between his teeth as a grin started to form.

“How to Manage Raw and Undisciplined Troops,” Steve read. “You find yourself very amusing, don’t you?”

“I thought it an absolutely fascinating read,” Tony smirked, then sharpened his gaze on Steve, challenging, engaged now, the way Tony did sometimes when his mind moved from idle thought to something more serious. “He isn’t wrong about the importance of defensive strength in siege warfare. You’d agree with that, I suppose. Battle is rather chancy business, after all, when one can fortify behind walls and avoid a potentially catastrophic defeat by simply outlasting the enemy. Even if you win on the field, your enemy has time to just scatter back to their castles and force you to pick them off, one by one. A slow and costly process I prefer to avoid.”

“Of course, a defensive posture is superior in siege. Strengthen garrisons at endangered fortifications, cut off the enemy’s supply lines, empty the land in front of him so there is nothing to plunder and wait it out,” Steve agreed, sitting back and adjusting the thick tome on his lap. “But, sometimes, the risk of defeat in battle can’t be avoided. No castle is stronger than the will of its defenders. The people inside must believe they can win, and for that to happen, you need a standing field force. An army, and not one growing thin and restless behind walls. One strong enough to prevent the enemy from dispersing and attacking your remaining strongpoints and to reassure the garrisons inside that relief is in sight. How many times does your scholar here relate some version of the phrase, ‘Seeing no hope of relief, they treated for surrender’?”

“A passing few,” Tony admitted, nodding his head back and forth as his lips curled into a smile.
“And what of your people outside the protections of the walls of a city or castle?” Steve demanded. “Should their suffering not count towards your assessment of the risk of battle?”

“You believe it doesn’t?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

“I’m not saying--you know I don’t believe that. I know you care. But, battle as a last resort, to be avoided unless victory is virtually assured, is warfare for kings and scholars. Not soldiers.” Steve insisted. “Sometimes, there is no other way, Tony. You have to…to say here. This far, and no further. Stand front of those you are fighting for, plant yourself on that line, and say, no. You move.”

“Fancy words for someone who would probably die in said battle. Die righteously. Die bravely. A balm to those you would leave behind, no doubt, but, die all the same, and take your platitudes with you,” Tony pointed out, a slight edge of tension lacing his words, though his hands were steady as he molded the heated metal of the tool. “If I can get that to work,” he continued nodding at the drawing half-rolled up on his desk. “Then soldiers may become obsolete. Perhaps even war itself.”

“I wish that were so, but war will never be gone from this world so long as there are men who crave power,” Steve countered. “And there are always men like that.”

“Far be it from me to rely on the goodness of man’s heart. I was actually suggesting fear as a deterrent. Slightly more effective, in my experience. If this works, use it once, and perhaps our enemies will think twice about invading our lands, and engagement or defense truly will be an argument for the academics,” Tony replied.

“Your...machine,” Steve said, still finding the unfamiliar word strange on his tongue. “Is impressive, Tony. I’ve never seen the like,” Steve admitted. It was a thing of terrible beauty, fearsome in its power and range, the repeating cannon Tony was working on was truly a far cry from anything Steve had ever encountered, even facing Shmidt. Just looking at the drawing had been enough to make his blood run cold. It would tear through siege towers and decimate a cavalry line, and all from behind a wall, manned by someone who never had to see the destruction or hear the cries of the dying. War made from a distance. He wondered if war should be something you were allowed to distance yourself from, particularly if you were the one to reap the rewards. “And, you will get it to work. You know you will.”

“See, that sounds so gracious and conciliatory. Flattering even. Ad yet, I sense a but coming,” Tony muttered, though his tone was teasing, pleased, even, as though they were engaged in some kind of game of words, and it wasn’t worth winning unless the other truly played his best hand.

“But,” Steve said with a sigh that was both weary and exasperated. “Wars are won by soldiers.”

“Says the soldier,” Tony remarked, eyeing Steve as he sat the metal cylinder he had been working on down, picked up the hot iron with one of the pincers and dunked it in a nearby bucket of cold water, sending a hiss of steam into the air. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Steve with a keen interest. “You don’t speak of it. The war you fought.”

“It’s over. Shmidt is dead. Most of his forces with him,” Steve replied, dropping his gaze down to the leather-bound book in his lap. Vestigus went on for volumes, dry tactics and strategy when the pages should have run red with blood. That was what war was, page after page of death until the stories all ran together and lost their meaning, the worst and best of men meeting not on some battlefield, but in every choice each one of them made. He doubted Tony’s book said that.

“You don’t believe that. You said so yourself. Cut off one head and all that,” Tony argued with an
annoyed frown, waving a hand through the air in front of him as if it might wipe away whatever argument Steve might offer. “You are a soldier without a war, and for that, I am, of course, grateful, but…it has occurred to me that, perhaps, you might find your life of leisure here somewhat…confining after years of soldiering. You clearly know a battlefield. Strategy, tactics…you put it to use, if you were inclined. Those ledgers I had sent to your quarters,” Tony said, standing up from his workstation and dusting off his tunic, sending a spray of metal shavings and bits of sand and dust onto the floor.

“Those accountings go back decades. There are overlaps and missing periods,” Steve told him, not for the first time. “Your regulations are outdated, and—”

“I know, I know,” Tony said, holding out his hands in front of him in a placating gesture. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” he continued, walking over to stand in front of Steve. He ran a hand through Steve’s hair and under his jaw, a gesture Steve was used to by now. Waited for. Wanted, even. Steve could feel himself leaning into the pressure of Tony’s hand, a slight shift of weight that changed the caress into something more, something solid, almost like being held.

“You’ve a good mind. Different than mine, true, but not the lesser for it, I think. I have come to…value…your insights, and, even more so, your agreement. Hard won as that may be at times,” Tony said, lips curling into a small, fond smile, even as he dropped his hand from Steve’s cheek, though not before tracing the pad of his down to the edge of Steve’s lips, which parted, making Tony’s eyes dance.

“Thank you,” Steve replied, somewhat taken aback.

“I have thought on what you told me. I know it is…difficult for you to speak of it. Your war. But, you may well be the only one in the entire kingdom who has faced Hydra and lived to tell of it. I would be a fool to ignore that,” Tony replied.

“What is it you are asking of me?” Steve asked.

“Officially, of course, I cannot take military advice—or any other counsel, for that matter—from a concubine. But, unofficially…” Tony trailed off, raising his brow. “I’m to tour the outer defenses with the city marshals on the morrow. Inspect the walls, let the troops present, that kind of thing. A show, to be sure, but a necessary one. And important. Something I do twice a year, so that I can praise their foresight and then fix everything they missed,” Tony grumbled, rolling his eyes and favoring Steve with a slight smile. He tilted his head to the side and rubbed at his temples, squelching his face in a frustrated sigh before looking back down at Steve. “Accompany me. You, and the boy to see to you, if you wish. You will have to keep a distance and stay silent, which, I realize as I say it, is perhaps like asking the rain not to fall, but, nevertheless, I would have you with me to see for yourself so that you might give me your thoughts later.”

“I—of course,” Steve replied, blinking up at Tony in surprise. He could feel his chest tighten, as if the air had been sucked out of it, and maybe it had. It was so close to the flight of fancy he had once imagined, floating in the warm waters of his bath, plotting an escape he wasn’t sure was a plan or a ploy to assuage his conscience. “Thank you.”

“Yes. Well,” Tony said quickly, a flurry of motion as he turned and headed for his bedchamber. Steve set the book aside and got up to follow him. “Speaking of advising, I’m afraid I must take my leave of you now. I’ve a meeting with the Lord Chamberlain this afternoon,” Tony called out over his shoulder. “Return to me tonight,” Tony said, catching Steve’s wrist as he passed by and bringing it to his lips. Steve nodded, eyes darting to where Tony’s mouth pressed to his wrist, warming the skin there.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Steve said.
“There is a gift waiting for you in your rooms. Something to occupy the long hours without my company,” Tony told him with a sideways grin.

“I’ve plenty to occupy myself with thanks to the poor recordkeeping of your army stewards,” Steve replied with a grimace, though, in truth, he was enjoying tackling the project, something Tony seemed to find strangely delightful.

“Yes, yes, you’ll tell me all about the terrible books later,” Tony tsked lightly. He leaned forward and clasped his hands on either side of Steve’s head, bringing Steve’s forehead down and placing a lingering kiss there, before trailing his hands down the front of Steve’s robe, gripping the fabric tight enough to hold Steve there. “Go now,” Tony whispered into the sliver of air between them. “Before I forget myself and Ms. Potts arrives to find more of me than she expected. Granted, that would hardly be the worst state she has found me in,” Tony finished with a low chuckle, then looked back up at Steve, face gentling as he did. “I would keep you by my side, if I could.”

“Tonight,” Steve said, wrapping his hand around one of Tony’s where it splayed over his chest and squeezing, making the word a promise.

“Tonight,” Tony conceded with a soft sigh.

Steve nodded and dropped his hand. He left Tony to his task and walked out the chamber door, which one of the guards held open for him. No one waited on the other side. He was free to roam the King’s personal rooms and come and go from his own quarters to the King’s as he wished.

In particular, Steve liked the King’s library above all, where the books seemed to outnumber the dustmotes that danced on the sun as it filtered through the windows. Books of every sort, on every subject imaginable. Books and…maps. Maps of the entire kingdom. Steve spent countless hours combing through them until he felt certain he had their likely route to the area of General Ross’s encampment memorized, thanks to Tony’s descriptions of the sights they would pass, as well as the best possible options for his escape. Even now, his stomach churned with guilt at the subterfuge. He knew the feeling was misplaced, yet couldn’t quite shake the sense of recrimination at using Tony’s largesse as a means to his escape.

His other favorite pastime when Tony was occupied was walking the gardens, over which he was given free rein. The gardens were beautifully lush and, seemingly, set up with various delights and amusements for his benefit, such as the chess set that appeared on the stone table where the willow dipped its branches into the clear surface of a pond, tempting the bright orange fish who darted beneath or the musicians who sometimes played from a balcony overlooking the lawn as he strolled. The collar he wore, as much as it was its own kind of prison, gave him a certain status and deference, and an amount of freedom he had once assumed he would never see again.

Though, he had learned there were limits to that freedom when he attempted to leave the harem compound by way of the large, red doors only to be turned back by Zola’s guards. Four of them, with tall, wickedly-pointed pikes held out in front of them, though none had touched Steve, only ordered him to return to his chambers. Fighting them off would have been a simple enough matter, but getting out of the compound had always been the easiest part of any escape. It was getting out of an unfamiliar and unfriendly city teeming with Tony’s own guards that presented the biggest challenge. Of course, Tony had, unknowingly, offered Steve exactly that opportunity, if he but waited for it.

Steve sighed heavily as he walked down the hall outside Tony’s chambers and opened the door to the tunnel, which led back to the compound. The same night the guards rebuffed him at Zola’s doors, Tony took him on a tour of his gardens, telling Steve of how his mother always loved the flowers and wildlife that called the menagerie home and how the stone path they walked along
mimicked the stars above as it twisted and spiraled through the garden.

They had dined under a tent, lounging on huge, feather-filled pillows and a carpet woven of white lilies, with the fountain burbling in the background, as they traded a cup of wine and stories of their childhoods, so seemingly different and yet, each able to pick up the thread whenever the other’s story unwound. All the while surrounded by great birds with long, sweeping tails of blues and greens that Steve could barely even comprehend, striped horses who grazed on the lawn and drank from the fountains, golden-crested monkeys that shouted at them from the treetops, and soft-coated deer with eyes like black orbs that took pieces of carrot from his hand. All manner of creatures for the King’s amusement, Steve recalled with a bitter twist of his stomach, all safe and cared for behind the King’s walls.

Yet, he had enjoyed the evening, and Tony’s company, as he always did. The King was brilliant and learned on many subjects and had a way of explaining things that managed to be informative and challenging, but also witty and charming. Steve liked listening to him, even when Tony sometimes got so deeply involved in a topic, he left Steve behind. It was still fascinating to hear the rise and fall of his voice, the segues that seemed random to Steve, but always meandered back to whatever Tony was discussing through some route in his mind that only he could fathom. Tony’s passion and frustration with a world that seemed to want to limit him in ways that even he could not always manage to overcome echoed through his words so much so that Steve could almost feel the push of will like the wind at the back of a sail, trying to move the world into something more, something better.

The walk back to his quarters yielded no more answers this time than it had any other time, though the futility of it didn’t seem to stop Steve’s mind from making the attempt as soon as he left Tony’s chambers each morning.

His mother’s tales of falling down a fairy hole popped into his mind. The fairies, she would say, knew a human’s deepest desire, and that was what was presented in offering, but it was always a trick, she had warned. A deception, so that you could never leave, and if you chose to partake of their gifts and hospitality, you would be bound to them forever. Steve felt a chill run down his spine as he pushed open the door to his quarters and headed for the balcony, where the afternoon sun spilled into the room through the open curtains that billowed gently in the breeze.

He stopped abruptly as soon as he pushed back the curtain and held it there for a long moment. Fairy tricks, he thought, with a shake of his head to try clear it, though it only partially worked. Something to occupy me, Steve remembered. Something to occupy him turned out to be a tall, wooden easel, with a large canvas stretched over it and a table laden with jars of paints in so many hues that Steve couldn’t name them all and a case of brushes in various lengths and bristle shapes, one a delicate fan of miniver-tail hairs so finely wrought, when he held it to the light, Steve could see each translucent fiber where it was woven together with a waxen silk thread at the base. There was even a treatise by Alcherius on colors and techniques, its pages so old, they were yellowed and crisp with age.

Steve remembered mentioning to Tony that he wanted to try painting, something far too expensive and impractical for a soldier. That night, in the garden, with the smell of lilies scenting the air around him, he had said he wished to paint Tony one day, and Tony had smiled and told him there were enough portraits of him in the world, but if Steve wished it, he would sit for him.

Steve reached out a hand and ran it down the smooth canvas, then back up and over the wooden bars of the easel. Extravagant gifts were Tony’s way of rewarding affection. Steve knew that much by now, though it made his heart cinch to think of it that way. He had a treasure’s worth of gems and golden adornments in his room to attest to how Tony’s mind worked, though. Emotion
was a currency for Tony, same as any other, and a debt needed to be repaid.

I think I could lift that from him, Steve thought with a sudden clarity. I think he might let me. One day. One day, some other part of Steve scoffed, clanging like a bell in his mind as he stared out over the edge of the balcony to the undulating stone wall that snaked around the castle and the longer, thicker defensive wall that circled the city itself. One day. In a couple of months, if everything went to plan, he would be sailing for home in the bowels of a ship or dead from trying.

He would never see Tony’ s machine work. He would never discover whether the suggestions he might give on the morrow came to fruition. The painting he could already see in his mind’s eye, of Tony at his worktable with a roll of parchment spread out in front of him and a soldering iron in a thick-gloved hand, the one that he knew Tony would like, above all the other, finer ones he owned, the one that would make his eyes go liquid soft and narrow at the corners, that painting would never be finished. A strange, disconcerting sense that he would be unfinished in some way, too, ran through his mind, leaving him unbalanced, as if leaning too far forward, that singular moment of fear and adrenaline before you catch yourself from falling.

“You’re back!” Cam’s voice announced from behind him. “Isn’t it great? It came this morning. Are you going to paint me? Can you paint me as a knight? I should like that, I think. There’s food, if you’re hungry. Should I call for a bath?”

Steve turned and shook his head as much at the flow of information as Cam’s questions.

“I was thinking I would try the baths downstairs this time,” Steve replied.

Reserved for higher ranking concubines, a portion of the bottom of the compound was carved out into large bathing pools, some heated, some cooled, a tile-covered room where a basin of water sat over a small stove, filling the room with currents of steam as thick as a cloud, and attendants to assist with soaping, shampooing, shaving, dyeing and other tasks. It was a far cry from the introduction Steve had received upon his arrival, though Steve had only been down there once, during his aborted tour of the compound that found him sent away from the red doors and the road to the castle gates that lay beyond them.

“Oh,” Cam said, voice filled with disappointment, likely at the loss of being able to ring for a bath and direct the other servants with his usual aplomb.

“I won’t stay long,” Steve promised with a huff of laughter. “I have a surprise for you, though. The King has asked us to accompany him on a tour of the city’s defenses tomorrow.”

“Really? A tour? With the King?” Cam squealed with delight. “I must tell Lena and Marcus. They will be so jealous. You will wear something special for the King tonight, yes? To thank him? I will come with you to the baths and see that they take proper care of you. You should be beautiful for him, and tell him how happy you are. He will like to hear this and will want to take us other places with him,” Cam stated with his usual directness.

“I—yes,” Steve said with a slight nod as he let his hand fall from the easel. “Thank you. I’d appreciate your help.” Something special for tonight, he mentally repeated. Tonight. I will be beautiful for him, Steve thought, remembering the way Tony looked at him before he left this morning, how he held on to Steve like he didn’t want to let him go. How the idea of being by Tony’s side flared in his mind, hot and bright. Reality wouldn’t allow it, but…Tony had a way of shaping the world around him, that push, that force of will that Steve felt when Tony talked, it emanated from Tony like a beacon being lit in the night.
Something special for tonight, Steve thought again, then sighed and smiled lightly at Cam.

“I will tell him,” Steve said, and he would, and it would be true, and he would look at more maps and study the wall and the defenses and the weapons carried by the guards. Words so empty shouldn’t be so heavy to bear, Steve thought, glanced at the easel one more time, then headed back the way he had come.

What Cam perhaps lacked in decorum and subtlety, he made up for with enthusiasm, Steve thought as the boy practically bounced down the steps to the baths a short time later carrying a soft towel and embroidered wrap to wear when not in the water, along with a ceramic scraper to rough over Steve’s skin before bathing and a pair of wooden sandals inlaid with mother-of-pearl for Steve’s feet.

Steve almost wished he had simply chosen to bathe in his room, but he had been curious about the bathhouse ever since he saw it. Or, rather, curious about the other concubines who occupied it, lounging in various states of dress, eating delicacies served by attendants while they were feted and washed, not because he particularly wanted to spend his time doing that, but because he felt more certain than ever that it was this carefully crafted image that Tony envisioned as a concubine’s life, not the small, dingy cell Steve had once shared with Cam under the cover of threat and pain. He had no idea what he would do with the knowledge if his suspicion proved correct, but he had to know. The incongruity of the man Steve had come to know in Tony’s chambers and the King who seemed to allow someone like Zola to operate as he would was driving Steve mad trying to reconcile.

A long corridor led to a large, vaulted room flanked by stone benches on all sides. Painted tiles on the walls and ceiling depicted scenes of birds, flowers, water creatures and bathing figures, while oil lamps swung from the rafters and hung from the walls, wafting a delicate incense into the room. Several concubines sat or reclined on the stone benches, chatting and taking small cups of tea soaked with mint leaves from their attendants, though the conversation stopped when Steve entered. He could feel the weight of their gazes on him, though they said nothing. Steve undressed and slipped on the sandals Cam provided, then wrapped the embroidered cloth around his waist.

“If you want, you can use this instead of shaving,” Cam offered, holding out a large, clay jar and lifting the lid enough for Steve to catch a horrid smell that rivaled rotten eggs and likely explained all the incense. “It’s better for…down there.”

“I think I’ll stick with the blade,” Steve said, shaking his head and wrinkling his nose at the putrid scent. He walked over to a basin that caught a font of water as it flowed out of a fountain in the wall and used one of the soft cloths stacked next to it to rinse off, then followed Cam to the next room, where high tables with carpets spread on stood in the center under the domed ceiling tiled with blue and painted with stars.

He climbed onto one of the tables and lay down on his back, letting Cam rub the scraper over his skin, then wipe him down, while other attendants took special care of his hands and feet, cleaning under the nail beds and shaping them, scrubbing and buffing until they shone. A cloth was placed over his eyes, and water poured through his hair into the catch basin on the floor, then strong fingers massaged shampoo into his scalp, followed by more warm water to rinse. Shaving was next, though he waved the attendants off when they made to lay the blade on his groin. Tony did not mind that, he thought, remembering the way the King seemed to like to trail his hand down the line of hair beneath Steve’s stomach and rake his nails through the coarser hair that framed his cock. He flipped over onto his stomach and let Cam repeat the process on his back, until he was clean and largely denuded, skin slick and gleaming with scented oils.
Once clean, he slid off the table, thanked the attendants, and followed Cam into the bathing house, where a large heated pool nearly waist deep sat in the center of a row of columns that raised a series of carved arches. Above the pool, large lamps glowed with soft, flickering tallow, casting shadows and light like stars on the walls. Several other concubines lolled against the edges of the pool, where a low stone bench etched into the wall of the pool allowed them to sit comfortably, while attendants hovered nearby with trays of food or drink and jars of oil and dried flower petals they added to the water. Steve pulled off the wrap, handed it to Cam, and slid the wooden sandals off his feet, then slowly lowered himself into the heat of the water.

A woman with piles of hair the color of obsidian coiled on top of her head, dark, almond-shaped eyes above a light dusting of freckles, a small straight nose, pierced with a twinkling stud that connected by a chain to the curve of her ear, and wide, generous lips that pursed together as she watched Steve enter the pool sat to his right. To his left, two men, one of them, with skin the color of sand and seemingly no hair anywhere at all, bigger than Steve by at least two hands, one thin and milk-skinned, though dotted with more color than Steve had ever seen, and had hair like fire over eyes as green as grass. Next to them, another girl, younger than the other woman, plump-cheeked with a mouth that curved into a ready smile and eyes that danced merrily as Steve entered the water. They were leaning close together, their laughter and talk ceasing as soon as they looked up, one after the other, and saw Steve. He sank into the pool and sat on the stone bench opposite the woman, returning her curious stare.

“You’re him,” the woman said, tilting her head to the side and smiling widely, though it wasn’t exactly a welcoming smile, more a knowing one that did not quite reach her eyes. “The one they are calling Raj’Inama.”

“They?” Steve questioned.

“They. The others. Those idiots who are not here, and want to be here,” she replied, smile widening. She had a thick accent that seemed to almost swallow parts of her words, though it was not unpleasant, just unfamiliar.

“Careful, Kadina,” the girl warned. “Be nice. I hear the King has called this one to him nearly every night. That he even came here to visit him. This is true, yes? There,” she exclaimed at Steve’s nod. “You see? He is special, Kadina. Best watch your tongue.”

“My tongue is part of the reason I’m here, silly girl,” the woman, Kadina, replied with a haughty toss of her head.

“I wish he would call for me,” the pale man said with a heavy sigh as he leaned his head back against the edge of the pool and regarded Steve. “He never does. Once, I went to his chambers. Zola was livid, after. You know how his eyes get so huge when he angers? I thought they would pop right out of his head. Kept thinking that as he shouted. That his eyes were just going to roll out, across my floor and I’d have to get them back from the Clea, and how would I ever explain that?”

“He—what?” Steve asked with a frown.

“Clea’s a cat,” the other man said helpfully, then turned to his friend and raised his eyebrows. “You’re lucky Zola didn’t send you back to Etta on the first ship.”

“No, I mean what happened with the King?” Steve asked.

“Nothing,” the pale man said, blowing the word out with a puff of air through his lips.
“Oh, come now. You do yourself a disservice,” Kadina said. “Not nothing, Danen. The King got busy with some—what was it again?” she queried, making a moue of her mouth, before smiling, cat-like, again. “Ah, yes. A line of numbers and letters that he stared at for hours, and forgot poor Danen was even there,” she said, swinging a smile around to Steve. “Such an entertaining tale. I never tire of hearing it.”

“Do not listen to her. Old age has made her jealous and bitter,” the girl commented, shooting a narrow-eyed look across the pool at the woman.

“Hush, Nyma. Let her have her fun. It is of no matter,” Danen said. “He sent me a bracelet with an opal the size of a robin’s egg for my time. For all Zola’s bluster, he will do nothing to one who pleases the King.”

“The King is most generous,” the huge man added with a small nod. He had a deep voice that seemed to echo, and an accent thickening his words that Steve couldn’t place. “I am called Tahir, Raj’Inama. It is good you have come. Always the same things with these ones. Who has what, who fucked who, who will they fuck next. They chatter, same as birds. Talk, talk, talk, but all that comes out is shit,” he said with a huge smile that revealed bright teeth the color of snow.

“As if you are so amusing, Tahir,” Danen shot back. “You picked a quiet day to join us, though. There are usually more here, but, alas. Today is market day, and the merchants bring their wares to the compound. Zola’s little flowers are like locusts when the wagons arrive, flying about, grabbing for trinkets that might call attention to them,” Tahir snorted derisively. Steve already knew about market day. It was one of the reasons he had chosen today to visit the baths, but he nodded and made an ah sound of understanding. “One does not need such embellishments. One need only be skilled.”


“The King likes the embellishments on him,” Danen added, nodding at Steve. “Ignore this one. She thinks she is special because she has served the Lady Christine for years and has forgotten her place when the Lady is away on her travels.”

“Which is often,” Kadina said. “Too often, I have told you this. She will forget you, child, or, more likely, find some heathen girl will long, fat fingers and a tongue she knows how to use for else but complaining, and then where will you be? You have cast your lot on her for far too long. Better to have ten masters vying for your attention than be at the beck and call of one. Unless, of course, your master is the King. I hear he does not wish to share,” Kadina said in a silvery tone, aiming a sly smile at Steve as she beckoned one of the attendants forward for a cup of the chilled rosewater. “I hear Lord Hammer was rather put out. I hear he still asks about you.”

“You hear that because you suck that thing he calls a cock and moan like a sword swallower,” Nyma said with an impish grin. “She is baiting you, Raj’Inama. A little worm to catch a bigger fish.”

Kadina shrugged delicately and sipped from her cup before handing it back to the servant.

“I only share my advice. You may pick up the pebble or not. I tell you this, the King will lose interest. He always does. It is the way of men who can have anything. They want a bit of everything,” Kadina replied. “It is the men who covet to whom you should aspire, King’s Prize. Grasping, little men who are honored by your service. They will want what so enthralled the King, you will see. Offer them a smile and beg to give you anything you want. Trust me on this. This one,” she continued, pointing at the younger girl. “She will love and be loved, and end with
memories. Can you eat memories? Will they clothe you and warm you and put a roof over your head? Silly child. When I leave here, it will be to my own manse on the High Road, with several of Zola’s little flowers in tow. I shall wave to you all from my carriage.”

“When you leave here?” Steve asked with a confused frown.

“The King is not the only one who can be generous, Raj’Inama. I’ve been careful. That one asks for silks and pretty clothes. Perfumes. Treats,” Kadina replied with a look of annoyance, tipping her chin at the younger girl. “For me, a coin, my Lord, if you please. A jewel, to fit just here, my Lady,” she said, tracing a line down the column of her throat to end between her breasts. “Or here,” she said, letting her hand following the curve of her stomach down below the water, then dip lower, between her legs. She smiled, a wickedly pleased look, tossed her head and laughed. “You are all children.”

“But…you will leave, you said,” Steve repeated.

“I will leave one day, Raj’Inama, when I am ready. I have been careful these many years. Smart. Not like that one,” Kadina said, nodding at Nyma. “Saved enough to buy my freedom several times over. But why leave this place? I am still in demand. I like what I do. I am good at it. Always have been. It’s why I chose this life.”

“Chose?” Steve said.

“Of course! Look at me. Do you think I was meant to work in a field or roll around in pig shit on some farm? Push out a couple of ungrateful urchins to chase? I left home and joined one of the pleasure houses as soon as I could,” Kadina replied.

“I…didn’t realize people chose this,” Steve said, his mind reeling. “Being a slave.”

“Why would I not? It is a good life for those such as us,” Kadina replied. “Better, than many others, Raj’Inama. They may have no collar, but what freedom is there in hunger and constant toil? I have watched mothers give a final bath to babes they could not feed and old folks walk into the desert to meet the sun so they would no longer burden their children. Backs bent from working the land. Breath that comes out black and bloody from the mines. Wars that leave nothing but widows and orphans in their wake. My life may not be entirely my own, but who among the likes of us can say theirs truly is? Was your life always your own to lead as you wanted?”

Steve stared at her for a long moment, then lowered his eyes down to the surface of the water, bright with the lights from the oil lamps and torches that lined the columns and walls. He remembered the burning emptiness of hunger, day after day, until everything was numb. His mother telling him she had already eaten when he knew she hadn’t. How she knew which bark and which roots could be boiled so he would have something in his belly. How hard she worked when he was too sick to help. He would have done anything, then, to take that burden from her shoulders.

He thought of Fury putting the shield into his hands and asking him to inspire men to die in a war they would lose.

But, we didn’t, he reminded himself. We didn’t lose.

And it was my choice. Choice didn’t require infinite possibilities to have meaning. Safety, security, these were the pyres on which freedom burned, and we all want to add our own kindling at times, bask in the warmth and let the smoke blind us to the ashes we are left with in the end.
“I did not roll around in pig shit, Kadina,” Nyma shot back after a moment of silence, sending a frown at the older woman. “Why must you say these things in front of him? We had a farm. No pigs. Goats. My mother sold me,” Nyma said, matter-of-factly. “After papa died. I was the eldest. We were barely scraping by, and she had my brother and sister to feed. I worked in a merchant’s house, watching his children, until the merchant’s wife saw how he was looking at me. She sold me to one of the pleasure houses, and then Zola bought me. I was scared at first, but it was a good choice, I think. No more going to bed with an empty belly. Mama was able to keep part of the land and buy a few slaves to work it for her. She lives with my sister and her family in the city now. They visit sometimes. I give my nephews and nieces treats.”

“And you?” Steve asked the large man, nearly choking on the words. His throat was suddenly constricted, as if the collar was shrinking. He looked back and forth between the other concubines and saw no guile there, or no more than was to be expected. Was this all Tony knew of things? People like this who came to him absent brute force or threats, driven more by poverty and circumstance of birth than anything else? Would he even think to peel back the layers and see the rot underneath? Why would someone like Tony, with so much responsibility on his shoulders, have cause to question what was so carefully presented to him in a system that had been in place since before anyone could remember?

“I was born a slave,” Tahir said. “In Ghoad. First, I was a soldier to meet my Lord’s quota. We marched for miles. Then stood for a while. Then marched some more. Then, one of the slavers there to buy soldiers, and he sees me and says, ‘You. Is all of you this big?’ and I say, ‘Yes’ and he says, ‘You will be a concubine,’ and so I became a concubine instead of a soldier. This is better.”

“Will you buy your freedom one day?” Steve asked through a tight voice that seemed to want to wait for his mind to catch up before it let the words out. Could he do that? He hadn’t even considered that it was possible, and yet, they spoke of it as a common thing. Tony had gifted him with more than he knew what to do with. Was it enough? He had no idea what Sitwell paid for him, though he couldn’t imagine it would have been much to take him off Rumlow’s hands at that point. Could he simply save the items Tony gifted him with and one day repay Tony’s coffers for whatever amount was owed? Was it really that simple?

“Why would I? Here is good. Everyone, they want to see Tahir. Even if they cannot take my cock, they like to say they can, and Tahir is rewarded. No marching. No standing. Just fucking,” Tahir shrugged, then grinned. “These three, they will wither like stalks of grain in the sun, but my cock will always be a gift of the gods.”

“It is a good thing you have a cock like a bull’s. There is little else to recommend you, Tahir,” Kadina taunted lightly.

“Yes, it is indeed a good thing,” Tahir agreed, seeming to ignore the intended insult. “You may see it, Raj’Inama, if you wish.”

“I—that’s—not—” Steve stammered.

“Ugh, stop, Tahir. He is not used to you! What will he think of us?” Nyma cut in, slapping at Tahir’s shoulder. “Do not worry, Raj’Inama. He means that Zola had the metalsmith make a bronze cast of it, that is all. Zola has many. All sizes and shapes, whatever may be desired. Christine likes Danen’s sometimes. It is so nice and curved, and not so big I can’t use my fingers. Fingers are best,” she asserted, dabbing her fingers slowly in and out of the surface of the water, watching the droplets drip back down with soft plinks.

“Tahir’s is best,” Tahir corrected with a sage nod.
“If the Lady Christine likes me so much, she should call for me,” Danen said with a pout.

“I said she likes your cock, Danen. No one likes _you_,” Nyma teased, laughing and splashing water at the young man next to her.

“Nonsense. Everyone likes me,” Danen replied, lifting his chin and giving Steve a haughty look. “I get a mark on my skin for everyone I entertain, didn’t you know?” he quipped, freckled face spreading into a wide grin. “Perhaps Zola will add yours to his collection? And we will see what keeps the King’s attention so well, eh?”

“Ummmm—hmmm, I would not wait for that acorn to fall,” Kadina laughed, throaty and full of challenge. “The King hoards his treasure.”

Steve felt a frown pull at her use of Tony’s endearment, and wondered, again, how much anything here was truly private. Happenstance or deliberate, he did not like to hear it from her, and he thought she knew that. If Nat were here, these two would crush worlds under the heels of their words, so full of barbs and traps.

“And you, Danen?” Steve asked, aiming to change the topic. “How…how did you come to be here?”

“My mother was a concubine to King Howard. Oh, don’t look at me like that, I’m not his,” Danen said to Steve’s disconcerted look. “Look at me for God’s sake,” he laughed. “Anyway, I guess you could say I was born to this life. Lord Marchant bought mother after King Howard died, and I went to his household until I was old enough to return, but Zola always wanted one of mother’s. She was very popular in her time. Not the most beautiful, but no one ever left disappointed. They say she was one of the few who could make King Howard laugh, there near the end, when all he cared for was his wine and whatever he was trying to build. And so, here I am,” he said, spreading his hands wide. “Concubine to King Anthony, not that he ever asks for me. One day, perhaps some Lord or Lady will buy me, and I’ll retire to their manor, or perhaps not, and mother shall send for me. Lord Marchant cannot speak or move these days, and his wife is dead these last four years. Mother has been comforting Lord Marchant’s son during this difficult time,” he finished with a coy smile.

“What of you? I hear Lord Sitwell saved you from the fighting pits,” Kadina remarked. “An untrained concubine for the King. Zola must have truly been desperate. He was most displeased when the King became so taken with you. Our illustrious harem Master does not care for the unexpected, and you…you are most unexpected, King’s Prize.”

“Sitwell found me at Rumlow’s. Raiders took me from my home and sold me to him,” Steve said flatly. It seemed so long ago and just a moment ago at the same time.

“Ah,” Kadina sighed and something that might have been sympathy passed over her face, though it was gone quickly. “You are most fortunate, then, to find yourself here. You’ve the look of Lord Stone. This is why Sitwell chose you. Not much of it, but some. Enough, I suppose, for Zola to think the King might enjoy you. But, Zola is a fool when it comes to our King. He treats him like his father.”

“What was King Howard like?” Steve asked curiously.

“A good man. A cruel man. Kings can be both,” Kadina answered, waving a hand through the air and sending a spray of water arcing in front of her. “I served him a few times,” she shrugged. “He fucked like a king. So proud of himself when I filled his ears with screams of pleasure,” she harrumphed.
“Lord Stone…he was…someone important to the King?” Steve asked.

“Young love,” Danen said with an exaggerated sigh and fluttering of his lashes.

“Stupid love,” Kadina interjected. “Lord Stone. Hmph. He was Sir Tiberius, until King Anthony raised him up, and granted him a title and the lands to go with it. Oh, he was all pretty words and gallantry to our King, tipping his lance at the tourney and carrying the King’s favor under his armor, strutting around the Castle like one of those fancy birds in the King’s garden while he warmed the King’s bed and fed him sweet lies. Everyone knew, of course, except the King. Stone is nothing if not a braggart, believe me. It was all a great scandal when Lord Stone left.”

*You are absolutely nothing like Tiberius, thank God.*

Was he not, Steve wondered with a stab of guilt churning his gut. Warming the King’s bed and feeding him sweet lies. Tell the King how happy you are. Tell him you like him. Wear something special for him tonight. It was different, of course, Steve knew that. He was doing this for his own freedom, not for gain, and yet…Tony would suffer for it. Steve thought again of how Tony had looked at him before he left, the way he said tonight with such a longing ache. That man would hurt. Perhaps more than Steve wanted to acknowledge. He would not understand, would see it as a betrayal, and looking around him, Steve could better see why.

“I do not like him. This Lord Stone,” Nyma said. “He made Marta cry.”

“Marta cries whenever the wind blows the wrong way,” Kadina huffed. “I have heard things, though. Word travels quickly through these halls.”

“What word have you heard of me?” Steve asked, watching the woman’s face break into a coquettish smile as she stretched out her arms in the water in front of her. It made Steve think of the way a spider extends its legs before rolling its web around its prey. Sweet lies, Steve thought to himself, though his mind spoke with Natasha’s voice and carried a warning with it.

“That the King calls for you nearly every night. That you spend many of your days in his chambers. That he favors you with extravagant gifts,” Kadina listed off with a trilling sort of songlike quality to her voice. She paused and regarded him, one delicate eyebrow rising to a perfect arch. “That he does not know you spent an evening with Lord Hammer.”

“I didn’t—nothing happened,” Steve stammered before he could stop himself, instantly regretting giving this woman anything. She will drain you dry, Steve thought to himself, and felt his shoulders hunch instinctively.

“Zola does not want him to know that you were sent to Lord Hammer,” Kadina said. “There are many things Zola does not want the King to know. There are many things other people do not want him to know.”

“Why does no one tell him, then?” Steve ground out in frustration. “All these things that—he should know.”

“Talk is dangerous, Raj’Inama. Even for you. The walls listen. There are no secrets. Only lies,” Kadina said quietly enough to almost be an apology. “You should be careful. The King has come to care for you. More than he should, perhaps. How disappointed would he be to know you asked your boy about the punishment for running away?” she asked, canting her head to the side and holding Steve’s gaze as her mouth slid into a wide smile. “I would say, he would not care to hear this, I think. He would not care for it at all. Remember, King’s Prize, there are those who would do anything to protect their position here. Destroy anyone who got in their way. Even one who
has the King’s favor.”

She rose from the bench and glided through the water to stand in front of Steve, reaching out a hand to stroke the back of her fingers down his face.

“No secrets, Raj’Inama. Do not forget,” she warned, then walked to the steps, where her attendant waited with an outstretched towel.

Steve glanced over at the other three, who quickly dropped their gazed and exchanged looks between them, though held their tongues. He flicked his eyes to Cam, who had the good grace to look completely abashed, returning Steve’s look with a pleading, red-faced apology. Flattening his mouth into a tight grimace, Steve pushed himself up and climbed the stone steps out of the pool, standing there dripping for a moment before Cam hurried over with the towel.

“I’m sorry,” Cam whispered hurriedly. “I just asked Lena, because I wasn’t sure I told you right. Maybe it was different for concubines or—I don’t know. I didn’t tell her it was because of you, I swear, and she promised—”

“It’s okay,” Steve cut him off, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t, but there wasn’t much to be gained by reprimanding the boy for it. He had been so careful to ask casually, to not draw undue suspicion, he hadn’t told Cam to keep the question to himself. He could almost feel his carefully laid plan slipping through his fingers like billowing smoke, making his throat tighten and spasm. Surely, if word had reached Tony, he would have said something. But, word was out there, and perhaps he owed Kadina something for her warning, as self-serving as it may have been. Intrigue was Nat’s province, not his, but he had to be more careful. That much was painfully clear. There was no one here he could fully trust. Not even himself, it seemed. He jerked his head towards the doors. “Let’s get back.” Cam nodded and handed Steve his robe, then placed the sandals in front of his feet.

“When I was a soldier, I saw a slave after he tried to escape,” Tahir said from across the pool as Steve slid his feet into the sandals. Steve turned and looked at big man, watching the streaks of light from the water’s surface cast eerie stripes in waves across his face. “They brought him back. Made us all watch. So that we would know. Now, I know. I do not wish to see such a thing again.”

Steve stared at him for a span of heartbeats, then turned back to Cam. Some of them chose this life. Some of them liked this life. Some of them would profit from this life. But, none of them were free to simply leave it, and however beautiful a prison it was, however kind their masters, these benevolences were façades, painted stones over sunken eyes on a bloated, ashen face, and he could not afford to fail to remember that. “Let’s go,” he said to Cam, and brushed past the boy for the doors, suddenly wanting to be anywhere but here.

Steve’s head felt full and heavy as they walked back to their rooms, as if what he had learned came with a solid weight. He couldn’t quite make sense of it all. Each question that formed in his mind seemed to fork into even more questions and few ended in answers. Cam ordered food for them and then disappeared to his room while Steve ate alone on the balcony, watching the sun go down and mentally tallying the guards on duty. He heard Cam clear his throat from behind him and turned.

“You don’t need to hide,” Steve said with a flat, conciliatory sigh. “It’s alright.”

“You will not truly leave,” Cam said, shuffling his feet underneath him as he looked down at his toes before raising wide eyes to Steve, before glancing around and wetting his lips nervously. The walls listen, Steve thought to himself, and knew Cam was thinking it as well. Steve did not
imagine someone was truly listening to them, not now, but words were like water here, and flowed
their own way, no matter what you intended. “You were only curious. Because you are from far
away. You would not try to leave the King. You care for him.”

“I do,” Steve agreed. It was easy to agree. Too easy, perhaps, but that was a path for another day.
“I was curious. I did not know your rules,” he said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. The
boy’s shoulders sagged and his face relaxed somewhat.

“That is what I thought,” Cam nodded, brighter and buoyant now.

The boy would not go with him, Steve realized with a jolt. Cam had nothing calling him away
from this, and a better life here than anything he had ever known. If Steve left, he would have to
trust Cam’s fate to Tony’s kindness. He turned back around and looked out at the horizon again.
It left an emptiness in his chest to think about, but, strangely, he had no real fear that Tony would
take out any anger on Cam. Not anymore. Tony wasn’t like that. That much, Steve was sure of,
though it was one of the few things in this place that he could attest to with any certainty. It didn’t
ensure Cam’s safety, but…perhaps there was another way to do that.

“It was good to meet the other concubines, yes?” Cam continued without catching Steve’s change
of mood. He was bubbling with an excitement that had been muted since they returned from the
bath and now seemed to fill him near to bursting. “See how happy they are here? And none of
them have the King’s favor, as you do. Nyma is right. You should not listen to that Kadina. She
is just jealous of you. The King will not lose interest. He is not like that, I do not think. He will
keep you with him always, you will see.”

I would keep you by my side, if I could.

“I should get ready,” Steve said, standing and brushing the crumbs off his robe for the birds to
find.

“I laid out some things for tonight. Special things,” Cam told him, bouncing along next to Steve as
they walked back into the living area. “He will be so pleased, and will not want to go anywhere
without you. You will see,” he repeated, sagely this time, with the absolute certainty of youth.

Good, Steve thought. He needed Tony to take him on the promised demonstration for this General
Ross. If he was going to attempt an escape, that was the best opportunity. Caught that if there,
Stevie, Bucky’s voice sounded in his head, but he ignored it, burying it down with everything else
he didn’t want to think about. Steve nodded to Cam and walked over to the bed, where the boy had
placed an array of items for his perusal.

Steve rolled his lips together and put his hands on his hips as he studied the suggestions Cam had
put out for him. They were…decidedly more revealing than what Steve usually chose for himself,
Steve thought with a huff of amusement. Cam was nothing if not direct. Reaching out, Steve
picked up a delicate chain with golden circles the size of coins dangling from the middle.

“Yes, that will be good!” Cam said encouragingly, when Steve raised an eyebrow at him. “He will
like that one.”

Steve’s mouth twisted into a rueful grimace, and he rolled his eyes heavenward, but shrugged off
the robe and allowed Cam to attach the chain around his waist. The circles dripped down in a
graduated triangle shape between the vee of his legs, leaving a good portion of his cock exposed.
His ass was entirely bare, save for a thin chain with a red jewel on the end that fell from the clasp
around his waist to sit just above the crease. He swallowed thickly and glanced over at the mirror,
then sucked in a breath and looked back down at the bed. A bright patch of gold caught his eye,
and he reached down to pick it up, holding it in front of him with a frown.

“Like this,” Cam said, gesturing his hands across his face to indicate how it was to be worn.

*Anyone ever told you, you’re prettier when you’re quiet?*

Tony would understand, Steve thought to himself. He would find it amusing. Steve felt his mouth tug up a bit, then sighed and wrapped the metal veil around his head, just above his ears, so the bright, gold leaves covered the lower half of his face. Twisted strands of gold went around his ankles with jeweled chains that hooked over his toe. His heart was beating rabbit-quick in his chest, and he could feel his breath coming in tighter, faster beats. He was half-hard already, the head of his cock jutting proudly from beneath the golden circles.

“You are beautiful for him. He will be so happy, Raj’Inama,” Cam announced with a wide smile, clearly pleased with the results of his suggestions.

Raj’Inama. That was what the others had called him. Is that who I am now? To keep him interested, Steve told himself firmly. To keep him. Two ideas so close and so far apart, and sometimes, like now, he did not know which one was closer to the truth. He stared at his reflection for a moment longer, then dropped his eyes back down to the bed where they lighted on something else Cam had set out for him.

The two round discs were connected by three golden chains, with a large, oval pendant containing a smooth, blue lapis in the middle of the bottom chain. Steve held them up and turned the discs over in his hand.

“They’re for your…” Cam began.

“I know,” Steve said quickly, cutting him off.

“You should wear them. Then, the King will see how much you want to be with him,” Cam added. There was something in his tone, a subtle warning that Steve barely caught, but it was there. Cam was a lot of things, but he was far from naïve, Steve knew. His spread of special things tonight was as much his own apology as he intended it to be Steve’s, and the boy wasn’t wrong. What better way to assuage any word that might reach Tony’s ears than by seeming to embrace this life?

_Seeing to? How come you were never this good at lying to anyone else, Bucky’s voice demanded in his head. Can’t take the boy with you. Gotta wait out this demonstration thing. Gotta keep the King interested until then. Maybe you could just buy your way out of this one of these days. That’s a lot of thinking about how to stay around for someone planning to run away._

Steve stared at the discs in his palm. They opened along a seam in the center, with small jagged, teeth-like rows on the bottom and top. He sucked in another breath, and felt heat coil low in his belly, tightening everything there, like it was taking up space. A spike of pressure lanced down through the tip of his cock as he thought of it. Wearing these. Watching Tony’s face when he saw Steve like this. He swallowed again, or tried to. His mouth was dry. He wet his lips and ran a finger over the tiny, squared-off clefts in the middle of one of the discs.

“I can—” Cam started, but Steve shook his head.

“A robe. Please,” Steve ordered without looking at the boy. He heard Cam’s footsteps disappear towards the closet, then flicked the first disc open. He caught his reflection again in the looking glass and watched, almost detached, as he brought the disc up to cover his nipple and slowly snapped the halves together. A low hiss of breath escaped him at the first stinging bite of pain. It
sizzled a line of heat that almost burned cold down to the tip of his cock. He stared for a moment, then repeated the same with the other disc around the other nipple, locking it in place and holding the pendant in his palm for a beat before letting it fall to the center of his chest, where it tugged the clamps down just hard enough that a stuttering gasp managed to wisp out of his throat before he set his jaw tight.

The metal veil, the clamps with their bright, blue pendant, the loincloth that drew attention instead of hiding anything, he looked the part, Steve thought as he studied himself, feeling warmth flush over his skin, up his neck and down deep, seeming to fill his belly like it was being poured in on each breath. His cock was heavy and thick, already reddening against the golden circles that hung between his legs. The steady, rippling pinch at his nipples sent twinges of heat spiking deep inside, the sensations pulling at the head of his cock, like there was a string connecting them. Every shift, every movement, every thought seemed to flicker like bright points in his mind, pain and pleasure warring for dominance.

In the looking glass, Steve saw Cam come up behind him holding out a beautifully embroidered robe of blues, greens and golds. Steve put his arms into it and Cam hoisted it over Steve’s shoulders. Steve tied the corded belt at his waist and cast a quick glance over at Cam, who beamed proudly at him.

“The King will be so glad to see how much you want to please him,” Cam gushed with a little too much enthusiasm. Steve thought it was at least half relief. “You should tell him this. He will see, yes, but he likes to hear your words, I think. He likes it best when you say these things to him.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. For the tour,” Steve reminded him, as if he thought the boy could forget.

“I have never seen the city,” Cam remarked close on his heels as Steve headed for the door. “Lena said the wall is as high as four men and thick enough for a team of horses to pull a wagon,” he told Steve. “Do you think there will be food?”

“I’m sure there will be food,” Steve said with a low chuckle that barely escaped the cover of the sheaves of metal that covered his face.

“Steve?” Cam called out, slowing Steve’s steps at the sound of his name. When had it started to sound strange on anyone’s lips other than Tony’s? He didn’t know. “I know, before. When you first arrived. I saw what they did to you. I know you did this for me. I don’t know why. No one’s ever… I mean, I’m just me. No one, really. I didn’t matter. But, I did to you, and…I—I know how I seem to you sometimes. It’s just…I would wish for you happy here, too. Not just the King. You. You could be, I think. When you are with him, you are happy. I see it. And he is happy, too. He smiles and teases and laughs, and you—you are so pleased when he laughs for you! I see this and—I would wish for you to be like that all the time. So, you should be with him more, and then you will both be happier, I think. That is all.”

Steve ducked his head, let out a long rush of air through his nose and opened the door. His mind flashed to days spent playing chess with Cam while Tony worked and called out moves from a gameboard he could see in his head, long hours of sketching and half-listening while Tony patiently explained whatever it was he was building to Cam, and books read aloud over meals that evolved into discussion and debate between mouthfuls. What did they look like to someone like Cam? He and Tony? Was that what happiness looked like? For a heartbeat, his eyes watered and prickled, and he wanted nothing more than to agree, to embrace it, free himself of the push to fight, sink into this thing with Tony and just let himself be happy and demand nothing more than that. It sounded so simple. He hung a hand on the edge for a moment, before glancing back to look at Cam.
“Get some sleep,” Steve told the boy. “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

He pulled the door closed on Cam’s frown and headed down the hallway, seeing nothing, though overly conscious of the way his body moved under the robe. His skin tingled with small needles of heat. His nipples ached, dulling out nearly everything else, save for the pulse of pressure that thrummed from just below the curve of his stomach down the length of his shaft, settling just behind the head of his cock. By the time he exited the tunnel into the hall outside Tony’s chambers, his breath was coming in short pants against the metal veil, warming his lips, and he could feel a sheen of sweat lighting his skin.

Steve stopped outside the heavy doors to Tony’s chambers and drew in a bracing breath, then knocked, once, and waited. The door opened barely a moment later, and one of Tony’s stone-faced guards greeted him by standing aside for him to enter.

The bedroom was empty, though a fire glowed in the hearth and the torches were lit. Brighter light spilled out from the workshop, where familiar clanks and clamoring sounded, somehow instantly putting Steve at ease. He undid the belt at his waist and tossed the robe over the back of one of the chairs by the fireplace, then walked toward the workshop.

He stopped, just under the arch of the doors that led from the bedroom, and looked across the room at Tony, who sat at his worktable, with a metal pin tucked in his mouth while he used a small, ball-pointed hammer on some kind of gear and shaft contraption that Steve didn’t recognize. Steve sank down to his knees on the stone floor and bowed his head slightly, waiting.

“Good, you’re here,” Tony called out, the words coming out garbled around the pin. “I was just thin—”

There was a plinking sound, that Steve was fairly sure was the pin falling from Tony’s mouth to the table and then bouncing down to the floor, where it rested next to Tony’s boot. Silence reined for a long span of heartbeats, so long that Steve finally lifted his gaze up enough to find Tony’s eyes, dark and wide, fixed on him, his mouth slightly open, the small hammer held midair, seemingly forgotten. Steve’s whole body thumped, heart pounding in his ears, the pain in his nipples seeming to keep time with it, muscles twitching, throat clicking as he tried to swallow, small, short breaths barely teetering out of him underneath the weight of the veil. His cock strained, hardening as he waited, a bead of moisture forming just at the tip.

The scrape of the chair as Tony was so loud it almost startled Steve, though Tony’s steps were measured. Careful. He stopped in front of Steve and stood there, silent and still, then reached out a hand and cupped the side of Steve’s face, the way Steve had known he would. Steve leaned into the warm, familiar curve of Tony’s hand, feeling the rough, calloused skin against his cheek. Everything else seemed to fade away. It was just Tony’s touch, his gaze, his heat. This, here, now. Nothing else mattered. Not in here.

“You…” Tony husked out, barely a word carried on this breath. “Look at how lovely you have made yourself for me. You are truly a wonder, aren’t you?” His expression had gone unmeasurably soft. His eyes, deep fathomless pools as he looked down at Steve. Steve felt his mouth part as a rush of air escaped against the metal shroud. His cock stiffened, rising enough so that the golden curtain above it jingled against his thigh. It should be humiliating. He should burn with the shame of it, prostrating himself before Tony like this. Instead, his skin prickled, body burning with anticipation, bright-white clouds edged his vision, and his heart slowed, steadied, as he waited, the drumbeat deepening and sinking lower, throbbing down the length of his cock.

“I must tell my painters to put down their brushes, my jewelers to set aside their tools, my gardeners to cease cultivating their flowers. You put them all to shame, my beautiful one,” Tony
whispered, voice rough and gravelly, and seeming to vibrate down to the hand that cupped Steve’s cheek, so he could feel the words themselves flow over his skin, tremoring though his body.

“This,” Tony said, tracing his thumb through the fringe of gold that covered Steve’s face. “This is meant to amuse me, yes?” Tony asked, eyes dancing with delight. Steve felt his face warm, but couldn’t help the answering smile that formed under the veil and lit his own eyes, making Tony grin in return.

“Tease,” Tony accused lightly, before the smile fell away and his eyes darkened, nostrils flaring as he looked Steve up and down again.

Hot, pulsing pressure was building low in Steve’s belly, thrumming with the pulling ache from his nipples and tight, pulsing heat filling his cock. The longer Tony regarded him, the more Steve was aware of it, all the earlier nervousness fading away under Tony’s gaze until he could do little more than just feel, everything and all of it at once, until it was almost too much.

Tony’s hand dropped from his cheek and he crouched down in front of Steve, so he could wrap his hand around the pendant hanging in the center of Steve’s chest instead. He smiled, though there was nothing soft or gentle about it, all wicked heat and hard angles, and tugged, inexorably forward, pulling at the clamps on Steve’s nipples until he had no choice but to lean into it. Tony’s grin widened for a moment, and then he jerked the pendant just hard enough to send a sizzle of pain stabbing through Steve’s nipples before capturing Steve’s mouth in a wet, searing kiss, tongue pushing in on Steve’s gasp with hard, sweeping strokes that stole Steve’s breath and left him panting when Tony final pulled back.

“Go to the bed,” Tony ordered brusquely, dropping his hand from pendant and standing back up again. Steve wanted to sag with relief, the words sending a spike of want along the line of heat between his nipples and cock. “Get on your hands and knees in the center and wait for me.”

There was a strangled, gasping half-whine that rent the room. It took a moment for Steve to realize it had come from him. He was already moving to obey Tony’s command, all graceless, gangly limbs and shaking muscles.

The walk to the bed seemed far too long, the floor shifting and listing as if on the deck of a ship, but he made it and climbed onto the huge bed. Positioning himself in the center, he leaned forward and braced himself on his hands and knees. A small gasp escaped him as he settled. The heavy pendant dangling on the chain between his nipples tugged downward, stretching them, the deep, throbbing ache seeming to leap forward into a stinging pain all at once.

He heard a half-swallowed noise from behind him and realized Tony knew that, which somehow made the pain better. Not less, but better, though that didn’t quite make sense to him. He was beyond caring, though. The position had his ass in the air for Tony to see, his cock jutting out below, tenting the golden skirt so it fanned out around his shaft, and the veil hanging from his face where his head was bowed towards the bed. He wondered, almost idly, what Tony thought, though he knew it was good. He could feel Tony’s happiness as surely as the warm waft of air from the fire over his skin. As he knelt there, his vision seemed to brighten, sharpen, then go fuzzy at the edges, the air thickening in his lungs and his skin slickening with sweat. His legs and arms trembled. Still, he waited, holding the position, only letting his head dip down more and spreading his knees apart, which earned him a guttural, strangled sound from somewhere behind him.

The sounds of clothes being removed followed. Heavy thuds of boots cast aside. The slide of cloth against skin. The soft swish of fabric hitting the floor. The bed dipped, though Steve kept his eyes down. It was easier that way for some reason. He heard Tony sigh, and felt the stroke of a hand over his back, up and down the ridges of his spine to just above the length of chain that
Tony shifted in front of Steve’s vision, dusky thighs corded with muscle, flat stomach, the deep vee of his groin, where his stiff cock jutted out from the thatch of dark, springy hair. Steve’s mouth watered. He felt Tony’s hands threading through his hair, gently nudging his head up, until he found Tony’s gaze. What he saw there was…he didn’t know what it was. Good, his body told him almost seeming to click the word into place in his mind like a lock turning. Tender and soft, unspeakably so, because they didn’t make words for this, they made music and painted canvases and sculpted stone, for these things that could not be said. Safe and solid and Tony.

“Steve,” Tony rasped, curling the word into a hum. He seemed not to have words, either, but that seemed right somehow. Steve nudged forward into the cradle of Tony’s stomach, and concentrated on the way Tony’s hands felt in his hair, on his shoulders and back, stroking his cheeks. His cock was heavy and straining against his stomach, leaking drops of moisture on the bed below and his nipples burned cold where the pendant pulled at them, but it was all good and soft and hazy somehow, as if the world itself had blurred while he waited.

Tony lifted the edges of the curtain of metal that covered Steve’s nose and mouth and held it up. “Open,” he said, and Steve did, eagerly, saliva pooling against his tongue as Tony fed his cock into the wet heat. Tony let the veil fall back down, so that most of his cock disappeared underneath it as he slowly thrust into Steve’s mouth.

Steve wrapped his lips around the shaft and sucked lightly, using his tongue to circle the head and lap at the slit there, the way he knew by now that Tony liked. Tony pulled back, then slowly pushed in again, repeating the motion until Steve felt his throat slacken and relax. His lips were sloppy and wet, leaving a trail of saliva catching on Tony’s cock like a spider’s web, dribbling down his chin as he sucked against the steady, shallow thrusts. Metal and musk smells mingled, filling his nose, as Tony pushed deeper into Steve’s mouth with a low groan that went all the way down to the tip of Steve’s cock. Steve continued to suck and work his tongue around Tony’s cock, even as a gasping choked-off breath was punched out of him as Tony thrust deeper, hitting the back of his throat before pulling almost all the way out again.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth now,” Tony told him, which was all the warning he got before Tony slammed his cock back in again, sliding past Steve’s tongue and down his throat again, momentarily making Steve’s vision blacken before he pulled back and started thrusting in earnest. Tony’s hands were in his hair, gripping his head now, anchoring him, keeping him steady.

A burst of saliva watered Steve’s mouth, and he tried to swallow, but couldn’t quite manage around Tony’s cock, making him cough, throat working to try to accommodate air and too much wetness and Tony’s cock filling him, not caring about either. Long, deep strokes that made Steve’s eyes water and shook the leaflike fringe of the veil until it clinked lightly together. The pendant swung wildly where it hung from his chest, tugging and pulling at the clamps, sending pings of stinging pain down his chest and groin as Tony used his mouth. Tears streamed from his eyes, and Steve blinked them back, lashes sticking together. Tony brushed a silvery trail off Steve’s cheek with his thumb and brought it to his mouth, sucking Steve’s tears off his finger as if they were an elixir, even as his hips snapped hard, pounding his cock into Steve’s mouth while bright, white stars blurred against Steve’s eyes.

“God, you’re the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen,” Tony breathed out in a rough scrape of a voice that sounded like steel against a sharpening wheel. “Beautiful. So beautiful. My soldier. Look at you, God, you’re so good, Steve, so, so, good, my treasure, mine, my beautiful one,” Tony chanted, eyes glazed over, hand’s holding Steve’s cheeks in an iron grip. He was rocking his hips.
hard into Steve’s mouth, quick, stuttering thrusts that left Steve breathless and choking, the pain in his nipples singing through his muscles and deep down, deeper still, behind his cock, where his balls drew up and tightened.

Steve had known, when he chose the veil, hadn’t he? That Tony would do this. That’s why he chose this. He had dressed for Tony, true, but told Tony what he wanted, as well, though the impulse hadn’t been conscious at the time. He could see it now, clear as the dawn. He had wanted this, though about it, when he took Tony in his mouth sometimes and felt the careful restraint in Tony’s thrusts as he showed Steve what he liked. He had imagined this, how good this would feel, to be on his knees and have Tony do this, to crawl to him, maybe, not the way he had once crawled to Hammer with his stomach twisting and fear clouding his mind, but like this, with this lightheaded, dizzying feeling that whisked away everything else, how he felt full everywhere when Tony took his mouth, Tony’s taste and scent the only things he could seem to process, consuming him, enveloping him, until there was nothing else beyond Tony’s cock stretching his mouth wide.

Tony’s thrusts took on a loose, sloppy rhythm, hips juddering almost helplessly against Steve’s mouth as small, sharp cries fell from Tony’s lips like rain warming Steve’s skin. When Tony’s seed filled his mouth and throat in hot, bitter streams, Steve sucked hard and tried to swallow around Tony’s cock, though some of it seeped out of his lips and down his chin to the bed below. He coughed and spluttered, but kept sucking, lapping at the mess in his mouth with his tongue until the last of Tony’s spasms subsided.

Tony pulled his cock out, leaving a thread of creamy saliva dangling between them for a moment before the veil fell back in place cutting it off, then collapsed on the bed next to Steve, panting hard. Steve let his head drop down between his shoulders, arms shaking, a drip of drool puddling beneath him to match the wet spot on the bed under his cock. His breath was steady now. Harsh, but steady. His whole chest seemed to ache with a cold-burning soreness, and his cock pulsed insistently, but it was all distant somehow. Beneath him. Away. He didn’t know. He had the odd sensation of floating, warm water cocooning him, the rush of it filling his ears with a constant susurration that blocked out anything else.

Tony was moving around on the bed, reaching for the pot of warming oil on the table and slicking his fingers. Steve waited. Tony would take care of him. He didn’t need to think now, just feel, and that was alright in here, like this.

“Here,” Tony said, his voice gentle and warm against Steve’s ear. “Roll over with me,” Tony urged. “On your back. There you go. Slowly. Good,” he praised, and the word broke open in Steve’s chest like molten fire. Steve rolled over, muscles protesting as soon as the strain was gone, but that was good, too, because he had done it for Tony. “Good, Steve, so good for me, so beautiful, you did so well for me,” Tony continued, hands running over Steve’s skin seemingly everywhere he could reach, kneading the flesh, as if he could rub the words themselves into Steve’s skin.

Steve looked up at where Tony hovered over him and found Tony’s eyes, soft gaze melting over Steve as he stroked Steve’s chest and arms.

“For you,” Steve slurred, then blinked and frowned. That hadn’t sounded right.

“I know,” Tony huffed in seeming understanding, a smile tugging at his lips. “You were perfect for me, Steve. So good,” he said, and brushed the hair back from Steve’s forehead, eyes going to crescent moons as he looked down at Steve. “You will relax now, and I will take care of you. Shhhhh, there now, that’s good,” Tony shushed, still threading his hand over and over across Steve’s brow, pushing the sweat-damp hair off his face. “Good, Steve. Relax, my love.”
Steve did, wondrously. It was easy to slide back into the warm ether of Tony’s words and hands. He felt Tony’s hand stroking lower, fingers trailing over Steve’s stomach and through the chains of golden coins that fell over his cock. Tony wrapped his hand around the shaft, pressing the cool, metal discs against Steve’s hard, heated flesh, making Steve let out a hiss of air through his teeth.

“You are so close already,” Tony mused, sounding inordinately pleased. “Just from me using your mouth.” Steve hummed agreement and pushed up against Tony’s hand, though Tony dropped it to his side and tutted. “Oh, no, I think not. Not this time, when so much is before me.”

Tony smiled, almost mischievously, and leaned over Steve’s chest, dipping his head to take one of Steve’s metal-covered nipples in his mouth. Steve’s whole body jerked. His hands came up to scabble at Tony’s head, though he couldn’t seem to decide if he was pulling Tony away or holding him close. He felt Tony’s tongue, warm and wet, flick against the delicate nub where it was caught between the teeth of the two half-moons. A low chuckle sent a puff of warm air across it that cooled when it met the wet skin.

“You are truly beautiful like this,” Tony murmured. “Beautiful always, but this…this is gift you gave to me, do not think I do not know it, my treasure. And you are all the more beautiful for it,” he said, finishing the last with a hum, before he popped the clamp apart and let it fall away from Steve’s nipple. A sharp gasp escaped Steve, and his hips jolted, canting up trying to find some answer to the sudden sensation. Prickling jets of pain shot through Steve, deep down in his stomach and the head of his cock, which twitched and went even more rigid. Then, Tony’s mouth, hot and wet, was around his nipple, sucking lightly, long laving over the taut peak.

Steve shouted some nonsense sound as his body rocked and twisted. He felt Tony’s hand on his hip, steadying him, even as Tony sucked all the harder on the nub as feeling flowed back into it. It was too much. Too much pain and pleasure weaving together into one bright burst of heat and need. So caught up in Tony’s mouth on his nipple and the desperate need to thrust, Steve didn’t notice Tony’s hand draw upon his chest until the other clamp snapped off and Tony caught Steve’s other nipple between his thumb and forefingers, rolling it and squeezing lightly, giving it the smallest of tugs. A long, low keening sound worked its way out of him like a bow drawing back. Tony moved his mouth the other nipple and lapped at it, swirling his tongue around and around, then flicking it, hard. Steve was coming before he realized what was happening, hips thrusting hard against Tony’s stomach. Tony’s slick hand found Steve’s cock, pushed the metal skirt aside and worked him through the last of it as long, white streams decorated the both of them.

He wasn’t sure how much time passed while he lay there and let Tony hold him. Dimly, he was aware that Tony was rocking him, just barely, but enough that he should feel silly, though he didn’t. The feeling was…different. Cherished. He curled into it without thinking about what he was doing and heard a pleasant, buzzing hum fill his ears and wash over his skin. Finally, he felt Tony disentangle himself and nudge Steve over enough to pull the blanket with its drying wet spots out from under him, before getting up. There were noises. A splash. A soft, patting sound. The padding of feet across the thick rug. Tony returned with a basin of water in his lap and a soft cloth. He lifted Steve’s head up enough to undo the clasp of the veil and pull it away, then dipped the cloth in the water and used it to wipe the mess away, first from Steve’s mouth and chin, then down his chest and over his stomach and groin. He leaned over and reached up to run the back of his fingers down Steve’s cheek, along his jaw and down the column of his throat to settle on the collar that marked Steve as his.

“You will sleep now,” Tony told him with a slight sigh as he drew a fresh coverlet from the end of the bed up to Steve’s shoulders. A fond, affectionate smile was trying to find its way onto his face, though he kept trying to purse his lips against it. “Tomorrow will be a long day. Save your thinking for then. Sleep. Dream. Good dreams,” he said, the smile wisping away like smoke to
something almost sad. “Not those that plague you some nights. You are free from those things
now. I will fill the rest of your days with good thoughts and your nights with pleasure, and these
memories, they will leave you. And, then…then you will be at peace, I think, and from this peace,
there can be happiness.”

“I am happy,” Steve insisted, though the words were sluggish with the weight of sleep. Had he
been sleepy? Exhaustion seemed to crash into him at once with Tony’s words, and he could barely
keep his eyes open. He didn't want to dream, didn't want to think of it, though his mind conjured
the half-formed image of waking up in darkness with a scream dying in his throat and Tony's voice,
soft and sure and soothing, in his ear. “With you. I’m happy with you.”

Tony looked down at him for a long moment, long enough that Steve had nearly drifted off, and
almost didn’t catch the words Tony spoke as he turned away and looked at the fire.

“No. No, you aren’t,” Tony said quietly, little more than a tight whisper, and pushed himself off
the bed, grabbing a robe and heading for his workshop.

Chapter End Notes

If you are interested in the pictures that inspired Steve's outfits in this chapter, head
over to my tumblr (sabrecmc) for all the pretty objectification of Steve. Sorry, Steve
(no, I'm not).

A little sidenote of interest probably only to me, but the discussion at the beginning of
the chapter is base don De Re Militari by Vegetius, and a critique (which Steve gives)
by a West Point professor.

Comments and kudos are the only way I know if you are enjoying this and are very
much appreciated!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Huge thank you to Onetruesikorsky for beta-ing this chapter and being an awesome cheer-reader. It is an incredible help.

Thank you again to everyone who has given this fic a chance. I know the subject matter is problematic, as it should be, but keep in mind that for this world, slavery is an accepted thing. That doesn't make it right, of course, and that is a part of what will be dealt with in upcoming chapters, but for Tony, this is all he has known and the way it has been forever, so it's going to take something dramatic to make him really see how wrong it is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6

Steve woke with a surprised rush of breath punching out of him, coming to alertness in an instant. Tony chuckled above him and went back to scraping his beard across one of Steve’s abused nipples, then over his chest to the other while Steve’s hands curled into the bedding with an iron grip.

“Good morning, beloved,” Tony said with a devilish grin as he peered up at Steve, waggling his eyebrows a bit before dipping his head down again to take the taut peak between his teeth just hard enough for a spike of tight heat to travel down the length of Steve’s cock, which appeared to have woken up some time before he did, Steve noticed with a contented hum. Tony had an arm braced on either side of Steve’s chest and one leg fitted between Steve’s and was lazily rutting his cock against Steve’s own in slow, gentle strokes that pulled and burned with a rough heat along dry skin.

“Tony,” Steve groaned, pulling the name out from somewhere deep. Sleep to this, to all of this, the rush of sensations, soft hands and rough beard, friction and want, all of a sudden, it was too much and not enough. Stop, don’t stop, more, less, it was all whirling around in his head like one of those storms Clint talked about that turned so fast it sucked the trees from the earth.

“Yes?” Tony asked, teasing and still a little honeyed with sleep, taking his mouth off of Steve’s nipple with a wet, sucking pop. “Something to say?”

Steve shook his head helplessly and wrapped his hands behind Tony’s head, threading through the soft curls and drawing Tony’s mouth back down. He could feel the smile on Tony’s lips as he obediently started suckling again, harder this time, tugging and flicking and working his tongue around the nub while he thrust his cock along Steve’s and through the thatch of hair at Steve’s groin, sending a low, buzzing friction thrumming through Steve’s body.

“Tony’s hand found Steve’s cock and stroked, idly, barely a touch. It was enough to draw a high, keening whine of protest out of Steve, which earned a satisfied-sounding grunt from Tony as he left Steve’s nipple and started kissing, nipping and sucking his way around the dusky edge, then down Steve’s chest, over the ripples of muscle. Steve felt Tony scrape his fingers through the short, twisty hair that framed Steve’s cock, back and forth, then catching in it, tugging a bit,
sending a streak of pain and want pounding through Steve’s cock.

“I should shave you,” Tony murmured, tongue tracing the line of Steve’s rib before he bit down, making Steve’s body jerk and a startled cry escape, partly from Tony’s teeth and partly from his words. Tony looked up at him over the flat of Steve’s stomach and grinned, then released his mouth and hummed. “I like this,” he continued, tracing his fingers lightly back and forth over the thatch of hair. “You being golden all over. Do not mistake me. But, I liked you the first night, too, when your pretty cock was set against your bare skin, all smooth and gleaming. I like you all ways, I think,” he said with a low laugh from the back of his throat. “You’d have to keep still for me. So still,” Tony sighed. “Could you be good for me like that? I think you could.”

For a moment, Steve thought of his first day in Zola’s compound, being cleaned and shaved and prepared for Tony. How horrible it had been, how helpless he had felt. Useless. Immaterial. Like he didn’t matter. He blinked, eyes stinging, and repressed a shudder. With Tony, though…Tony would be gentle. Careful. Tease Steve. Barely touch him, but touch him enough. Slide the blade across his skin while Steve was still for him. He would talk. Tell Steve how good he was. Call him beautiful. Treat it like a wondrous ritual that he was able to do for Steve. It would be good. To be still for Tony like that, to let him do that. He closed his eyes and this time, the shudder had nothing to do with revulsion. Tony tutted a teasing warning and went back to sucking marks on Steve’s chest.

“I could shave you,” Steve offered, the idea springing fully formed into his head, but as soon as it was there, he couldn’t think anything else. He would love that, to have Tony in his care, to have Tony trust him that way. His cock twitched, hard and eager, bumping into Tony’s chest, leaving a glistening wet trail, and making Tony’s gaze drag down Steve’s body for a long moment before he raised his eyes up again, a curious, teasing glint shining in their brown depths.

“And what would I get if I were still and good for you?” Tony asked before dipping his tongue to circle the hole in Steve’s belly as he kept up the slow, steady rhythm of his hand on Steve’s cock and his hips rocking across the path of Steve’s groin and stomach.

“Probably a better shave,” Steve replied drolly with a slight shake of his head from side to side, only to hear Tony’s burst of laughter before he buried his face into Steve’s stomach, making it shake as he laugh ed. It should’ve broken the mood, but instead, seemed to make Steve’s blood run hotter, heating his veins as it coursed a ponderous ache deep inside him.

“My concubine finds himself rather amusing this morning, I think,” Tony grinned and wrapped his hand around Steve’s cock again, stroking lazily, thrusting his hips up as he did so his own cock rutted through the springy hairs at Steve’s groin.

“Someone has to,” Steve said, then gasped as Tony thrust his hips again. “Tony,” Steve said, voice low and full of pleading.

Tony smiled, catlike, and pushed himself up on his hands above Steve’s chest, then leaned his head down and took Steve’s left nipple in his mouth, sucking hard enough that the line of heat that went from there to the head of Steve’s cock suddenly went taut, arching Steve’s back along with it like his whole body was pulled on a puppeteer’s string, and maybe it was, he thought dizzily. His cock pulsed with need, a constant throbbing under the head and in his balls that made it feel like the skin was stretched too tightly and he was half sure he would burst from the pressure if Tony touched him or do the same if Tony didn’t.

Steve raised his knee up, clasping his leg to Tony’s side and started working his hips in languid, undulating thrusts as he met Tony’s. Tony hummed, the sound vibrating through Steve’s nipple, and looked up at Steve from under his lashes, sucked obscenely, wet and loud, and bit down.
Hard. Steve’s hips spasmed and jerked, and he came against Tony’s stomach while Tony continued to rock his hips into Steve’s groin in long, slow thrusts.

Once Steve’s hips stopped bucking, Tony pushed himself up on his knees between Steve’s legs and spread Steve’s knees wide apart. He wiped his hand down his stomach, coating it in the mess, before wrapping it around both of their cocks and holding them together in his hand, using Steve’s own seed to slicken them as he slid his own cock along Steve’s in his hand. His thrusts picked up speed, hips pumping and snapping his cock into the circle of his hand where he held Steve’s.

“Fuck, that’s gorgeous,” Tony burst out in a strangled voice as he looked down between them. “God, Steve,” Tony moaned, low and gravelly as he thrust. He came with a harsh, broken shout, back bowing, muscles going taut, warm streams that covered Steve’s chest and neck. A fleck hit Steve’s bottom lip and he startled, then flicked his tongue out to taste, keeping his eyes on Tony as he lapped it into his mouth.

Tony groaned and collapsed next to him, rolling over onto his back as he panted, heavy, heaving breaths that seemed ripped out of his chest so hard as to leave him shaking. Steve turned to his side and buried his head against Tony’s shoulder. A moment later, he felt a blanket being tossed over him and Tony’s hand stroking through his hair and patting gently at the side of his face. The sudden memory of lying in the grass by the small stream that cut through the meadow with his hand spread out on the surface as the water coursed underneath and the sun beat down from overhead lit his mind, and a warm, almost liquid sense of contentment flowed through him, over him, under him, he wasn’t sure. They stayed like that a long while, with Tony raking his fingers through his hair and stroking his face. Steve watched the reach of the sunlight through the window where it marked the rug grow longer, catching specks of dust in its grasp. He could see so clearly that he thought he could almost count them.

Tony was talking. Of course he was, Steve thought with a familiar fondness attached to the knowledge. It sounded oddly distant, but it seemed to slowly get louder, as if Tony was approaching from afar, and then, suddenly, he was right there, next to Steve, all warm, sweat-slick skin and damp curls of hair pressing against his temples.

“Good, Steve, so good for me, just beautiful, my darling, so perfect for me. I like this, you know. Waking up next to you, taking care of you, watching you come on my mouth or my hand or my fingers,” Tony was murmuring, almost chanting, the way Wanda would chant sometimes, and you could feel it in the way your blood pounded with the words. “I would see you like this every day, all soft and pliant and happy and know that I made you this way.”

“I like it, too,” Steve rasped out, the words sounding odd, as if he were relearning how to speak and each word had to drip into his mind once more. “Waking up with you. Not just—not only what you—what we did, but, this. Just this. I like this, too.”

“Well. That’s…” Tony began, then stopped and looked away, something sharp and surprised moving across his face before he collected himself and looked back down at Steve, his eyes hooded like crescent moons. “That’s a good thing, then, isn’t it?” Tony said softly, voice strained, though he was still running his hand through Steve’s hair in gently scraping strokes. “Though,” he began, stretching out the word with a sigh, “as much as I would love to while away the morning doing exactly this, we must see the day, beautiful one. There is much to be done. I should have you clean me up,” Tony said with a groan as he stretched. “You would look utterly amazing doing that.” Steve frowned and turned his head towards the basin and the stack of cloths that stood under the window. He could do that, Steve thought to himself, somewhat hazily. He started to push himself up on his elbow, only to have Tony grab his arm and pull him back down with a soft laugh and press a kiss to the top of his head. “With your mouth, my treasure.”
Oh. Steve felt his cheeks warm and knew he would be red-faced, which would please Tony, who reveled in his reactions, so he pulled back enough to catch Tony’s eye and was rewarded with a soft smile and the stroke of Tony’s hand through his hair again. The thought of cleaning Tony up like that rolled around in Steve’s head for a moment, then seemed to sit at the front of it, growing larger in scope the longer he thought about it, until it seemed to block out anything else, and somehow sinking down, lower and lower, sitting firm and tight behind his cock.

“Would you like that? Your mouth on me, your tongue, cleaning up the mess that is there because of you?” Tony asked, all husky-voiced. Steve didn’t know how to answer, so he didn’t, just dropped his eyes, and he thought that was okay, too, by the soft, approving hum that vibrated through Tony’s chest. “You would be gorgeous, no doubt. Your pleasure is beautiful to behold, my darling. Brighter than the sun warming the sands. I don’t imagine I will ever tire of seeing it.”

Something about that prickled in Steve’s mind, leaving a crawling sensation behind it. The warmth fled, chased away by a flurry of thoughts that seemed to spring into Steve’s mind all at once, and he was suddenly adrift, a small boat rocking in a windswept sea, with a wave curling around him, sending him under until up was down and he wasn’t sure which way held the sky.

The King will not lose interest. He is not like that, I do not think. He will keep you with him always, you will see.

Cam had said that, but…that couldn’t be right, Steve thought, though the idea left him cold. In time, the King would no longer want him. Tony would cast him aside, surely, and—that was what he wanted. Was it not? Then, he could buy his freedom, and Cam’s, with the gifts Tony gave him, or so said the half-formed hope that had sprung into his mind after talking with the other concubines. How long, though, until Tony wouldn’t want him? Weeks? Months? Long after the promised trip to the desert wastes? Would Tony allow him to buy his way out of this with the presents he had given to Steve or would he expect Steve to continue to serve others until he accumulated enough to repay whatever his purchase price had been? Would Tony really send him to others? When he is done with you, why would he care, Steve’s mind demanded. He will send you away, like he has done with the others, and you will crawl to Hammer and his ilk, because that is what is left when all of this is over. You, on your knees, unable to rise up because you put yourself there, his mind whispered, drowning in the cold dark, burning in the box with the sun so bright it blinds you, and still too slow, too slow, too slow, too sl--

“What is it?” Tony asked suddenly, drawing back enough to look at Steve. He brought his hands up to cup Steve’s face and held him there. “Steve? Are you unwell?” Sharp concern laced Tony’s voice, and a frown marred his features.

Steve was aware that his heart was pounding in his chest as if it was trying to chisel through his ribs, and his brow was covered in sweat, though neither of those things seemed to matter. He sucked in a breath and tried to calm himself, though he found himself reaching for Tony, almost as if his limbs were working of their own accord.

“Nothing,” Steve said, shaking his head as much as he could within the confines of Tony’s hands. “I am fine.”

His voice sounded thin. He swallowed, throat clicking with the effort, and coughed, trying to clear it, but the air sat cold in his chest. He ducked his head forward, into Tony’s chest, and breathed in the warm, musky scent. It helped steady him, somehow, and up was up again, the disorienting sensation slowly dissipating, as Tony’s warmth seemed to seep into Steve’s skin. “I am,” Steve insisted, and this time, it sounded like it might be true.

“No. No, you are not. This is not fine, Steve,” Tony said. His arms wrapped around Steve’s back
and held him to his chest, slowly stroking along Steve’s shoulders and down the ridges of his spine. “Tell me what is the matter? A sickness or—”

“I am fine,” Steve said again. He thought he sounded better. Stronger. At least his voice wasn’t shaking like a leaf on the wind any longer.

“You should stay here today, rest. I will postpone—” Tony started to offer.

“No! No, I am fine,” Steve assured him quickly. “I am, Tony. It—it was just a momentary malaise. It has passed. I think, I should eat, perhaps. That is all.”

“You are certain?” Tony questioned, sounding doubtful still. “The walls will not move, my dearest. They will be there for another day. We can wait.”

“I am truly fine. I am, Tony, I swear. I have not seen your city, not really, just passed through, and then it was…difficult to notice much. I would like to go,” Steve said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone as he pulled his head up to look at Tony. He had his own reasons for wanting to see the city and the wall that surrounded it, and for some reason, it seemed even more important now to do so. If I stay in here with him, I will stop looking at maps, stop counting the jewels that could be easily removed, stop timing the changing of the guards, and I will be the kind of happy that must be, because the alternative is not melancholy, but horror. “Please, Tony. I would very much like to go,” Steve added at Tony’s skeptical look, and that was enough to soften the King’s features, though his mouth flattened into a thin line, clearly unsatisfied, even as he capitulated.

“Very well,” Tony agreed with a sigh, though he still sounded unconvinced. He didn’t move. Not right away, at least, just stayed there, running his hands over Steve’s skin for long minutes, until he finally heaved another long sigh and rolled out of bed and headed to the fireplace, where an iron pot hung over the embers. He returned with a warm, wet cloth and wiped Steve clean, slowly, with an almost ritualistic care, rubbing the heated fabric into Steve’s skin in small circles as he did. When he was done, he repeated the effort on his own torso, though far more perfunctorily.

“I will have food brought,” Tony told him. “You will eat. Then we will see.”

“I should go back to my rooms,” Steve said, pushing himself up to a sit and letting his legs hang off the side of the bed. “Get ready. Cam will be waiting, and he will have food there. I think he delights in seeing what he can convince the kitchen to make for him. You should see how excited he is,” Steve told him with a wry grin. “Truly, Tony, I am fine.”

“He’s a good lad. Clever,” Tony remarked, shrugging his robe over his shoulders and tying the belt. “You could have proper attendants, though, you know. I’m not suggesting putting the boy from you,” Tony added quickly, holding up a placating hand. “You are worse than one of those hens with a chick under her wing about him,” he grumbled, then ruined the effect by laughing lightly. “I was merely pointing out that it is customary for one such as you to have something of a retinue to see to your needs. I’m told. By Pepper. Who is always right, of course.”

“I fought Hydra, but I’m not fool enough to argue with Ms. Potts,” Steve began, watching Tony’s expression as he rolled his eyes and pulled a knowing face. He liked the chatelaine, with her strange moniker, fearless efficiency and devotion to Tony, though she rarely did more than greet Steve politely if he happened to be in Tony’s workshop during one of her visits. “But, Cam is more than enough for me,” Steve replied. “I’ve never had a servant before, let alone a…retinue. I don’t know what anyone else would even do.”

“Pamper you? See to your every whim? Listen to you argue, since I know it brings you such joy to do so,” Tony suggested wanly, walking over to stand between Steve’s legs where they hung
“Are you suggesting that you are wrong so often in order to please me?” Steve asked with as serious a frown as he could muster. “You are truly generous, Your Highness.”

Tony stared down at him for a moment, then tossed his head back and laughed, his whole body shaking with it. When he finally collected himself, he grasp Steve’s face between his hands, leaned forward and kissed him, hard, half laughing through it, even as his lips slanted over Steve’s and his tongue brushed inside Steve’s mouth, flicking and curling against Steve’s own.

“You think yourself the court jester now, do you?” Tony asked, still chuckling lowly as he pulled away. Tony leaned forward again and pressed another kiss, long and almost chaste this time, to Steve’s forehead, then pulled back and rested his head against Steve’s, sighing softly, and draping his arms over Steve’s shoulders. “Oh, you do please me so well, my treasure,” Tony said, drawing back with a shake of his head and grazing the back of his knuckles along Steve’s cheek. “I did not think it would be…like this.”

“That what would be like this?” Steve asked, blinking up at Tony with a matching frown, though his was born of confusion. Tony started to speak, then stopped, sucked in a breath and wiped his hand across his mouth and looked away, towards the grand fireplace, shrouded in carvings and tapestries older than the both of them.

“Having a concubine. A favorite, I mean. Should have taken Obie’s suggestions years ago, I suppose, but, no matter. You’re here now,” Tony said with a shrug, turning away with a sweep of his robe. “So, no more attendants to argue with you. Very well, then. I shall tell Pepper that it was you who refused my entreaty, so any blame for not heeding her advice shall fall solely on your shoulders, fair warning. Go now. Break your fast. Relax. Dress. I shall send for you when it is time.” He raised Steve’s hand to his mouth and brushed his lips over Steve’s knuckles. “If you begin to feel ill again, you send word. No arguments.”

“I am fine,” Steve ground out, spitting the words out like sand.

“Ah, that’s more like it,” Tony said with a relieved smile. “My soldier does not like to be coddled, and yet, I rather enjoy the coddling. Let us ponder who shall win this conflict for a moment, shall we? Hmm? No? You appear to be grinding rocks with your teeth, my darling,” Tony laughed when Steve shot him an annoyed look. “By the way, the merchants will take the opportunity to hawk their wares today. They will try to catch your eye, have the crowd see your interest. Perhaps you will see something that sparks your delight? A bauble, some trinket or fine length of cloth, a decoration for your room? Cam will, in theory, know how to handle things. Admittedly, this theory is still very much in the testing phase. Still, anything you want, you’ve only to ask and it is yours.”

“I want to go home,” Steve thought, and at the same time some other part of him answered, “I want you.” He thought both might be true and both were almost certainly lies.

“You have given me so much,” Steve replied, then more carefully, “Surely…surely a fortune already. More than I am worth, I would think.”

Tony sucked in a breath, eyes going wide for a moment. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, head bobbing in a nod that seemed more for himself than Steve.

“You are…you are beyond price, Raj’Inama,” Tony said softly, though his voice was strained with tension, as if the words were barely slipping through a sieve.
Steve looked at Tony for a long moment, the half-formed plan to buy his way out of this wafting away like smoke, until Tony was the one to cast his eyes down and move away in a flurry of movement that had him handing Steve his robe and mumbling something about preparations for the day. He was off to his workshop then, and Steve watched him go, his own motions sluggish, as if in contrast to Tony’s hurried steps.

*Your pleasure is beautiful to behold, my darling. Brighter than the sun warming the sands. I don’t imagine I will ever tire of seeing it.*

Steve donned the robe he had tossed aside last night and went searching for the veil and loincloth that had somehow ended up halfway across the room. The veil was nowhere to be found, though Steve did not waste much time looking for it. Cam would be waiting, anxious excitement and youth being something of a heady combination, Steve knew. He nodded to the guards as the dour-faced one held the door for him, and caught an exchange of looks between the two as he departed, though on what cause, he could not say.

His mind was still half abed, his body warm and teetering between the need to stretch and move and an indolent desire to do little to nothing, as if all it would take was stilling himself for a moment to recapture whatever haze it was that had ruled his body and mind during the night. He could almost see it, hovering just out of reach, but so close, and if he but stopped…turned around, returned, he could find it again…though he didn’t. He never did. He wondered if that was enough, not to let himself go back, or if now that he’d gorged himself, freeing himself from the fairy folk was as illusory as his mother’s tales claimed.

Walking back to his room had taken on a kind of solemnity over these last few days that Steve associated more with preparing for battle than a simple stroll, but he could almost feel whatever carapace enveloped him in Tony’s chambers slowly slough away as he left the hallway for the tunnel to Zola’s compound. When had he stopped looking at the suits of armor that lined the hall? When had he stopped counting his steps? When had he forgotten to measure the length of the torches that burned in their cradles and marked the last time someone had come this way? It was harder, each time, and Steve knew if he wasn’t careful, one day, he wouldn’t truly leave at all, and that thought alone was enough to sober the lingering sluggishness from his mind.

“There you are!” Cam shouted, as Steve rounded the corner to the hallway that led to his rooms. Cam was waiting with the door to their quarters thrown wide, rocking back and forth on his heels and motioning Steve to hurry, wearing a dashing blue and cream robe that was clearly new and far finer than the usual plain one he wore around the compound. “There’s food,” Cam announced as Steve slipped between him and the door. “And look,” he said, twirling for Steve to admire. “We’ve new robes! I look like a true gentleman, do I not?”

“You do, indeed,” Steve agreed with a grin. A table in the center of the room was set with food. Steve’s stomach rumbled, as if awakening from a deep sleep, and he realized he was, in fact, starving. He used the privy and took a quick splash bath from the basin of warm water Cam had helpfully provided, then wrapped a simple cotton robe around himself. He and Cam rushed through the meal, though Cam still managed to use more words during the course of it to discuss their impending adventure than Steve had probably uttered in a month’s time. When they were done, Cam rang one of the bells to have the table cleared, and set about placing items on the bed for Steve.

“You are to wear this. The King sent it, special for you,” Cam told him, rubbing a hand across a deep blue robe shot through with golden threads and lined with layers of silks and muslin dyed in various hues of blue. “Is it not fine? And this,” he said, pointing at a gleaming metal headdress decorated with pyramid-like shapes and dripping with ovals of golden chains that would cover
Steve’s face and neck, save for his eyes and mouth.

Steve held the piece up and stared at it for a moment, before putting it back down next to the robe. Not nearly as dainty or filigreed as some of the other pieces at his disposal, this one had a structural quality to it that reminded him of Tony for some reason, and he wondered if Tony had any input into the design or had simply chosen something he liked. The King sent it. Special for you, Steve mentally repeated. Either way, it was something Tony wanted to see him in, and that thought alone was enough to make a flare of heat burst low in his belly, though he pushed it aside as best he could.

“Everyone in the city will be so excited to see you and think you so beautiful. They will write poems and songs of you, you will see,” Cam twittered merrily as he laid a pair of shoes on the rug by the bed.

“Everyone in the city?” Steve questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“People always come to see the King when he ventures out, and they almost never get to see a Royal concubine in person, but you are not just any concubine. You are the Raj’Inama. Besides, their lives are boring and simple. The King and the concubine he adores, this is grand and romantic!” Cam sing-songed, clapping his hands together with excitement. “They are curious. The King is well loved and kind, but since his parents’ deaths, he does not spend much time in the city or have parties at the Castle, the way Queen Maria used to do when she was alive. Already, the Castle’s tales of the King’s happiness spill out to the city. The people will want to see the one who makes their King feel this way. They will love you, too. You will see.”

“And how do you know all of this? That anyone in the city even knows of me?” Steve asked. “You have more gossip than a miser has coins, I would swear.”

“The kitchen helpers, all they do is chop and boil and talk,” Cam replied. “They like to talk about the King most of all, of course, and you, too, because he cares for you so.”

“Why do they think that?” Steve asked curiously. “I barely even see anyone outside of here, except his guards and Ms. Potts, and I can’t imagine her sharing the King’s secrets. General Rhodes, once, and those who care for his room and bring his food.”

“And do you not think they all perform their duties and then rush back down to the kitchens or laundry or wherever with stories of the King?” Cam said, sounding rather incredulous at Steve’s apparent naivete. “They can barely contain their words from spilling out. They all want to be the first to share. What else would they do with their lives for excitement? It is not just his concubines who like to talk. It is the whole Castle’s favorite pastime, to talk of the King. And now, you, because he places you above all others.”

“Share what?” Steve asked. “What do they say? About Ton—about the King? And…me?”

“Oh, this and that,” Cam replied noncommittally. “You know.”

“No, I don’t,” Steve said. “What do they say?”

“That you sleep in the King’s bed by his side. That he notices what foods you prefer and asks the chef to prepare more of those. That he sends for books from as far away as the universities as far away as Ghoad on matters of war and art and things that he thinks might interest you. That you have a chair in his workshop where he has never allowed anyone to stay for more than a few minutes before. That he has the musicians play on the chamber balcony while you walk the garden because you like the music. That he sent General Rhodes to the port—” Cam listed off,
ticking each on a finger.


“General Rhodes went to the port. I thought you must know this?” Cam said, wide-eyed and innocent-faced. Steve was fairly sure it was an act. “He was gone for nearly almost a full week. Erdé is his chambermaid, so she knows. She said the King summoned him from his dinner one night and sent him off,” Cam replied.

“Off to do what?” Steve demanded.

“No idea,” Cam shrugged. “But, he went directly to the King when he returned without even changing his garb from the ride. Oh, and she said he spoke to Admiral Carmichael about raiders and not being able to find enough drink or something. Erdé was there, picking up the laundry, and heard part of it.”

“Not being able to find enough drink?” Steve repeated with a frown.

“Yes. He didn’t have enough rum. I guess for the Admiral. Something about a box of it that he left behind at the port, or some such. It was odd to her, because usually General Rhodes prefers wine or mead,” Cam replied, pursing his lips and brow into a look of indifference as he shrugged again. “Now, come, come, we must get you ready! They will send for us soon!”

A box of rum? Not enough rum? Steve frowned, trying to follow the thread of something as it loomed itself into a weave. Left at the port. Not enough rum left in a box at the port. He was… low on rum. That was left in a box at the port.

Rumlow.

Steve’s mind halted, as if the word was a wall, and all that was there was hate and fear and his fingers scabbering at it uselessly, unable to gain purchase, as he tried to tear it down, except sometimes...sometimes, he was inside the wall. Behind it. In a box, and he couldn’t get out, he was trapped there, forever. This is what I dream about, he thought. What disturbs Tony at night.

Steve felt his teeth gnash together, and he tasted bile in the back of his throat, the remnant of this morning’s food trying to work its way out.

No. No, do not think of it, he told himself firmly. He walked over to the vase of flowers on the table that someone replenished daily, always with white lilies, their soft, delicate petals fanning open like a star being born. He leaned over and let their scent waft through his nostrils. It was light and pleasing and he knew from experience that, somehow, it was scent that worked when other things failed.

He sends these to me, Steve thought with a sudden tightening in his chest. This is one of the things he does that the slaves and servants talk about amongst themselves. White lilies. Every day. Because that night in the garden, under the lanterns, with a blanket of them at our feet, I told him they reminded me of the white star on my shield. And so he has them bring these to me, every day, and I have only just now noticed. What else have I missed, Steve wondered with a sigh, going back to where Cam waited impatiently, bobbing back and forth between his feet as he held the blue robe in front of him, trying to entice Steve to cooperate with his plans for dressing him.

Tony sent Rhodes to find Rumlow and the raiders. Rhodes left him in a box. The box. The one where Steve spent countless hours waiting for death to extend mercy. Steve remembered waking up that night and seeing Tony sitting by the hearth with some kind of shadow over him that wasn’t usually there and thinking then that Tony would be terrible in his anger. Perhaps, he was. Terrible
and ruthless and brutal. It should be horrifying. It shouldn’t make Steve feel this surge of righteous satisfaction. It wasn’t for Tony to take this away from him, and yet, a part of Steve reveled in it. Relished the viciousness of it. He shouldn’t. He knew that. It was awful and terrible, and yet, there was a pitiless sort of power that flowed through Steve’s chest at the thought of it, as if a wound that steadfastly refused to heal had suddenly been plunged into fire.

Tony had done this. For him. Taken one of Steve’s nightmares and destroyed it, more fully than Steve would have allowed himself to do, he realized that much, and there was something humbling in that, this willingness of Tony’s to bear the burden of mercilessness. All while Steve was wandering the gardens, watching Tony work and looking at maps. I would have killed Rumlow, Steve mused. Had I the chance. Honorably. In a fair fight. He would have died. Quickly and easily. But, I wanted this, even if I refused to give in to that viciousness, and Rumlow would have died, mocking me, with an insult on his lips, taking as much power as he could with him when he did. Instead, he would die alone, in ignominy, with no way to hurt anyone else, and when Steve thought of Rumlow, if he thought of him, that is how he would remember the man who once tormented him. Hunched over on his knees and screaming from a throat so parched it burned, with no one hearing him except the wind and the sea birds who floated on the gusts by the shore, searching for fish and answering with their own screams in return.

“Are you well?” Cam asked carefully, still holding out the robe, though a frown marred his features now. “Should I not have said anything? You are disturbed. I can tell. It is Erdé. She heard wrong. That is all. Forget this thing that troubles you. The King adores you. He will be so pleased to see you today. He will think you the most beautiful sight. He always does. Now, you must get ready,” Cam continued, shaking the robe a bit in encouragement.

Steve sighed and shrugged off the robe he was wearing. He let Cam help him don the one Tony had sent, his mind still full of Cam’s revelations. At least the process of dressing gave him something to do other than turn the information over and over in his mind, like a ball of snow, tumbling down a hill, gathering more and more flakes and debris as it went. If he kept at it, his thoughts would end the same way, in a broken heap at the bottom, unrecognizable as to what once had been.

The robe was exquisite, no doubt. Intricately embroidered with golden threads and small glass beads that caught the light, it fit his shoulders perfectly and swept all the way down to the floor in layers of blue that swirled at his feet. Well, it certainly wasn’t the first time he had been asked to wear a special outfit and perform for a crowd, Steve supposed with a wan grimace at Cam.

Though, the prospect of an outing certainly interested him. On many levels. The idea of seeing Tony out and about in his regalia, waving to an adoring crowd while he made his way through the city, filled Steve’s chest with something akin to pride, and, at the same time, he wondered what Tony saw when he looked at the sea of faces and saw collars worn like invisible chains. Lets everyone know your value, Steve recalled, touching his fingertips to his collar. Did Tony look upon the ironclad slaves who toiled behind their masters or mistresses and measure their worth the same way he would some other piece of chattel?

You are beyond price, Raj’Inama.

What did that even mean to someone as rich as Tony who handed out trinkets to show worth? Steve had no idea. That Tony had no intentions of selling him, at least, Steve supposed, though much beyond that and he wasn’t entirely sure what to think.

He had yet to see Tony interact with slaves outside of himself and Cam and the few who carried trays of food to and from the chamber, stoked the hearth or cleaned while he sat with Tony in his
workshop, Steve realized as he slid his feet into the shoes. Soft, impractical silk sandals that matched the robe and would be useless on the hot sands. Shoes, he mentally added to his list and went on getting dressed. It would be interesting, observing him amongst his people, Steve thought, then moved to the looking glass to fix the headdress in place. The metal was cool against his skin, and the chains looped down over his chin and neck, past the collar and onto his chest, where the robe opened enough to allow the brilliant gold and blood-red of his collar to gleam through.

“There. Perfect,” Cam said proudly while Steve stared at his reflection. “The King will be so happy to see you like this. To show you off. You will see.”

What Tony had chosen was not without its effect, he had to admit. Putting on the robe, donning the elaborate headdress, it was almost like he was becoming someone else, at least for a little while. It is a costume, nothing more. In the end, not so very different than the one Fury had fitted for him, Steve told himself, though when he caught his own eyes in the glass, his thoughts were of what Tony would think, and a languid heat gathered low, filling him with a thudding emptiness that pressed against his cock and balls.

“I think we are ready,” Cam added, taking one last, quick look at himself in the looking glass. The words were barely out of his mouth when a knock sounded at the door. Cam ran to answer it and returned a moment later to Steve’s side. “It is time, Raj’Inama. They are waiting.”

What, exactly, was waiting turned out to be a carriage hooded in an oval-shaped canopy draped in red and gold cloth, held up by swirling poles in fanciful colors. Ornately scrolling twines of carved leaves and the same flowers that decorated Zola’s compound wound their way along the sides and wheelcovers over brightly painted and gilt-leafed scenes depicting various flora and fauna. Two horses in matching livery pranced in front of a driver’s box, where a man sat holding the reins, though he secured them and hopped down as soon as he caught sight of Cam and Steve. Cam chattered with delight, admiring nearly everything and everyone, though the carriage in particular seemed to fascinate him and provide a source of ongoing commentary.

“Is it not beautiful? Look at how fine it is! Did I not tell you? It was a gift from the Ettan Emissary long ago, along with their finest concubine for whoever was King then, but look! It is fixed up as if new for you, see? Here, you are to sit there, in the back, so that you may see properly and be comfortable,” Cam told Steve, pointing a finger towards the rear as they approached the carriage.

The driver opened the side door and placed a small step below it to allow Steve and Cam to climb inside. Alongside them, a number of guards, outriders and their squires gathered, including, Steve noticed, General Rhodes, who waited at the front, along with who appeared to be the City Marshall by the look of the insignia pin that held his cape to his shoulder. Steve could feel a number of gazes travel over him as he sat down, with Cam across from him, though their eyes slid across him like the wind over blades of grass, never staying long.

“Is it not fantastic?” Cam asked, clearly elated. “They say the first Raj’Inama was carried about on a litter by six men and if they allowed the Raj’Inama’s feet to ever touch the sand, they would be bound naked on stakes in the desert with their eyelids cut off.” Cam added happily, grinning at the gruesome tale. “Do not look like that. They do not do that anymore, if they ever truly did. We are civilized now.” Steve huffed, mouth twisting into the mimicry of a smile as Cam bounced up and down on the soft seat. He motioned to where a corked bottle and covered basket were fitted into slots built into the interior of the carriage. “There is food and drink and look,” Cam said, reaching for a silk pouch to the side of Steve’s hand and hefting it, making its contents clink together. “For the crowd.”
“For the crowd?” Steve repeated with a frown.

“You throw them. Well, you do not. I will do this for you. You must not touch money,” Cam told him and opened the pouch, carefully counting out the coins inside. Mostly copper, though there were a few shinier pieces, even a few circles of gold bearing the royal seal.

“I can’t touch money?” Steve asked with a confused frown.

“It is unseemly,” Cam said, still concentrating on his tally. His tongue was caught between his teeth, sticking just a bit out of his mouth as he counted, the way Steve remembered Bucky doing when they divvied up rocks or acorns or whatever they intended to use for ammunition against the invading horde that came in the form of the O’Malley brothers, twin boys the size of small oxen with the brains to match their cattle counterparts.

“Unseemly?” Steve said.

“It is beneath you. Your hands touch the King. Your hands are meant for jewels and gold, sweet perfumes and oils. This, I will do,” he said, holding up the coins cupped in his hands. “You will see. Luka has been teaching me what I am to do as attendant to the King’s favorite. He says I am slow and stupid, and you should have someone else, but he just means you should have him. Bah, he is a jealous one,” Cam continued with a breezy snort and wave of his hand as he finished counting and stuffed the coins back into the pouch.

“My hands are meant for a sword and shield,” Steve muttered, sitting back against the cushion and looked out at the soldiers and riders in their armor, with their weapons and banners and horses built to charge and kick.

“Shhh! Do not say such things. You know it is forbidden for slaves to wield weapons. Someone might hear you. They would perhaps not understand you are merely remembering your old life, as you are wont to do. This I know,” Cam said confidently, with enough force that Steve was sure half of it was for show, though, the boy’s nervousness wasn’t entirely misplaced, Steve knew. Cam, for all his youth, could be far shrewder than Steve when it came to Castle intrigues, that much was certain. “But, they may not see that you are only reminiscing and are so relieved to have the--the burden of being a soldier lifted from your shoulders and be able to serve His Majesty.”

There are no secrets. Only lies.

“Being around all these soldiers, I cannot help but think of my old life,” Steve remarked, looking idly around at the mounted men and the line of soldiers who flanked them.

Their armor was beautifully wrought. Metal plate, shaped, tempered and hardened for maximum protection. Curved surfaces that would send most blows glancing off. Vulnerable just below the curve of the arm, the back of the thigh, the groin, though. Get them on the ground and a dagger would be enough. They have not seen war, Steve thought to himself. They are gallant knights, protecting their King, and what they know of war is read from pages in a centuries-old book that speaks of glory and heroes and does not tell them those things can never truly be found on a battlefield. They come later, in peace, when the war is a memory and you can lie to yourself and your children so that they might one day make war, too.

A shuffle of hooves and the clamor of armor signaled Tony’s approach as the men stood at attention or held themselves in position if on horseback, banners held high and helms doffed in deference. Steve watched as Tony trotted into the courtyard atop a dark bay stallion, dressed in the red and gold of his house, with a simple coronet crown on his head. He maneuvered his horse next to the carriage where Steve and Cam sat, eyes alight as he looked Steve over, an almost
mischievous smile blazing across his face. Steve lowered his head and waited for acknowledgment.

“You are well, then?” Tony asked after a moment.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Steve replied, raising his head. “I am anxious to see your city.”

“Indeed. As they are to see you, or so I am told,” Tony said with a small, somewhat rueful smile. “And you, you will see to him, yes?” he said with a nod to Cam.

“Yes, Your Highness!” Cam burst out as sort of one garbled word, all crammed together. “I shall! I promise!”

“Good, good. Well, General Rhodes. Marshall Strucker. If your men are ready,” Tony called out. “Best not keep them waiting any longer. The citizens grow restless without a bit of sport and show. Luckily, I am both,” he quipped and grinned down at Steve with a wink.

“At once, Your Highness,” the city Marshall, a tall, lean man with sharp, hawk-like features, replied.

Tony moved to the front, beside General Rhodes, and the other guards arranged themselves in a standard formation around him, though a half-dozen held themselves back and surrounded the carriage instead.

“We have our own guards,” Cam whispered delightedly. “Just for us! Well, for you.”

“Wonderful,” Steve remarked dully as the carriage lurched forward and the riders moved in unison around them.

He could barely pick out the top of Tony’s head from his position in the carriage, but as soon as the Castle gates opened, it was clear where he was. A throng of people a dozen deep waited outside, letting out an uproarious cheer as Tony emerged, a hand in the air with a practiced wave. Flowers cascaded through the air in rainbow arcs and dotted the stone path where the horses trotted and guards walked, three abreast, as they made their way through the street lined with more guards acting as a bulwark against the excited crowd. They love him, Steve thought, though it was no surprise. Peace, prosperity and a handsome King to rule over it with an easy hand, what was there not to love?

“Here we go!” Cam said excitedly, clapping his hands rapidly together and readying his purse. “Do not wave,” Cam told him sharply when Steve raised his hand almost by rote. “Do not acknowledge them directly. It is not done. You are the King’s, after all. Do not roll your eyes like that! You are special. You do not need to acknowledge the likes of them,” Cam said with an airy sniff. “Oh, and Luka says that I’m to tell you that if you want something one of the people offer for sale, you should just nod, and I will buy it for you. You should buy things. It is good,” Cam urged. “They will like you more if you send money their way, and a merchant whose wares catch the eye of the King’s favorite will have great prestige.”

A bauble, some trinket, a fine length of cloth, Steve remembered. Patronage was public relations in its own way, Steve thought with a flash of insight as the carriage rolled forward through the gates, the heavy chains of his headdress swaying as they moved. Another cheer went up, if possible, louder than the first, to Steve’s surprise and confusion. It took a moment, and Cam’s enormous grin, for Steve to realize the adoration was aimed at him. He looked around bemusedly as the crowd pressed forward, only to be rebuffed by the guards who rode along next to the carriage. More flowers rained down, a few managing to fall inside the carriage at his feet. Cam
tossed a handful of copper coins, sending a score of children darting forward between the guards to collect them.

“See?” Cam said. “They love you.”

“They love spectacle,” Steve countered evenly. That’s what he was, at least for the day, and hardly for the first time in his life, though this was no farce to inspire the people to keep sending their sons to die in an unwinnable war. This was merely an entertaining diversion for the masses. Harmless, he told himself as he studied the faces in the crowd.

Raj’Inama, the voices heralded as he passed. Some hung out windows or sat atop roofs. The rich had chairs sitting up on high daises built of clapboard and under covered awnings in bright colors. The poor jockeyed for position against the line of guards, holding out dirt-stained hands in hopes of a boon. They held children on their shoulders and pointed. They didn’t seem to mind that Steve largely ignored them, as Cam had instructed. If anything, his lack of response seemed to fuel the flurry of cheers that rose and fell as the carriage rolled by. I am everyone and anyone, Steve thought. One of them, less than them even, taken from nothing and elevated to this creature of fables and stories, because the King has decreed it to be so. They love the idea of it. Of course they do. For them, it is a story of hope, of the vagaries of life actually leading to something better, for once, and we all want to cling to that possibility, don’t we? They do not see, cannot see, how deep their need for this illusion goes, because to acknowledge it would require recognizing their part in the story. They will never see the wrong in their world, so long as they can tell themselves the happy ending is possible.

Harmless diversion, Steve thought again, though the thought pricked down his spine, dark and cold.

Someone was walking through the crowd selling roasted nuts and small squares of gingerbread. The scents wafted through his nose as they passed, making him think, for a moment, of home, where chestnuts popping over the flames meant boughs of pine strung over doors and empty shoes left in front of the hearth in the hopes that Sanniklaus would leave gifts behind, if you had been good. Steve caught Cam’s eye and nodded towards the woman with her basket of goodies.

“You are hungry?” Cam asked.

Steve shook his head. “For the children,” he said, nodding at the lean faces and wide eyes who watched him pass by with such solemnity and awe.

“Ah! Yes!” Cam rushed out excitedly and waved to get the baker’s attention. One of the guards escorted her forward, and Cam dumped a small mountain of coins in her hand, explaining Steve’s request. She grinned at Steve, a gap-toothed, yellow smile that still managed to take years off and soften her face to something that might have been lovely once, and bowed her head, thanking him effusively as she turned back to the crowd and held her basket open, motioning the children forward.

“A gift from the Raj’Inama,” she chanted, over and over, as she handed out the food to a wave of cheers and high-pitched squeals of thanks.

Well, Steve thought with a sigh. It wasn’t as if it was his first time trying to charm a crowd. It seemed the whole of the city had come out to see their small parade, Steve thought a few moments later as they rounded a curve and emptied onto the main thoroughfare, the High Road, lined with its many shops, stacked like hats atop a head, and manses that seemed to barely fit in their narrow confines, as if at any moment the whole street would burst at the seams.
Goldsmiths, cloth merchants, jewelers, armurers, all manner of fine merchants in rows by their guilds, which Cam helpfully narrated as they passed. The Gold Row, the Silk Row, the Ruby Row, named for the prized red stone favored by the Starks, Steel Row, Glass Row, and so on and so on. Steve chose a set of three gold rings set with carnelians, one of them elongated with three stones, from a plump goldsmith who beamed as Cam pointed at him and nodded imperiously.

“Made by my own father’s hand, Raj’Inama. He would be honored,” the goldsmith called out with a deep, sweeping bow.

“They will be sent to the Castle later,” Cam told Steve. “No one would steal from you, of course, but this way, the merchant has an excuse for an audience, and perhaps the King will want more of his work.”

A heavily embroidered robe over a fabric so fine Steve could see the skin of his hand through it followed. An incredibly intricate necklace of crystalized glass flowers that sparkled in the light. A reddish-brown necklace of topaz beads. A soft fur cured so well that the underside was like the velvet of a young deer’s antler. Steve wanted to tell himself he was picking things at random, but each time something stood out, it was his mind saying how much Tony would like to see him in it that warmed his chest.

At Steve’s urging, Cam bought a steady stream of foods from carts and vendors, then promptly gifted them back to the adoring crowd. Full bellies, an afternoon’s entertainment and a few coins to rub together, and most of the people would go home basking in delight, never quite questioning what they saw, at least, not enough to scratch away the surface. They do not want to see, Steve thought, and it is so very easy not to look when you are shown the exception.

The crowd finally thinned as their party approached the city wall, a tall, twisting structure of thick limestone blocks that circled the city. Steeply angled to prevent siege towers from directly abutting it, the wall was wide enough for four horses to pull carts abreast and easily as high as six men. Curved towers, harder to climb or lay siege engines against, crowned it at various points, with battlemented terraces on their tops.

The lower part of the wall featured storage vaults for munitions and supplies, while the upper floor had a walkway with high, stone merlons surrounding a number of embrasures for bowmen, and a line of ferocious-looking scorpions, ballistas and trebuchets that Steve recognized instantly as Tony’s handiwork. A solid metal gate provided the main point of entry or exit to the city, with a massive timber beam that raised and lowered across it as needed.

Steve vaguely remembered passing through the gate on his way into the city, watching a monkey delight a gaggle of children and collect coins in reward. A small, bitter laugh escaped him, causing Cam to look his way, though he shook his head and dropped his eyes down from the bright burn of the sun on the rock.

The carriage trundled through the gates, leaving the city behind, across the moat, half drained from the heat and use, to the expanse of cleared field on the other side of the wall. All the better to see your enemies approach, Steve knew, admiring the careful precision with which the area was kept pristine.

A covered pavilion awaited them on a semi-barren patch of land marked by a grove of sparsely-leaved olive trees and a tall palm with spiky fronds that curved the branches so they hung low and shadowed the ground. Tony, General Rhodes, Marshall Strucker and a handful of guards rode on some length, towards a section of the wall that seemed to be undergoing repair, while the carriage halted, and the driver hopped down to open the door and place the step down for Steve and Cam to alight onto a long, thick rug that created a path over the parched grass and rock to the pavilion.
Feet must not touch the sand, Steve thought with a carefully schooled expression as Cam shot him an astute look.

A slave rushed over and held a silk-draped parasol over Steve’s head to block the sun. Steve had to physically force himself not to roll his eyes at the gesture, and instead, thanked the young man, who nodded exuberantly, but refused to look Steve in the eye.

A large, cushioned chair sat on a slightly raised dais in the middle of a semi-circle of smaller chairs, and next to it, a flat silk pillow atop an ottoman, festooned with fringe at each corner. A long table filled with foods, casks of wine and pitchers of water stood to one side, where collared slaves in simple, tan robes waited to serve Tony and his entourage. Two of them were pushing a hand crank around and around, apparently causing the long arms of the fan that hung in the center of the pavilion’s ceiling to slowly turn, sending small trails of blessed air through the pavilion.

The guards stationed themselves around the pavilion, though the only threat around the area at the moment seemed to be a wayward goat from one of the nearby steppe farms that was intent on chewing its way through the pavilion’s tenting. It brayed with annoyance when one of the slaves tried to shoo it away and promptly went back to gnawing on an edge of the flap. Steve chuckled a bit at the antics as he made his way to the flat cushion and sat down. Cam immediately set about arranging Steve’s robe, standing back and cocking his head to the side, then darting over to fix a fold or drape until he was satisfied. One of the slaves brought Steve a cup of cool water flavored with a slice of orange while he waited for Tony and the others to return, ducking her head at Steve’s attempt at thanking her.

It was hot. Steve had gotten used to the cooler, sea-facing confines of the Castle and compound, where a steady, salt-tinged breeze flowed through the halls. Out here, beyond the wall, under the scorching sun, with little in the way of shade, he found his mind wandering to the maps he had studied in Tony’s library. The mountains were craggy and layered with rocks and more caves than could be counted. Places to hide. Shelter from the sun in the day, warmth when the temperature dipped in the night. Water was an issue, he thought as he sipped the sweetened brew in his hand.

The river, Steve remembered, was used by the farmers to make their land arable, and the runoff from their efforts made the water this far near the mouth undrinkable thanks to their preferred choice of fertilizer. But, as the river thinned to a trickle closer to the mountains, it would be cleaner. He hoped, anyway.

The river. It provided sustenance and made otherwise inhospitable land into something approaching arable, but it would be a problem for Tony, should an army like Hydra ever attack the city. Too easy to dam and flood the low-lying farms, making crossing a simple matter, despite the large bridge with its wicked-looking defensive towers that Steve remembered during his wagon-march to the city. They needed outposts at the narrower points, something Steve didn’t recall seeing. The river also provided an approaching army with a means to ferry supplies and place to water horses and regroup out of range of most of Tony’s weapons and even the best of bowmen.

What they needed was a way to get their weapons closer, without limiting them to the bridge, which could be easily destroyed with a raft of explosives thanks to the large arches underneath that allowed the river to rise and fall with the seasonal rains as it flowed. A series of spikes downriver could stop that, Steve thought. Or at least make it more difficult. They could be raised and lowered, drawbridge-style, as needed to allow for commercial traffic, Steve mused, and at once thought about Tony in his workshop with a model, explaining the mechanism to Cam.

But, I will not be here for that, Steve reminded himself. I should be paying attention to the comings and goings from the city, not pondering how to improve Tony’s defenses, Steve thought with a sigh, though his mind spiraled on. The heat, he told himself, as he thought about the
positioning of ready forces and longbowmen in the hills and steppes, back where the biggest menace seemed to be very determined goats. Voices and the sound of hooves on hard sand sounded, and Steve turned to watch Tony and the others approach.

“The garrisons are adequate, Your Highness, but the seaward posts are smaller and particularly those on the Eastern side, less likely to be approached due to the rocks and lack of a deepwater port. Admiral Carmichael insists on patrolling, nevertheless,” Marshall Strucker was saying as he dismounted.

“Small boats can navigate those shoals, Marshall, and the Stone Steps are still there, however much disrepair they may be in after all this time,” General Rhodes pointed out as he, too, climbed down from his horse and handed the reins to one of the waiting slaves. “Some of us, who shall not be called by name, used to climb down them on a dare and return with a shell to prove it.”

“I still have those,” Tony announced with raised eyebrows, spurring his horse to the shade of the palm tree where another slave waited to grab the bridle. Tony dismounted and walked over to the pavilion, his eyes finding Steve almost immediately. “Crabbers still use the Steps, I’m told, to pull their catch and other urchins out of the sea ponds that empty between the rocks at low tide. You would have braved the climb, I’m sure,” Tony said to Steve as he approached, taking a cup from the tray proffered by one of the slaves. “If only because it was there,” Tony said, looking down at Steve with a wavering smile. “They carve the shells into jewelry, combs, all manner of things. I shall send you one. A gift. Unlike any other. And tell you that I made the journey and claimed it from the sea just for you.” Tony mused, eyes going gentle. “As you were for me.” He let his hand stroke down the side of Steve’s face, lightning-quick, and then turned and sat in his chair, without a further glance to Steve, giving his attention to Rhodes and Strucker.

You did. You had General Rhodes put it in a box, Steve thought, though, he said nothing.

No one else paid much mind to Steve, though he did catch Rhodes giving him a quick, furtive look while Tony was listening to Strucker talk about the need for larger caches of oil. Steve sat silently by Tony, mindful of the admonition not to speak. Though, there was enough talk to go around without his contribution. On and on, while food and drink was served by nameless slaves who garnered little acknowledgement. When Steve thanked the one who served his drink, the poor man’s tray shook so badly, he nearly dropped it, which marked the only time Tony seemed to take notice. Because Steve said something, Steve realized. He ducked his head and said no more, though watched. Listened.

Tony wanted more of his machines stationed at various points. General Rhodes argued for more men at the weak points in the wall and outposts. Marshall Strucker wanted to dig more wells and add storage to cut down on the need to resupply. Steve listened to what they said, and, more importantly, to what they didn’t say. Supply lines and storage. Bowmen. Mortars. A standing army that largely depended on the promises of Lords and Ladies who owed fealty to Tony. Little mention of heavy horse. The space for trench lines had been eaten away by city sprawl that crept outside the gates before Tony’s parents were born. As a walled city, they prepared for siege, not war, and the success of that strategy showed in the centuries without conquer.

But, Hydra was different, Steve knew. It was a different kind of warfare that Shmidt and his ilk brought with them, with their blasting cannons and the black powder that burned with such force it could tear holes through rock. The wall is a shield, but it is not impenetrable, and can be breached, whether through it or under it, and once that happens, it is nearly impossible to shift defenses quickly enough to prevent invaders from making their way inside, simply due to relative numbers.

The wall is a shield, Steve thought again, something about it niggling at the back of his mind. For
some reason, he thought of the white lily, so brightly and clearly that he could almost smell the sweet fragrance when he breathed. He shook his head to clear it, making the chains dance and clink, drawing Tony’s attention for a brief spell, as Marshall Strucker continued his diatribe on rats in the grain stores for so long that Steve was ready to chew through a few grain sacks himself.

They spoke of war as if it had been learned in a book and could be added up on a balance sheet, Steve realized, remembering the stack of ledgers he still needed to finish combing through. He lacked Tony’s mind for numbers, but he knew what an army needed to run, and even a casual perusal of those told him something was off. Perhaps he would blame the rats, too, he thought with a flat grimace, as Strucker launched into another round of complaints.

These are good men, Steve supposed, listening to them talk. At least, not evil men, certainly, though something about Strucker gave him pause. They cared about the people whose safety they were charged with protecting. They were soldiers, most of them by career from what it sounded like. Not so very different from the ones I left behind. And yet, the system they are trying so earnestly to defend is also far too familiar. One where someone’s worth was measured not by what blood they carried, but by whether their necks bore a collar, arbitrary, meaningless measures, and both systems buttressed by their own kind of violence. Only here, that violence wasn’t a battlefield, but a story, one woven into the minds of every person, including the slaves themselves, he thought, remembering the other concubines and their easy embrace of this life.

Steve had wondered, this morning, how Tony would treat slaves who were not sharing his bed, and here was his answer. He does not see, Steve realized, looking over at Tony, who was taking another cup of chilled wine from a girl who might as well have been invisible. He cannot allow himself to look. If he did, Steve knew, Tony was far too smart not to see this for what it was, so he simply did not see. Trained to blindness from birth. They all were. Except, each day with Steve, Tony saw him, truly saw him, more and more, and that was what terrified Zola. Not the collar. Not the namesake. Not the gifts or the status. That Tony might see Steve and one day, not be able to look away.

Lord Stane commands me to keep him happy and pleasantly occupied, as if doing such a thing is a simple task.

Must be terrifying to wonder if your whole way of life might crumble because your King learned to care for a slave, Steve thought, barely managing to avoid a derisive huff of laughter. Was it even possible? Could a man change so much that he questions the underpinnings of the only system he has ever known? If there was such a man, it was Tony. Of that, Steve was certain. Certain enough to stake his life, perhaps. But, his freedom? He wasn’t sure.

Steve looked up and caught Tony’s eye on him while Strucker went on about the need for more sentries on the guard towers, which wasn’t wrong, but what he really needed was scouts and a network of informants and beacons to send their flame-filled warnings. Sentries, however many he had of them, were too little, too late, but they were under the man’s purview and so that was the need he saw. Steve mouthed the word ‘scouts’ at Tony, then covered it by taking a sip from the cup he cradled in his hand.

“What about scouts?” Tony asked, cutting off the Marshall’s soliloquy to a sputtering halt.

“We could use more, particularly in the Red Mountains and the sand wastes beyond. We’ve had reports of some new band of brigands causing problems from the herdsmen who live out that way and the few traders who go looking for their fermented goats’ milk or whatever else they eke out of that desert,” Rhodes said. “Call themselves the Ten Rings. And let us not forget the Chitauri. If they turned their eyes north…that’s the thing that keeps me up nights.”
“Those God-forsaken, tattooed grotesques? Forgive me, General Rhodes, but I think you overstate the risk. The Chitauri would never dare threaten our borders, Your Highness,” Strucker harrumphed.

Chitauri, Steve mentally repeated the odd-sounding word. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise and suppressed a shiver. A rabbit ran over your grave, Steve Rogers, his mother would say, an old saying, but one that felt truer now than ever.

“Let us hope the Chitauri know how terrified they are of us,” Tony muttered, half into the cup of wine he took a swig from, glancing down at Steve.

‘Beacons,’ Steve mouthed at him, though that only got him a frown. He sighed and flattened his mouth into a frustrated grimace.

“Should they ever decide to do more than pillage and plunder their neighbors, would they come this far north and threaten a kingdom defended by an army?” Tony asked, looking over at Rhodes.

“We are a rich target, obviously. Though, they’ve never ranged anywhere near this far before, nor sought to lay siege. They prefer the open field,” Rhodes said. “Not to say simply because they have not yet done so means they wouldn’t. We are, perhaps, spared by the infighting that seems to plague them. Each band has their own leader, and they fight each other more often than anyone else, thank God.”

“No doubt those savages are salivating at the thought,” Strucker added, seeming to reconsider as he stroked the small tuft of beard on his chin. “They’d loot the city in a heartbeat, if they could. The Royal Treasury alone would last their—what do they call them? Chiefs? Chieftains? Anyway, it would last them many lifetimes, and they likely know it, not to mention the other riches the kingdom has to offer. Food stores, weapons, metals, slaves…there would be little left of your concubine there when they were through with him,” Strucker grunted, pointing a stick-thin finger at Steve.

“They might find that a bit more of a challenge than anticipated,” Tony replied coolly, reaching out to stroke his hand down the side of Steve’s head, pressing the cool metal against his skin. Tony’s eyes were on him, amused, yes, but something else. Something harder edged. When Tony looked back over at Strucker, Steve watched the Marshall wince, his throat bobbing as he swallowed and sat back, hunching his shoulders like a wounded dog.

“Yes, well…er,” Strucker managed, then coughed into his hand and looked away. “More wine! What are you lot waiting for?” he called out to one of the slaves, who hurried over with a flagon.

“At any rate, assuming that bacon is not a defensive strategy that we should consider pursuing,” Tony said, suppressing a grin with some effort as his eyes flicked over to Steve, “how fares our system of beacons at the outer borders?” Tony asked brightly with a lilt in his voice that was almost a laugh. Steve ducked his head, the strands of metal swaying from the veil and smiled into the cup he raised to his lips.

“They stand, but they’re manned by locals, for the most part,” Rhodes told him. “I’ve been requesting we post soldiers for years, but Ross says it’s unnecessary and a waste of manpower. Besides, no one wants to pull the duty, which, I can understand. Far from home, sparse action, little chance of acclaim or glory.”

“Double their allotment,” Tony suggested. “We can’t be talking that many men.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling Ross, but the beacons haven’t been lit in, God, what? Has to be over
a thousand years,” Rhodey reminded him.


“Ugh,” Rhodey snorted. “If I never have to hear Selvig’s endless recitals again…”

“The First Antillan Crusade lasted from 241 through 243. The Second Antillan Crusade lasted from 247 through 256,” Tony and Rhodes recited, then laughed at whatever the shared joke was. “There were a total of seventy-eight Antillan Crusades, spanning nearly six hundred years, some lasting little over a month, and some carrying on for nearly a decade,” he told Steve, leaning his head over the arm of his chair with a slight smile. “None were successful and the whole campaign finally ended when a pestilence wiped out both Antilla and the Crusaders.”

“I remember Selvig claiming the King who called for a truce did so out of mercy after a dream, and you taking great delight in correcting that bit of family history,” Rhodes said with a nodding smile.

“Some great-great-and-so-on ancestor of mine finally decided not even vast salt mines of Antilla were worth risking his cock rotting off with whatever disease his soldiers were coming home with,” Tony told Steve, side-eying Rhodes as he did. “Peace in our time, my good men. I always thought that story was rather poetic in its own way, all things considered.”

“You would,” Rhodes shot back, rolling his eyes a bit while Strucker’s bulged, watching the interplay between the two of them.

The rest of the afternoon passed much the same way, though Steve only added his silent suggestions a few more times, and he was fairly sure by the end, Tony was simply having fun with their game of pantomime. The ruse should have been frustrating, but, for the first time in a long time, all eyes were not trained on Steve, there were no expectations of brilliance, no demands that he figure something out to solve the quagmire someone else had created, just Tony, listening, trusting and seeing the value in what Steve offered. The give and take without the pressure of holding lives in his hands was freeing, in a way, though, by the time the hour grew late, General Rhodes was helpfully suggesting that perhaps the aforementioned sentries could use hand gestures, as that might be more subtle, though he was glaring at Tony when he said it. This seemed to serve only to amuse Tony, who grinned back and raised his eyebrows in mock challenge.

The journey back to the Castle was somewhat less dramatic than the morning’s spectacle, though plenty of people turned out to see their return. Cam finished tossing the last few of his coins before they reached the end of the High Road, and looked apologetically at the children with their hands aloft, until a guard hurried over with a new purse filled with more coins that seemed to have been produced from the ether. Tony, Steve assumed, as Cam delightedly tossed the largesse to the waiting crowd.

“They love you,” Cam observed as the carriage jiggled over an arched stone bridge laden with boughs of flowers. “You see? I told you.”

The Castle gates opened in front of them, and Steve could see the riders disappearing through the entry, though, he noticed, not all of them. A line of mounted and standing guards formed a gauntlet near the gate as a cheer rose from the crowd, louder and louder as the carriage approached. Steve wondered at the sudden noise, then caught sight of Tony atop his magnificent horse, his golden robe flowing across its haunches and crown gleaming from his head, looking every bit the ruler he was.

Waiting for Steve.
That was why they cheered. Because it was the happy ending of the story. The handsome King waited to carry his prize back to his Castle. It was both a beautiful lie and a terrible truth, Steve thought as his eyes dropped to the white lily Tony held in his hand. Tony was waiting for him, making a show of it, deliberately telling everyone how much Steve meant to him, and this, as much as any observations on defense, was why Tony wanted him along today, Steve realized with a sharp jolt. It was a performance, true, but it was also real, for Tony, in his way. Tony communicated his feelings in grand gestures and quiet, unsung moments of devotion as if there was nothing in between.

Tony leaned down in his saddle and held the lily out as the carriage rolled past. Steve reached out a hand to pluck it from Tony’s fingers, hands brushing for a moment, and held it to his nose, breathing in the scent. If anything, the cheer from the crowd grew louder, as they stomped their feet against the stone and clapped their hands, voices raised to a roar, and it was a show, yes, but it was also a declaration, Steve knew, inasmuch as Tony could make one for him.

“You see! You see!” Cam chanted, bouncing in his seat more from excitement than the uneven pavement under the wheels. “He shows them how deep his regard is for you. How special you are to him! He does this for no one else. None,” Cam added, slashing a hand through the air sharply. “Only you. Is it not romantic? I told you!”

Cam couldn’t stop smiling and kept glancing expectantly at Steve, though Steve’s own thoughts were in far too much turmoil to allow for the kind of affirmation that Cam seemed to want so very badly from him. If I leave him, what will it do, now that he has all but declared his affection before his people, Steve wondered with a sick feeling churning in his stomach. He will look the fool. Again, apparently, if Kadina’s insinuations about the situation with Lord Stone were to be believed. A gift for his enemies at Court, no doubt, whoever they were, who would seek to carve weakness from Tony’s heart, when it is his greatest strength. Steve sighed and looked down at the flower clasped between his fingers, idly twirling the stem so the star-points of the petals spun into a white blur. A star, Steve thought again, and felt something unlock in the back of his mind, sending his tumultuous thoughts elsewhere for the time being.

Steve leaned forward and peered out the side of the carriage, looking for Tony, who rode up next to the carriage and dismounted once the Castle gates closed, while the guards and others followed suit, as stable boys hurried to assist with the horses. Tony waved the driver away and opened the door himself, holding out a hand for Cam, then Steve, to climb down.

“You did well today, Small Hands,” Tony congratulated with a grin. “A surprise awaits you in your room. Go on, now. Run along.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you!” Cam nearly shouted in his excitement at the praise. “Everyone loved him, did they not?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you!” Cam nearly shouted in his excitement at the praise. “Everyone loved him, did they not?”

“Indeed,” Tony said, face going soft. “They did.” Steve could feel the words warming his skin, the faint tinge of pride carried on Tony’s tone making his stomach flutter like a bird’s wing. “Off with you now,” he said, though his tone was light and encouraging, almost teasing, in that indulgent way he sometimes got with Cam that made Steve’s heart constrict. “I will return him to your able care on the morrow, young sir.”

“Yes, of course, Your Highness,” Cam said formally and bowed low, before grinning widely and scampering off to see whatever it was that waited for him back in their rooms.

“You spoil him,” Steve said, watching the boy run off.

“I’m certainly trying. He accepts it better than his charge, whose decadences are woefully difficult
to discern at times,” Tony remarked, eyes narrowing on Steve as a fond smile tugged at his lips. “Not all the time,” Steve replied, returning the smile.

“No. Not all the time,” Tony grinned, clearly pleased at the banter, eyes twinkling as he gazed at Steve.

“Your Highness,” Marshall Strucker interrupted, making Steve and Tony both turn in startle, as if they had mutually forgotten the others were still there. “If you would like, we could continue—”

“We’re done,” Tony cut in, making the man nearly choke in an apoplectic fit trying to draw back his words before more came out. “Marshall, I thank you for your assistance this day.” he continued, a little more conciliatory. “You have given me much to consider. Please enjoy the Castle’s hospitality for the evening. Master Zola will see you are well cared for,” Tony promised, making something in Steve’s chest heave and then tighten. For a heartbeat, it felt as if all eyes, all the world, was looking at him, seeing him in this ridiculous garb, in his beautiful cage, seeing what he was, though, of course, they weren’t actually looking. That was part of the story, wasn’t it? It was their thoughts that saw him this way, Steve realized, with a frisson of discomfort lancing down his spine. This is who I am to them. Different from whomever will serve the Marshall tonight, only because of Tony’s regard. “Rhodey, tomorrow afternoon, as usual? Bring Carmichael. I’d like an update.”

“Of course,” General Rhodes nodded, then jerked his head to one side to indicate that the others should disperse. “I’ll see you then.”

“Good,” Tony agreed. “Come,” Tony commanded, though his voice was gentle now that his attention was back on Steve. “It has been a long afternoon. I’m hot, and I stink of horse,” Tony said with a brisk laugh.

Steve followed next to him as they walked back through the Castle grounds with only a couple of guards on their heels. Servants, slaves and various courtiers jumped aside and bowed or curtsied as Tony passed through the halls, and Steve could feel their gazes sweep over him, fleeting and curious, before quickly moving away, as if they feared being caught staring too long at something that did not belong to them and displeasing the King.

The doors barely closed on Tony’s chambers when he turned and pressed a hand to Steve’s chest, stilling him, then caught Steve’s jaw between his palms. Tony leaned up and kissed him, almost chastely at first, his beard scratching at Steve’s chin and mouth and digging the shortest of the chains that dangled from the headdress into Steve’s skin. Tony pulled away and let his forehead rest on Steve’s for a moment, then stepped back and looked up at him.

“I have wanted to do that all day,” Tony whispered on a sigh. “You were so beautiful. I could hardly keep my eyes off you. I could almost see your mind turning the whole time,” he grinned. “You will have much to say, I’m sure. I must admit, I am rather eager to hear your thoughts. Strucker is capable, but a relic, and his engineers do little that hasn’t already been done enough times to be taught at university. He lacks…imagination. Something I think you have in abundance, God help me,” he finished with a quirk of his head and easy smile.

Steve gave a low chuckle, then on impulse, leaned down and kissed Tony full on the mouth, deep and wet, full of heat and promise, nothing like the kiss Tony had given him.

“I have wanted to do that all day,” Steve said, mimicking Tony’s words when he finally pulled away. Tony was looking at him with a flushed, wondrous expression that was almost surprise, though he recovered quickly enough. “Thank you. For allowing me to accompany you and for…”
what you did,” Steve said, holding up the lily.

“They remind me of you, now,” Tony said. “I cannot see them and not think of you.”

“I mean—” Steve started.

“I know what you mean,” Tony interrupted, holding up a hand. “You are special to me, Steve. I would have it…known. That you are—that you—” he stopped and looked down and away, wiping a hand over his mouth. “There are many things I would have where you are concerned,” he said after a pause, dragging his eyes up to Steve, his gaze raking up and down over Steve’s face, as if searching for something. “Some things…some things not even I can bring to pass, but…” he huffed out a frustrated sounding sigh. “There could be a—a close approximation, if you will. It is good for the people to see you. To know you, to see your kindness, how much you care. I saw what you did, with the foodstuffs. It was good. You were good. At this. Like you were born to it. They will love you, and…it will be easier, in time, you will see.”

Steve’s face dropped into a confused frown and he opened his mouth to ask a question, only to have Tony turn away and start unclasping his robe and tugging off his gloves, which ended up one on a chair and the other on the floor beside it.

“A bath, I think, to wash the day off, then dinner,” Tony called out over his shoulder as he sat down on the edge of the bed to tug off his boots, which hit the floor with soft thuds. He headed towards the small door that Steve knew led to the privy closet and, beyond that, some kind of bath that Steve had never seen, with a quick look over his shoulder at Steve and a cant of his head to indicate Steve should follow. “No reason military strategy can’t be combined with a hot bath, right?”

“That’s certainly how we do it where I am from,” Steve said with a completely straight face, watching Tony’s head pivot around and his eyes go wide for a heartbeat before he burst out laughing.

“I knew we were doing something wrong here. Rhodey never lets me clean his cannon,” Tony smirked.

“I can’t believe you said that,” Steve said with a shake of his head. He walked over to the pitcher by the basin and placed the lily in it. For now, at least, that would do. Turning back to Tony, he grinned and pursed his lips into mock disapproval. “Now who thinks himself amusing, hmm?”

“Well, you can’t say it wouldn’t motivate discussion,” Tony muttered with an exaggerated waggle of his head. He reached out a hand to capture Steve’s as Steve walked by, and pulled him over between the cradle of his knees. His hands went to the belt of Steve’s robe, untying it and sending it carelessly to the floor. Then the ties. Then, he was pushing the robe over Steve’s shoulders and letting it fall.

To Steve’s surprise, Tony knelt down and slid his hands under Steve’s foot to lift first one shoe off and then the other, then stood up, smoothing his hands up Steve’s calves, over his thighs and the curve of his ass as he did. He continued his path around Steve’s waist and up his chest, palms gliding over Steve’s nipples just hard enough so the vee of Tony’s spread fingers caught on them for a moment before moving on, hands roaming over Steve’s collarbone and shoulders, tracing the column of his throat, his jaw, his cheeks, where the latticework of metal still covered most of his face.

“Beautiful,” Tony murmured, eyes darkening and going half-lidded.

Tony reached up and lifted the coronet off his head, holding it in the circle of his hands for a moment.

“A King must look the part,” Tony said, then dropped the coronet on the bed without seeming to much care.

“You are more the ruler they need when you are in there,” Steve said, nodding his head towards the workshop. “Building things, thinking of ways to make their lives better, learning—all the time, I see you with a book or some piece of parchment with God only knows what you’ve drawn on it—and it could be leisure or pleasure, and you do enjoy it, but it’s for them, all of this, the arguing, the study, the nights when you barely come to bed before morning, it’s them.”

“Shhh, don’t tell them,” Tony admonished lightly, tugging the corner of his lip between his teeth.

“You should tell them. How hard you work,” Steve protested. “How you sat all day listening to that Strucker talk your ear nearly off about rats—”

“Don’t remind me, I’ll want cheese,” Tony cut in with a rakish grin.

“They should see that, instead of—the spectacle,” Steve finished with a slight sigh.

“The spectacle, as you put it, is what they want. What they expect,” Tony said. “Believe me, I have been doing this longer than you have been alive, my beautiful one.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps it is what they want. But, it isn’t what they need,” Steve said.

“Need. And what do you need? Hmmm?” Tony asked. His tone was light, curious, but there was an undercurrent of something harsher, rougher running through it. Desire. Lust. That was always there, on the surface. But, something more. Something deeper. Longing, Steve thought, for him, yes, but for something he didn’t think Tony even knew how to name. He has never even dreamed the world he so desperately wants to build, Steve thought, glancing down at the coronet where it gleamed atop the bed, holding the power to move worlds inside it and nothing more than a useless ornament at the same time.

For the first time in a long time, Steve’s hand flexed and gripped for a handle that wasn’t there.

“I think right now, what we both need is a bath,” Tony huffed, drawing Steve from his reverie.

Unfastening the clasp at the rear of the circle of metal, Tony pulled it aloft and tossed it on the bed. Steve blinked at the sudden loss of weight, with an accompanying feeling of being revealed in a way that headdress had protected today. He sees me, Steve thought with a light, buzzing sensation filling his ears, disconcerting him for a moment.

Steve wondered, now, for the first time, if today’s anonymity had been deliberate on Tony’s part. Giving him that bit of privacy even as he put Steve on display. He remembered the familiar, revealing feeling of exposure, of…unmasking, being seen …that always accompanied removing the coif of mail and his helm with the aleph on the front. Assigning to Steve the symbol associated with the stubborn ox during training had likely been Phillips’ attempt at humor, Steve supposed, looking back now. Though, Steve had kept it as his own sigil, long after Phillips wiped his hands of training him and sent him off with Fury, because it had been the first thing that was his, because Bucky thought it amusing, because a part of him still believed in luck, the way all soldiers do, and could not return a talisman that seemed to hold sway over fate, having seen him through more than he cared to recall.
“Speaking of a bath, if I keep at this, we’ll never get to it,” Tony murmured, voice low and hoarse as he stared at Steve in only his collar.

“May I?” Steve asked, hands already on the front of Tony’s doublet to help him disrobe.

He heard Tony grunt an acquiescence as he undid the ties and clasps and tugged it over Tony’s head. Tony stood and allowed him to undo the front of his breeches and pull them down over his hips, followed by the hose and undergarments Tony apparently only deigned to wear for special occasions. Steve felt a small sigh against his neck and dropped his eyes down to Tony’s, catching a glimpse of something dark and unreadable in Tony’s expression. The small point at the base of Tony’s neck was jumping as the blood pounded against the skin. Steve leaned down to mouth at it, sucking lightly and running his tongue over the sweat-salted skin and felt Tony give a stuttering gasp, arms weaving under Steve’s to roam his back. Tony’s cock was pressing hard against Steve’s thigh. His own was jutting into Tony’s stomach with a pleasurable aching stiffness.

One of Tony’s hands found the center of Steve’s chest and splayed wide. Steve could almost smell the lily’s scent while his mind said star, and the strange thought that it could be both filled his head, powerful and insistent. He kissed a line up Tony’s jaw until he felt the scratch of beard, then found his mouth and teased at the lower lip, until Tony grew impatient, reached up and grabbed the sides of Steve’s head, tongue thrusting deep and warring with Steve’s own.

Laughter, joyous and free, bubbled out of Tony as he pulled away, shaking his head and grinning dazedly up at Steve.

“A simple flower, and this is what I receive in return?” Tony asked, head cocked to the side in seeming bemusement, though his eyes were folded at the corners in that soft, knowing way he sometimes looked at Steve when he found something to his liking in Steve’s manner.

“It was not just that—” Steve began.

“Yes,” Tony cut him off, holding his fingers up to Steve’s mouth to silence him. “I will give you one each day, and perhaps you shall know my regard for you as well as my people do.”

“And what will I give you so that you shall know my regard?” Steve asked, reaching out to cup Tony’s jaw, voice quiet and husky, shaking with an emotion he wasn’t sure he was ready to name, but it made him think of watching Bucky and Natasha dancing to their own music as the first snow fell, their breath puffing white between them, and something else, something sparkling and bright and so clear he could have sworn he saw it haloing them as they swayed. He’d watched them for long heartbeats, a tight, pounding burn filling his chest and head, and he’d loved them both, their happiness, their belonging, so fiercely in that instant, it had almost overwhelmed him. This was the same, except not, though his mind couldn’t separate exactly what the difference was, it just burned, bright and clear, this feeling he had for Tony, and he thought if he could reach out and touch it, it would feel like the velvet smoothness of a petal.

Tony’s expression cleared, eyes wide and liquid, mouth parted, a fleeting, open yearning held suspended there, as if captured by Steve’s touch for that one, brief moment before it was gone, and the familiar mask slipped into place as a curtain falls to block the sun.

“You have already given me all I require, my beautiful one,” Tony whispered, a smile trying to form, but seemingly unable to take hold. He opened his mouth to say more, then slammed it shut and dropped his eyes for a moment, mouth flattening in some kind of internal war before looking back at Steve, expression guarded now. “Come. Bath, first, then I will let you show me your regard all evening,” he said with a grin that for a heartbeat looked like a skull with the skin pulled back over the teeth. Steve blinked and shook his head, stepping away enough to allow Tony to
There was nothing to do save follow, so Steve did. The bath was down a short, stone hallway, where the floor went from smoothly carved limestone to swirls of rich colored marble in deep gold veined with streaks of red, as if it had bled when cut from the quarry. Pillars held torches around a circular bath set several steps off the ground and sunken into the middle of the chamber so it would end up being just over waist deep, Steve guessed. It was covered in painted tiles in bold floral shapes that matched the tiled dome overhead and abutted a dry fountain that sprung from the wall. A few moments after Tony turned a handle, the fountain sent a cascade of steaming water flowing in the tub, which then drained out a port in one side and down a chute into a pipe in the floor.

“My design,” Tony said, grabbing a couple of towels from a basket and ascending the steps to the tub. “They heat the water downstairs, and then it is pumped up here using a piston. Also, mine.”

“Amazing,” Steve said, meaning it. He reached out and touched the hot water flowing out of the fountain, then drew back his hand at the heat.

“I think up all sorts of crazy ideas in the night. I have trouble sleeping from time to time, as you know. Somehow, the impossible seems possible around the time just before the sun comes up,” Tony replied with a sort of deprecating half-smile. “Here,” he said, waving Steve towards the tub.

The water was warm, almost decadently so, and Steve nearly moaned with pleasure as he sank into the heat. Tony motioned him over, and he sat on the circular stone bench that ringed the tub, twisting his back to Tony at Tony’s urging. Tony picked up some kind of tan sponge and dipped it into the water, then took a sliver of precious soap and lathered it over the porous material and started scrubbing it up and down Steve’s back. Steve’s head dropped down with a soft groan, and he leaned forward, offering up more of his back to Tony’s ministrations.

“I know,” Tony laughed as Steve’s shoulders slumped and went boneless. “Feels wonderful, hmmm? It grows on trees, believe it or not. Big, green gourds of it from an island on the other side of the world. I’m told the islanders eat it when it is young, and when ripe, pull it down from the tree and make sponges from it.”

“Trees?” Steve said, trying to picture it in his mind. “The other side of the world? Truly?”

“Truly. Traders bring it over land all the way to Etta, and then it sails here, along with spices, cloths, and other diversions we can’t make ourselves. Speaking of luxuries, I heard you visited the baths at Zola’s,” Tony remarked, seemingly nonchalantly, making Steve start with surprise. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“I met some of the other concubines,” Steve began. “But, no, I didn’t,” Steve replied honestly.

“And did these other concubines fill your head with all sorts of rumors and innuendo?” Tony asked, sounding amused, though his hand stilled for a moment, before he started to swirl the sponge in wide circles across Steve’s shoulders. “You should listen with one ear to their spite, my treasure. They will never like you.”

“You sound like Cam,” Steve told him with a small smile, earning a huff of laughter from Tony.

“I told you the boy knows what he is about,” Tony reminded him as he dipped the sponge in the water again and brought it back to Steve’s neck.

“They told me about Lord Stone,” Steve confessed in a carefully neutral tone, then glanced over
his shoulder with something of an apology on his face, though Tony just hummed thoughtfully and said nothing.

“Did they now?” Tony hummed quizzically. “I am sure they embellished the telling quite a bit.”

“They said he used you for his own gain, and you…” Steve trailed off, looking down at where his hands were slightly distorted as they moved through the water.

“That I was played the fool and left broken-hearted?” Tony guessed, making a clucking noise with his tongue. “Well. That is one version.”

“What is the other?” Steve asked. “Your version?”

“That I was played the fool and wiser and far more careful for it,” Tony replied. “That I was young and infatuated with someone who acted a certain part, and that I did not…” he paused, stilling his hand for a moment on Steve’s back before going back to his ministrations. “That I did not know what it would feel like to actually love someone who was worthy of it. My parents were certainly no fine example of it. A political marriage. Unhappy for both of them, it turned out, though they got along well enough towards the end and spent a good decade ignoring the worst of each other. The harem is full of sharp tongues who will gladly bend your ear for hours over all the details, I am sure, but suffice to say, what I thought I wanted and what it turns out that I want are more different than I could have imagined.”

“What do you want?” Steve asked, craning his neck to look up at Tony and catching the flicker of sadness cross his face before it disappeared so quickly, Steve could have convinced himself he had imagined it.

“The impossible,” Tony replied, staring at nothing for a moment before his eyes filled again and he looked down at Steve. “Nothing for you to worry over. Eventually, I’ll marry, of course, and likely find as much joy there as my parents did, but it is naught that needs to weigh on your mind, my dearest. Marriage changes little for Kings, as my Mother quickly learned. It certainly need not…alter anything with you.”

Steve swallowed thickly. Your pleasure is beautiful to behold, my darling. Brighter than the sun warming the sands. I don’t imagine I will ever tire of seeing it. Tony’s words from this morning. How could it be both comforting and terrifying, this idea that Tony would not lose interest in him? I want to go home, Steve told himself, looking at Tony as he recited the familiar refrain. Steve could hear them, echoing in his head in Tony’s voice, searing his chest with warmth and filling the hollow places.

The memory of the cave, small and round and littered with the bones of birds, muskrats, rabbits and other small prey, beneath a stone canopy carved cracked into the mountainside when the earth shook eons ago with markings older than words, came to him. He shivered, remembering the holy man’s words as he gave Steve the draught. One is life, one is death. Steve had thought the man meant the potion, and hesitated. Which one is this, he had asked. Each of you are both, the holy man said, then cackled with a strange, almost childlike laugh that unnerved Steve moreso than the ritual, and left him there with the firelight from the single torch casting shadows on the grooves of a story that…had it made sense at some point that night? Steve thought it had, but it was like trying to remember a dream.

_Nat would wake up with leaves in her hair, a smile on her face and her hand on her dirk. I was never more home than those moments, Steve, and you know it._

“They were jealous, I think. The other concubines. That you do not…with them, I mean, that you-
-that you choose me, and not them,” Steve stammered, feeling his face heat from something other than the water.

“And what say you? Perhaps you would enjoy a respite from serving your King? Should I take one of them to my bed do you think?” Tony asked, light and teasingly, almost as if it was barely a thought, but there was a thread of tension in the way his hand gripped the sponge, a subtle tightening at the corners of his eyes that said the query wasn’t mere idle curiosity.

Panic, snow-bright and blinding, raced down Steve’s spine and churned a whirlpool, sickeningly sweet, in his stomach. Later, he could perhaps convince himself it was the potential disruption to his plans, but here, now, there was no thought in his mind other than a blaring, silent scream of refusal lodged in his throat like a stone. Why had he not really considered this except in the most general way? Was it not strange that he was just now, when presented with it, aware of the possibility that Tony would eventually want someone else, even if he continued to call for Steve? Someone with coal-dark hair and cat-eyes like Kadina or delicate and thin-boned like Danen, someone different, someone not Steve. His stomach clenched in rebellion and a hand squeezed his heart so tightly, he thought it would burst from his chest. Pain lanced through him. Hurt and betrayal that he had no right to feel. Tony wasn’t his. There was no promise between them. That wasn’t what this was. A flower and a show for a malleable crowd, that was all today had been. So, where was the relief at Tony’s suggestion? Where was the urgency, where were the encouraging words, the sly hints or outright begging that Tony send for someone else, if only for a little while?

Why did the thought that Tony would want someone else hurt so?

*Better not answer that one, Stevie,* Bucky’s voice sounded in his head with a low, knowing laugh.

“Steve…” Tony began, voice tender and strangely pleased sounding.

“I would prefer if you did not,” Steve said stiffly, looking quickly over his shoulder, then turning away from Tony, blinking back something he did not want to face.

“Then…I shall not,” Tony said, the words coming out stiff and almost surprised, as if he hadn’t quite expected to say them. He held the sponge still, then set it on the ledge and moved around until he was standing between Steve’s knees. He reached out and lifted Steve’s chin until Steve was forced to look up at Tony. It reminded Steve of that first night, when Zola brought him to Tony, and Tony had called him beautiful for the first time.

“You won’t?” Steve asked, feeling nearly dizzy with relief. “Really?”

“It is settled. You need not think on it again,” Tony told him firmly. “You are…you…” he stopped and looked away, mouth twisting in frustration before he sucked in a shaky breath and looked back at Steve. His eyes were wide, shining bright in the low light of the torches, his face drawn tight. A muscle twitched in his jaw, but his touch was gentle, as always. “You give me all that I need.” He cupped his hand over the side of Steve’s face, and Steve leaned into the touch, seeking it, as he always did, but this time, it was different, something passing between them that felt like a promise.

Steve took the sponge from the ledge, soaped it again, and stood, motioning Tony to turn. Tony leaned on his elbows on the lip of the tub and presented his back for Steve. There was a disconcerting moment where everything was off balance, and the world righted itself as Steve stroked the sponge up and down Tony’s back and shoulders, as if the final child clasped hands in a ring, everything complete and ready to begin at the same time. He squeezed the soapy water into Tony’s hair, dropped the sponge to the side with a splat and started massaging the mixture into
Tony’s scalp.

“So, tell me your thoughts about the city’s defenses,” Tony urged after a long breath of silence. His voice was still waver ing with tension, and filled with a forced brightness, but Steve latched on to the change of subject like a rope thrown to a drowning man, and wasn’t that apt, he thought with a sigh.

“You are well prepared,” Steve said, trying to find his footing once again as the steady pounding of his heart slowly ebbed. The topic change was Tony’s way of allowing them both to regroup, he knew, and was struck again by how keenly aware Tony could be at times and how much he could miss, as if Steve’s mind was a cave that Tony could see the mouth of clearly and then everything else became blackened by shadow. “You need more trench lines and your towers are too isolated as you move away from the main gate, making them vulnerable, but overall, the city is well defended from siege.”

“But?” Tony cajoled with a sigh. “I know there’s a but coming. That was entirely too vaguely complimentary for you. You do that when you’re about to tell me everything that’s wrong.”

“But, the likes of Hydra’s cannons would shred those walls and your towers, and with so few men garrisoning them, General Rhodes is right, you’d never patch them up before you were overrun,” Steve explained. “I was thinking, though…a star. The wall, if it—if it were built more in the shape of a star…”

“A star?” Tony repeated, glancing over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised in question.

“If the walls went to points, somewhat like a star, but with two faces and two flanks,” Steve began, the words picking up speed as he went. “Fire from the flanks could protect the curtain wall and the adjacent bastions. Plus, if you made the walls of the points flat, rather than curved or angled, you could fire from there and eliminate the dead zone in front of your towers that an enemy could slip a cannon under.”

“Okay…” Tony said, stretching out the word in consideration. “Okay, that…damn. That could work. A star fort. Archers and cannons could hit any point on the field from there. The bastions could be a point of attack if taken, though. We’d need to, I don’t know, retrench along the rear to isolate it from the main wall, but—it could work. It would work. I can see it. This is brilliant, Steve! It’s so simple—well, not simple, but—God, you know what I mean. Why have I not thought of this before?” he asked with a laugh that was half excitement, half exasperation.

He was grinning and flushed with excitement, and it was a sight to behold, Steve thought. Tony would take this kernel of an idea and turn it into something Steve could only begin to see, he knew, and the thought thrilled him in an indescribable way. To get to be a part of this…this remarkable journey that Tony’s mind could take. I push, but Tony leaps, Steve thought with a sudden grin at the image.

“You haven’t thought of it because you haven’t faced Hydra. Yet. You haven’t seen those weapons. Few have. War is changing, Tony, and the enemies we face won’t be rolling towers up to try to climb your walls with ropes and ladders. They’re going to blow through those walls with that black death of a powder that Shmidt stocks his mortars and shells with,” Steve said. “Lean your head back,” Steve urged, then scooped up water in his cupped hands and let it rinse the soap from Tony’s hair, leaving it in a tangle of curls that Steve couldn’t resist shaking his hand through.

Tony let a pleased sigh slip out, then turned and wound his hands around Steve’s neck, pressing a quick kiss to his lips.
“My soldier,” Tony huffed, though it had the tinge of pride to it that made Steve’s stomach swoop low. “I will be interested to hear what say you of the demonstration in the desert and how you think it would fare against what you have seen. I am fairly proud of this one. I call it the Jerak’ho. For the fabled city whose walls fell to the wrath of a vengeful god. Too ostentatious, do you suppose?” Tony asked with a flash of a grin that said he knew it was.

“For you? Never,” Steve replied, trying to roll his eyes, but finding himself smiling in return instead. “We called it Jericho. In my story. From back ho—from where I’m from.”

“I didn’t realize the story had traveled so far. Perhaps if we share the same stories, we are not so very different, then. Your people and mine,” Tony said, dropping his hands from Steve’s neck and picking up the sponge again. He lathered it with soap and started running it up and down Steve’s arms, eyes tracking the movement. “I wanted to be a knight. When I was younger. Always having grand adventures in the garden or heroically fighting off invaders from the sanctuary of the Castle walls instead of seeing to my studies. That’s why my father had my tutor bring in Rhodye. To provide me with a good example to follow. A stalwart student who would help curb my wayward tendencies. As you can imagine, this did not quite go as planned,” Tony tutted with a fond smile that spoke of good memories. “He became the knight, of course, not me, but he still allows that I may be capable of grand adventures and heroic deeds from time to time.”

“He is a good man. General Rhodes,” Steve said, feeling his stomach go cold. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, breathed out, and looked down at Tony. His throat worked, but no sound came out.

“Steve?” Tony said, brow puckering with a slight frown. “Are you alright?”


Tony stared at him, his eyes joting back and forth, searching, then he sighed and put the sponge down on the edge of the tub, bracing his hands against the rim for a moment. Steve watched the knuckles go white.

“I am a selfish man,” Tony began, eyes hard on the wall where the fountain streamed water in a steady cascade. A denial jumped to Steve’s lips, but he held his tongue and waited. “You are mine, now, and I can’t deny that I am glad of it, however it came to pass,” he said, voice tight. “I shouldn’t be. I know it. But, you are here, safe and free from want, and I—”

A muscle worked in his jaw. Steve could count his heartbeats on it. Slowly, Tony turned to look at him, steely-eyed and straight-backed, gaze boring into Steve like he could see the deep, dark part that celebrated victory at Rumlow’s fate. Could see it and understood it, and clawed open his own chest so that Steve could keep it deep and dark.

“But, I found that I am…unable to well abide in a world where someone who hurt you exists. Not when it is within my power to see that such a situation ceases to be,” Tony said, voice low and tight.

This is how I will show you my regard, with flowers and the heads of those who would hurt you, Steve thought to himself with a blazing sort of realization that stole his breath away. I could love him. This terrifying, beautiful man. I can’t. I won’t. But, I could. It would be so very easy.

*Her hands can kill a man and weave crowns of flowers for the children. I fell in love with her yesterday and have loved her my whole life.*
I know, Buck.

Do you?

“Thank you,” Steve whispered, pulling back and reaching his hands up to cup Tony’s cheeks, holding his gaze. The words came out broken-sounding, thick and rent with emotion, but he needed to say it, and willed Tony to understand. Tony’s throat bobbed and worked, mouth parting, then closing on whatever he might have said. Finally, he sighed and his eyes went soft and dark, gleaming with a brittle brightness as he blinked up Steve.

“You have no idea what I would do for you,” Tony husked out, then dropped his gaze and shook his head. A laugh, a harsh, grating sound that was almost bitter, escaped him as he dragged his eyes back to Steve. “I think even I do not quite know,” Tony admitted with a slight grimace twisting his mouth. “Come. Let us dine, and speak of more pleasant things. You can tell me more of this star fort idea of yours.”

“Tony. Wait,” Steve said quickly as Tony moved to get out of the bath, sending water sloshing over the side as he did. He reached out and grabbed Tony’s arm, holding him there, though his touch was light. Finally, Tony turned back to look at him, something like trepidation lining his face with a worry that shouldn’t be there.

“You are many things. But, you are not selfish,” Steve said, slowly, firmly, keeping his gaze locked on Tony’s. He moved forward in the water, until his body was brushing against Tony’s, and his hands settled on the sharp bones of Tony’s hips. “You are not.”

Tony stared at him, mouth opening once before he snapped his jaw shut and swallowed, eyes going liquid as he looked at Steve.

“You are the least selfish person I know,” Steve whispered, words slurring a bit as he gazed down at Tony. “What you did—I know the price it exacts, something like that. It has nothing to do with being selfish.”

“Yes, well…I—you--” Tony stammered, uncharacteristically seeming to be at a loss.

“I mean it, Tony,” Steve said.

“I know you do,” Tony replied, voice going rough and thready. “I just,” he sighed, almost defeated sounding, “I don’t know what to do with the idea that you do.” He looked up at Steve and slowly shook his head. “You’ve no way of knowing how remarkable you are. Perhaps it is better that way,” he said with a trace of resignation that he quickly wiped away behind a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Yes, I am most generous. We’ve already discussed that, I believe,” Tony murmured, teasing now, or trying to make the attempt. “We discussed my generosity, I believe. At length,” he added, lips quirking.

Tony darted a glance up at Steve before letting his gaze fall back to Steve’s chest, tracing a line across it, then, very deliberately, picked up the sponge and scraped the rough edge of the sponge hard against Steve’s right nipple. Steve’s body jerked, and he let out a hiss of air. His cock, forgotten in his panic and the discussion of the city’s defenses, stirred to life between his legs again as Tony repeated the action against the other nipple.

“So sensitive. You should have jewelry for them. They make chains for them that attach to your collar or your cock, you know? Beautiful decorations that you wear beneath your robes, that only I would know about. You would wear them and think of me each time they pull or tug, and they would. All day. While you are sitting with your paints or having a repast. They would make you
ache and think of me. Would you like that, my beautiful one?” Tony asked and wrapped his hand around Steve’s cock, just holding it there, heating Steve’s skin even against the warmth of the water.

Surely, Tony could feel it thicken and harden in his hand as Steve’s mind filled with the images Tony’s words presented. It should embarrass him, his reaction, and it did, in a way, but that was good, too, the shame of it twisting low in his gut, because it was for Tony. It belonged to Tony, in here, and Steve could just…give it to him, let him take it from him, so it was Tony’s, not Steve’s, that hot, heady humiliation that burned through him at the things Tony said and how his body reacted to them. Steve lay his head against Tony’s forehead, rolling it there while his body shuddered under Tony’s hand.

“Tony,” Steve gasped, pleading, the name stretched thin, like the wind through the reeds back home. Steve grunted, hips shimmying against Tony’s hand. He bowed his head and found Tony’s lips, warm and slightly rough from the heat of the sun, heard Tony’s groan fill his mouth as Steve’s tongue slid past the seam of his lips. Wet heat, the spice of the day’s wine, the smell of soap and skin and Tony on each breath, it was almost overwhelming. He could lose himself this way. Maybe he already had, but there was something to be found here, too, or he thought there might be. He didn’t question it, just let his body and mouth give Tony the words he could not say, the emotions he would not feel.

He broke the kiss, panting hard, heart pounding, as if he had been running from something, and caught Tony’s expression as he reached up to push a strand of hair off Steve’s forehead, all shadowed and full of a breathtaking awe that tore at Steve’s heart.

“Would you like that?” Tony asked again, harder this time, more insistent, the words going right to the tip of Steve’s cock with a throbbing pulse of heat.

“Yes,” Steve gasped, his breath ragged around the word. “Please.”

“I know you would. Then, you shall have them,” Tony promised, taking Steve’s cock firmly in his hand. His mouth found Steve’s again, nudging Steve’s lips apart so his tongue could slip inside. Tony’s tongue, soft and wet, heating his mouth, his hand holding Steve’s cock, it was all Steve could think about, and then, without warning, Steve felt the rough glide of the sponge across his cock where Tony held it beneath the water. A groan fell from Steve’s lips, caught by Tony’s mouth as it slanted over his. Another stroke of the sponge, harder this time, up and down the sensitive skin of Steve’s shaft, around the head, and again, along the underside where his cock strained and bulged.

Tony lifted Steve’s cock and repeated the motion, then swept the sponge across Steve’s balls, hefting them and running it around and between the sacs as they tightened. Steve’s hips bucked, and his hands gripped Tony’s waist with bruising force. It was such a different feeling, the wet-roughened scrape of the sponge on his cock leaving a burning trail in its wake that Tony followed with the familiar pull of his hand. Steve’s mind couldn’t seem to decide on pain or pleasure, just let it all swirl around into a turbulent eddy of need that kept building higher and higher. Again and again, the sponge washed over his cock and swirled around the head, then down the shaft, while Tony’s other hand followed in slow strokes and twists and his tongue flicked into Steve’s mouth and warred with Steve’s own.

“Come for me, Steve,” Tony urged as he worked his hand and the sponge with as much deft ease as he usually reserved for building his machines. Steve moaned, tearing his lips from Tony’s and let his head sink to Tony’s shoulder. “So good for me. Almost there,” Tony said, then wrapped the sponge around the head of Steve’s cock and twisted his wrist in a circular motion once, twice,
and then Steve was coming so hard he nearly sent them both reeling into the edge of the bath, though Tony held him and kept his hand working Steve’s cock as the last of the pulses shook through Steve’s body.

“Beautiful,” Tony murmured into the curve of Steve’s neck as he helped Steve sink down in the water to sit on the tub’s seat. “Amazing. You did so well, my darling.” He kissed Steve again and wrapped his arms around him, even throwing one leg over Steve’s under the water and pushed the water away to make sure they were both clean of it as the white bits floated from the tub and down the chute to the drain.

“We’d best get out. Before our skin wrinkles like old men,” Tony urged, though the words were soft, full of joy, as if the image pleased him. Steve’s mind caught on Tony’s happiness and throbbed with it, like little fissures of warmth that crackled across his skin and made him feel as if he would break apart, were it not for Tony holding him together.

He let Tony help him out of the bath. They dried off with the thick towels that were folded nearby, and Tony handed Steve a robe that fit his shoulders and height too perfectly not to have been deliberate. When they returned to Tony’s chamber, dinner awaited by the fire, and Steve noted with a burst of fondness that Tony had apparently taken this morning’s resolution to see Steve well fed to heart. The platter of food nearly bowed the table, Steve thought at he sat down and took the goblet Tony handed him.

Dinner was a languorous affair, with too much food and a sweet wine that left Steve’s head feeling heavy. Overlapping fields of fire. Ramparts. Converging fire from diagonally oriented walls. Tony spent nearly half an hour on an idea for a floodgate system. Then, somehow, on to a water distribution system for the city, massive sewer and plumbing works, Steve’s choice of purchases— Tony was intrigued by the sheer fabric and managed to get Steve stammering as he tried to describe the rings he’d selected—the need for rotation of crops and whether a piece of bucolic art was improved by the inclusion of livestock or if a landscape free of cattle was preferable. In a word, it was exhilarating.

“You should accompany me more often,” Tony said as the meal drew to a close. “You would like that, would you not? You’ve a,” he waved his hand in the air, “good mind for these things. Better than most of my Council, I’d wager. Hell, all of them, likely. I wish I could have you present this idea for the new wall design. You’ve a way,” Tony continued, rolling his lip between his teeth for a moment. “This way of saying things that makes it sound obvious and…right. Makes me want to agree to please you, if nothing else.”

“Not that you do,” Steve interrupted.

“And give you the satisfaction? Hardly. Still, you do have a natural way about you. I don’t know,” he laughed. “Perhaps I’m just partial? At any rate, Obie will no doubt feel it a wasted expenditure at a time when the realm can ill afford it. It is difficult to fight a threat that you can’t even see. I’m not saying it isn’t necessary,” Tony rushed out with a small, placating tip of his head. “Merely that it will be a challenge to convince them.”

“Do you require their permission?” Steve asked arching his brow.

“No,” Tony replied with a sharp crack of laughter. “Though, it is good to have their support. They are, after all, peers of the realm, liege lords in their own right and not without considerable influence. Would you have me go against them?”

“If it means doing what’s right,” Steve said. “I don’t…I don’t know about your politics here, or the costs of something like this but I do know Hydra. I know what’s out there. This is the right
“Well, I don’t disagree,” Tony said with a shrug of his shoulders, taking a sip of wine. “As I said, you’re most convincing. We’ve had too little rain here the past few years, and harvests haven’t been what the Lords and Ladies are used to, which cuts down on the taxes they can pay the Crown. You know the issues with the Guilds and their losses. Not that we are in dire straits by any means. Fear not, you shall have all the trinkets and fabrics that catch your eye,” he promised with a smirk that was clearly pleased with the thought, though the words settled cold and flat in Steve’s stomach and hung there, suspended, as if waiting for something to come along and push them into motion. “The materials won’t be particularly expensive. Rock from the quarries should be readily available, just a matter of transport, and Lord Parrish will be pleased to provide his barges for such an endeavor, I’m sure. Or, he will once I give his daughter a place at Court. Timber can be had fairly easily. I’d prefer oak or elm, but there are pines and beech trees on the lower steppes. Lady Sybel’s lands. She’s a…personal friend. I believe she would allow access without much care, at least to the older groves. Slaves will do the bulk of the building, though I’ll have to divert them from other projects instead of purchasing new ones, which may not sit well with some. Truly, the costs are actually not as much as Obie will likely rail about. I’ll see about having an estimate put together. Stave off his protest, if I can.”

Steve flinched. Something bitter and loathsome bubbled in Steve’s stomach at Tony’s words and stabbed, ice cold, through his chest. His mind flashed to the slave turning the crank on the pavilion’s fan, round and round, all afternoon, while Steve sat, adored and adorned, at Tony’s side, grasping at ideas to keep Tony and his city, his way of life, safe from harm. Slaves would do the bulk of the building. Slaves like Steve. Like Cam. Like the man who turned the crank. Like the boys who sometimes wore Cam’s face in Steve’s thoughts who had gone before him to serve whoever this Lord Stane was. People who did not matter, unless they happened to catch the eye of the King or other notable, and then, cruelty or comfort, even their very existence, depended on the whims of someone else.

As Steve’s depended on Tony. Tony, who wanted someone as abhorrent as Rumlow destroyed, but saw such a man as an aberration, the fetid, infected underbelly to be cut out, not the natural result of a system that called one man property and one man master.

“Enough of this talk of politics and budgets!” Tony said, pushing his chair back from the round table in front of the fire where they shared meals and standing up. He walked over to stand next to Steve’s chair and reached out a hand to cup the side of Steve’s face. This time, Steve did not let himself lean in to the touch, but held himself still against Tony’s hand, until he looked up and caught sight of Tony’s face, unguarded for a fleeting moment and full of a deep yearning. He leaned in. He couldn’t seem to step himself. Watched the expression melt away from Tony’s face, leaving an aching tenderness in its place, the way night slips into day, sun blazing, bright and beautiful all at once.

“Come,” Tony said. “I’ve waited all day to feel you again.”

He wanted Tony. Wanted Tony to take him to his bed, touch him, make him feel.

Make him forget. Forget the camps. Forget the war. Forget not being fast enough when it really mattered. Forget the dark enveloping him as he sank. Forget the cold that woke him up nights, shivering and terrified. Forget the clank of chains as the ship swayed. Forget the box and the heat and the vicious thirst that drove him out of his head. All of the horrible things that brought him here, he could forget, for a time. With Tony.

Tony could do that. Take all of that away and replace it with tenderness and caring, warmth and
passion, brilliant, beautiful things that Steve wanted to hold onto more than almost anything else.

But, he couldn’t forget Zola’s demand that Steve call him Master. He couldn’t forget Sitwell’s hands on him while he hung there with hatred burning in his veins as Rumlow looked on. He couldn’t forget Hammer telling him to crawl. He couldn’t forget Cam in his white robe. So brave, braver than Steve had ever been. Braver than Steve was now.

Maybe it was the fervor with which the crowd greeted him today. Maybe it was how easily they believed the story that suited them. Maybe it was what Tony had done to Rumlow, for him, for Steve, but not for the girl Sitwell pulled off the wagon, not for the countless others who weren’t in his bed. Maybe it was the talk of slaves in the same breath as timber. Maybe it was the crank of the fan turning around and around, all afternoon, while no one cared or acknowledged it. Maybe it was any number of things.

Steve stood, though his feet were leaden, and walked towards the waiting bed. He sat down on the edge and swallowed, tasting bile as he felt the collar bob against his throat. He had to know. He had to know how Tony saw him. A person or a slave. Steve Rogers, Captain in the Army of the Unified Free States, or this creature who was here to pleasure a king. Steve’s hand shot out and wrapped around Tony’s as he reached for the knot of the belt at Steve’s waist.

“I don’t want to,” Steve said, though the words sat unnaturally in his throat even as he spoke them. There was truth there, but a lie, too, and he could hear it, even if Tony couldn’t. Tony’s hand froze, and Steve looked up, finding Tony’s eyes, intent and curious, though not angry. Not yet, anyway.

“Is something amiss?” Tony asked, drawing his hand back and canting his head to the side to regard Steve with concern lining his brow.

“I—I just don’t want to. Tonight. I don’t want to do this,” Steve replied, holding Tony’s gaze steadily. His stomach roiled, not with fear, exactly, but with a desperate hope. The worst kind of terror. The one that dared to want something impossible.

Tony frowned and pressed his palm to Steve’s brow, then his cheeks, and finally ran a hand through Steve’s hair, clucking his tongue and humming under his breath.

“I forget sometimes that you are unused to our heat. A whole day in the sun, no wonder you are overtired. You were not well this morning, and I knew it. I should have insisted we put off the day’s events until some other time,” Tony murmured, voice rough with regret as he stroked his knuckles along the ridge of Steve’s cheek. “I am sorry, my treasure. You will rest. Tomorrow, nothing, save staying in bed for you. I mean it. I’ll call for the boy to come and entertain you with losing at chess. If you even think of taxing yourself, I’ll tie you to it, don’t think I won’t,” he teased with a soft smile. “Now, sleep. If you are not feeling better in the morning, I shall call for Doctor Banner to make you one of his concoctions. They’re terrible. You’ll likely despise me—and I’ll probably not want to kiss you for some time after—but, they do work. Rest,” Tony ordered lightly and leaned down to place a quick kiss to Steve’s brow. “I will work in here, in case you have need of me.”

Steve blinked up at him in momentary confusion, then watched as Tony strode off to his workshop, only to return with a large book, plank of thin, flat wood and a few sheaves of parchment on which to sketch what Steve instinctively knew would be the beginnings of the bastion points for a star fort. He lay down and pulled the coverlet over him, staring up at the canopy, his whole body loose and shaking with relief and confusion.

That was…it? Go to sleep? That was all? It was so lacking in whatever climax Steve had
expected that he wasn’t sure what to do. All of the arguments about the inherent right of people to be free and hold dominion over their own lives and bodies that had been brewing in Steve’s mind between Tony’s comment about using slaves to rebuild the fortifications had somehow been swept away by Tony’s instant, and obviously sincere, concern for his well-being. He turned his head to the side and saw Tony sitting in one of the large cushioned chairs by the fire with a large book open on his lap and a stylus between his lips as he studied the page.

Steve puffed out a frustrated breath of air and turned his eyes back to stare at the bed’s canopy without really seeing it. It was…frustrating. Annoying, even. That’s what the tight, twisting sensation in the back of his mind was. Annoyance. With himself or with Tony, he wasn’t sure. Himself, mostly, he supposed. Had he said no before? To Tony? Why not? In the beginning, he had been too worried that any misstep would mean a terrible fate for Cam, but that worry had passed some time ago, if he was honest with himself. So, why had he held his tongue for this long?

_Easier to do what you want if you can tell yourself you don’t have a choice, isn’t it_ , Bucky’s voice asked from somewhere in the back of his mind.

I don’t want this.

_You don’t want exactly this, sure, but you want him. You want your star forts and your fancy discussions about philosophy and war. You want his humor and his mind. You want his focus. You want the way he calls you his treasure and damn well means it, like it’s something real. You want your grand plans for a better world and him looking at you the way he does, like none of it matters without you in it._

That’s not what this is.

_Well, Steve, that’s not the first time tonight you’ve been wrong about things, now is it?_ 

Steve threw the coverlet off his legs and climbed out of bed, drawing Tony’s surprised frown as he approached.

“I’m not sick,” Steve said, and for a disconcerting moment, it was like hearing his own voice echoed back to him. “I’m not sick, Tony. I’m not unwell. I said I didn’t want to be with you tonight because...because I wanted to see what would happen.”

“What...did you think would happen?” Tony asked slowly, carefully, looking up at Steve with the same bewildered frown.

“I don’t know. That you wouldn’t care. That you’d tell me it didn’t matter,” Steve replied, voice coming out high and strained, like he couldn’t get enough air. “I’m your slave. I’m supposed to...serve you. Please you. And if I don’t...” he trailed off, shaking his head and blinking back the sudden pounding against his eyelids.

“And if you don’t...” Tony repeated, eyes narrowing, mouth working around the words as if he was chewing on them.

“If I didn’t please you, I’d be...punished,” Steve filled in, finally, the words dragging out of the bottomless pit of his stomach. “Zola said, if I didn’t please you, there were punishments, Tony, and—I didn’t want to think—I don’t think, not you, not like that, but--.”

“Ah,” Tony said, cutting Steve off with a raised hand. “I see. Come here,” Tony said, voice gentle as he motioned Steve forward to the place in front of his chair. “You will not listen to me from
over there. Your head is too full, my dear one, and no wonder. Please,” Tony urged again when Steve didn’t move. Finally, Steve walked over and stood in front of Tony’s bent knees, then knelt down and looked up, as much out of a shocked curiosity than anything else. “Do you truly think that I would ever hurt you? Really hurt you?”

Steve looked down at the rug for a moment, it’s mosaic pattern blurring as he tried to focus. “No,” he said, looking back up at Tony. “Not you. I know that. I do. Zola, though—he said, there are punishments—”

“This is my fault,” Tony broke in, mouth flattening into a grimace around a sigh. “You are so good for me, it is easy to forget that you have no training and do not know our culture or our ways,” he said with a frustrated sigh. “Yes, there are punishments. But, it is not like what is in your head,” he stopped, wiped a hand over his mouth and looked away. “It is nothing like what you experienced with Rumlow. Nothing. He is a vile, abhorrent man who would have been rotting in a prison cell had he not bribed the magistrate years ago when I first heard reports of his cruelties. Or had I followed up, as I should have, but I trusted it to be done, and—well. That is—that is neither here nor there for now,” Tony stopped, rolled his lips together, closed his eyes and let out a puff of air. “Do you remember that night when I had you touch yourself? After you’d left me, all alone in my bed with only my impure thoughts of you to sustain me?” Tony asked.

“I do seem to recall something like that,” Steve replied drolly, earning a rueful, acknowledging smile and nod from Tony.

“When you think of it, what I had you do, how does it make you feel?” Tony asked.

Steve looked at him blankly, opened his mouth, then closed it again. How did it make him feel? He wasn’t sure. It had been humiliating and painful in its way, but when he thought about it now, he remembered Tony watching him, Tony not watching him, which was somehow good, too, and the way it had hurt, a bright, high, stretched thin sort of ache that felt like walking along the edge of a cliff. A low, squirming heat filled his belly and made its way down his cock, and his chest tightened, while a steady beat of pressure coiled tight and hot behind his balls.

“I don’t know,” Steve finally settled on.

“Fair enough,” Tony acknowledged with another nod. “Did it make you fear me or hate me?”

“No,” Steve said. “No, not that. I was…frustrated with you, but…” he trailed off with a frown, recalling the night and walking back to his cell at Zola’s only to find a cold bath waiting for him.

“If I told you to do it again, now, how would that make you feel?” Tony asked, tilting his head to the side as if simply mildly curious. “If I had you stroke yourself while I watched and told you that you couldn’t come from it? Put a golden ring on that lovely cock of yours?”

“I—“ Steve started, then swallowed thickly and dropped his head, closing his eyes. When he opened them, he could see his cock pressing against the folds of his robe and supposed that was answer enough.

“Or if you disobeyed me, and I took you over my knee? Used my hand or my belt on you until you begged me to stop?” Tony mused, seemingly idly, though his eyes were dark and intent on Steve.

Steve’s mind stuttered to a halt at the image, his heart pounding, his cock throbbing in echo. His chest burned cold.

“Breathe, Steve,” Tony ordered with a warm fondness.
Oh, right. Steve had forgotten that. His head couldn’t seem to do anything except conjure the image of being lain across Tony’s lap for some moment of rebellion, waiting for the strike to fall with a terrible, twisting arousal mixed with anticipation burning its way through his body. He didn’t want that. He didn’t want to want that. It couldn’t be right, to feel this way. Tony placed his hand on the side of Steve’s face and held him there, thumb moving up and down over Steve’s cheek. Steve’s eyes fluttered as the world went hazy and out of focus for a moment, and he leaned against Tony’s hand, seeking an equilibrium that escaped him.

“No,” Steve admitted, voice cracking on the word.

“Do you want me to show you?” Tony asked.

Yes, Steve thought, please, God, yes. His cock twitched under his robe, going hard with a sudden pulse of need. His skin was on fire. His heart was pounding a drumbeat in his ears. He was trying so hard to remember to breathe that each puff of air seemed to shatter out of his chest.

“I don’t—I don’t know what—” Steve stammered, trying to find words, any words, just something to chase the images in his head away for a moment. “What you’re asking.”

“I know. Do you trust me?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Steve said immediately. That much was true.

“Good. So, this—tonight—earlier, that was a test?” Tony asked, seeming to mull the words over as he spoke them. “May I take it that I passed?”

“Yes,” Steve said after a pause. Had it been a test? He supposed it had, though he hadn’t really thought it through that way. He had wanted to know. How much of him Tony truly saw. And that, at least, Tony had answered, though Steve still wasn’t entirely sure what it meant.

“So, when you said you did not wish to be with me tonight, that was a lie,” Tony pointed out.

“Yes,” Steve admitted, shifting his eyes away for a moment before he dragged his gaze back to where Tony was watching him with the intense sort of focus he seemed to reserve for Steve or his machines. He felt himself tense, but held Tony’s gaze.

“I believe I warned you once that you should not lie to me, did I not?” Tony asked. His voice was still light, almost nonchalant, but there was something darker that moved underneath the words, something that set Steve’s cock to pulsing and straining, and made air suddenly difficult to come by.

“Yes,” Steve said, stomach twisting into a knot of apprehension that was somehow spiked with desire, until he couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began.

He thought again of Tony’s words, about taking him over his knee, and what it would feel like to do that, how ridiculous he would look. Shame burned brightly through him like a swath of oil being lit, whooshing heat into the air all at once, and curled low in his belly, sparking embers there
that kept flicking fiery pinpoints of heat against his balls and down the length of his cock. He hadn’t been spanked since Mrs. Duncan took a spoon to Bucky a score of years ago for his language and Steve got a few swats for ‘encouraging him, ‘cause I heard you over there a’laughin’ like a loon, Steve Rogers.’ It was humiliating, just the idea of it, and yet the idea wouldn’t seem to leave his head. Him, bending over to present his bottom for Tony, Tony’s belt snapping against his skin or, worse and better somehow, Tony’s hand coming down on him, hard, stinging blows.

He was suddenly conscious of his nakedness under the robe. He was half-hard, and could feel his cock stiffening as Tony’s gaze dropped down, then raised again, expression speculative. A thread of heat squirmed low in his belly. He could feel himself clench up, body going tense as he waited, mind insistently presenting him with the image of bending over Tony’s lap and waiting for a blow, just letting it happen, the whoosh of air, the sharp sound of it, the awful shame at the way a part of him relished the thought twisting through his stomach and hardening his cock even more.

“I think we can find a better use for your mouth than lying, don’t you?” Tony said idly, as if the thought were only now occurring to him, though Steve doubted that was so.

Steve jerked, part surprise, part anticipation, part…disappointment. He tamped that down as quickly as possible, but he caught Tony’s eyes go wide, knowing, then darken. Steve’s mouth watered, filling with an almost embarrassing amount of saliva. Using his mouth on Tony hardly seemed a punishment. He loved doing that. He thought Tony knew?

“Take off your robe,” Tony ordered, voice so rough he had to clear his throat. Steve did, almost too quickly, his hands shaking as he undid the belt and pulled it off his shoulders where it puddled to the rung at his knees. “Good,” Tony said. “Come here,” he ordered. “Put your arms on either side of my knees. Just like that. Good. Now,” he continued, hands going to the ties of his breeches. He pulled his cock out, half hard already, and held it in his hand like an offering. ‘I’ve work to do, which I started when you lied about not wishing to please me tonight. So, I will finish my work, and you will keep my cock warm while I do. You will not move. You will not suck or use your tongue. You are absolutely not to touch yourself. Your mouth is nothing more than a place to hold my cock. You will just take it, let me use your mouth to keep it warm while I work, nothing more. Do you understand? Nod if you do.”

Steve nodded. He knew his eyes must be the size of the coins Cam had thrown to the crowd earlier in the day. He couldn’t quite process Tony’s words. There was no context for them. He wet his lips and watched Tony’s eyes narrow on the movement.

“Do you need to drink or use the privy before we begin? It will be a while,” Tony warned him. Steve shook his head. “If you need anything, you will tap my leg twice. You will not take my cock out of your mouth without permission, do you understand?” Tony asked. Steve nodded.

“Good. Open.” Steve opened his mouth and bent his head forward, his hands clutching at Tony’s thighs while his arms rested next to Tony’s leg. Tony fed his cock into Steve’s mouth, nearly all the way in, until Steve could feel the bulbous head of it just barely scraping the back of his throat, the prickly hairs at Tony’s groin teasing his nose, the musky scent filling his nostrils.

Tony picked up the book, placed the parchment on the board and grabbed the stylus from the table where he had set them and went back to his work, seemingly completely unfazed that Steve had his head buried between his thighs and Tony’s cock in his throat.

It was good, Steve thought. Hardly a punishment. He liked Tony’s taste. His smell. The soft, supple feel of the skin of his cock, the way the vein on the underside rushed with blood, the way he could feel the slight stiffening and lengthening of the shaft in his mouth. Above him, he heard the scratch of the stylus across the parchment, rhythmic and familiar. He looked up at Tony under
his lashes, watching as he occasionally chewed one end of the stylus before going back to whatever he was drawing. The star fort, Steve assumed.

The side of his body that faced the fire was warm, almost hot. He wanted to swallow, but it was difficult with Tony’s cock jamming the back of his throat, and the saliva flowing freely. Not uncomfortable, exactly, but he could feel his mouth going dry. He wanted to move, stretch his legs a bit or shift his knees, but Tony had told him not to, so he stayed as still as he could. Above him, Tony slowly flipped through the pages in the book as he read, stopping every once in awhile to jot something down on the parchment or make a note at the margin of the book.

He wasn’t sure how long it had been. A while by the look of the progress Tony had made in his book. Steve’s knees ached. His thighs burned. Half of his body was hot, the other half chilled. His jaw hurt, and he was desperate to wet his lips and mouth, to swallow freely, just once. His eyes stung, prickling at the corners as wetness made his lashes stick together. He wasn’t sure how long it had been. A long time, surely. The springy hairs above Tony’s cock made him want to scratch his nose. It was all he could think about. That and the need to swallow fully.

Tony made a humming sound, as if he had come upon something interesting in the book, but when Steve raised his eyes from behind his clumped lashes, Tony was gazing down at him, expression soft and almost wistful.

“You’re doing so good, my beautiful one,” Tony whispered, voice low and almost melodic, Steve thought. Like there was a tune to it that Steve couldn’t place, but it distracted him from everything else for a moment. “You look so gorgeous, with my cock tucked so nice and warm in your mouth. It feels amazing like that. I love looking down at you while I work, seeing your mouth stretched around me, keeping me warm and ready,” he continued, stroking a hand through Steve’s hair, then down the side of his face, cupping his cheek, the way Steve liked. He wanted to lean in, but he wasn’t supposed to move, so he didn’t, but felt the pressure of Tony’s hand, a little harder than usual, as he held it there, and that was close enough. “You’re perfect, Steve. So good for me, even though I know it is difficult. But, you’re doing so well. A little while longer. Can you do that for me? Tap my leg if you can.” Steve tapped the side of Tony’s leg, though it took a moment to get his hand to cooperate with what his mind was trying to tell it to do. He could stay like this. He would. It hurt, he ached, he wanted to move, but he wanted to be good for Tony even more than any of that. “Good. Good, Steve. You’re taking it so well, look at you. So still and good for me. You’re beautiful, truly, my love. So beautiful like this. So very good.”

The words washed over Steve, swept him up from whatever trough he had been mired in and over a kind of hill, then down, down, down, into warmth, like the heat of Tony’s bath, but at the same time, something completely different. He didn’t have a word for it. Better than that. Better than anything. The pain, the aches, the itch, the need the swallow, slowly, it all receded. The tension he had been holding was gone, swept away along with everything else. Not everything at once, not even in succession, but a sort of overlapping stretch of time where it all just faded. Not gone, not entirely, but...distant. Somewhere behind him. It didn’t matter. This mattered. Tony’s cock, warm and heavy and thick in his mouth. The heat rolling off the juncture of Tony’s thighs. The smell, musk and metal and the soap from the bath. The weight of Tony’s hand where it held him. The occasional stroke of Tony’s thumb. There was a callus there, healing now, but still rough enough for Steve to feel it scratch across his skin, good and hard and present.

Time left him. He had no real sense of it, just understood it as a long while. He was vaguely aware that Tony had neared the end of his book. There were several papers spread out on the table with long strings of letters and numbers on them and a few scribbles of the beginnings of some kind of machine showing through the thin parchment. It could have been minutes. Hours. Days. It didn’t matter. There was only Tony and this, where he was good and still. He could do that for
Tony, who had passed his test, and would give Steve a lily, every day, to show his regard.

I’m being good and still, his mind hummed.

That’s the wrong test, Steve. You know it is.

A lily. Every day. To show his regard.

Wrong test, Steve.

Punishment is another side of pleasure.

Wrong. Test. Steve.

My pleasure is a gift.

Wrong. Test.

He will never hurt me.

Wrong.

I think I could love him.

There is a path. Through the mountains. Steep. Unmarked on most maps. But there. You saw it. You know it. You can see it now, if you thought about it.

Maybe there are other paths. Other ways. He sees me.

Steve.

“Steve,” Tony called out, voice soft and encouraging. Steve blinked. Looked up. Tony was there. Of course, he was. Tony was everywhere. All around him. He knew that. That was good.

“There you are, my beautiful one,” Tony said, brushing the pad of his thumb across Steve’s cheek. “So lovely like this. You did so good. Now, open for me. Just a bit. There you go,” Tony told him. “That’s good. Just a little more for me.”

Steve opened his mouth wider, had the sense of his jaw unhinging with some kind of great, silent clank, and suddenly felt a rush of saliva into his mouth as Tony pulled his cock out. He swallowed. Swallowed again. Coughed on it, but got it down. Tony curled over him, grasping Steve’s head to his thigh and holding him there with a hand splayed through Steve’s hair. Tony was murmuring soft words, good words, that flowed over Steve’s skin as he stroked Steve’s hair.

Steve was warm. Not hot or cold anymore. Just warm. He ached, but like running a long way and slowly coming to a halt. His breathing was shallow, but steady, almost like…dreaming of being asleep. Finally, Tony nudged Steve’s chin up with one finger until Steve managed to return his gaze, though there was a halo of softness at the edges of his vision, as if someone had rubbed the colors into smoothness.

“You were so good, sweet one. So good for me,” Tony rasped out, voice thick and heavy to Steve’s ears. He bent over and took Steve’s mouth, tongue thrusting in deep, swirling and curling around Steve’s, exploring unhurriedly until he finally drew back, and wet his own lips with Steve’s taste.

“I like that. You should always taste like me,” Tony whispered, eyes soft and slack. He tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowing to shrewdness as he regarded Steve. “Can you be still for me a bit
longer?” Tony asked. Steve nodded. Or thought he did. He wasn’t sure. It seemed to be good enough for Tony. Tony gestured then, looking over his shoulder at one of the guards, who walked silently over to the bedside table and then over to Tony, where he deposited the pot of warm oil on the table next to Tony’s chair.

Steve watched with a strange sort of detachment as Tony dipped his fingers in the oil, then began to stroke himself. Long, languid strokes down the length of his shaft, setting a leisurely pace. His eyes were on Steve. Steve could feel his look, even as he couldn’t tear his own gaze away from the mesmerizing motion of Tony’s hand as he worked his own cock to hardness. A soft grunt. A puff of air. The pace of the strokes increased. Grew harder. More insistent. Tony’s wrist twisted over the head of his cock, and he groaned. The sound sent a stab of arousal down Steve’s own neglected cock. To his surprise, he realized he was hard and leaking, and wondered how long he had been in that state.

Harder now. Faster. Rougher. There would be callouses on Tony’s hand from his work, Steve well knew. They would scrape along the delicate skin there. He could almost feel it on his own cock, which jutted out insistently between his legs as Steve’s eyes tracked Tony’s hand while he stroked himself. Small pants of air sounded in the quiet of the room. Another groan. A broken-off curse. Tony’s body slumped, then bowed, and he cried out, harsh and guttural.

All of a sudden, he was coming in long, white streams that coated Steve’s face and neck and spattered his chest. Steve’s eyes snapped shut, and his body jolted in surprise. It was dripping down his face. Across his lips. He could taste it. Smell the salty bitterness of it. When he blinked his eyes open, flecks of Tony’s seed sprayed off. A rivulet of it ran down his neck, under his collar. Another thick clump of it clung to his cheek.

“Fuck,” Tony gasped, letting his head fall back against the chair and closing his eyes, a thin, wheezing breath escaping him. He opened his eyes and looked down at Steve, chest heaving, eyes dark pools, cock held limp in his hand, with a few beads of white dangling from the tip. “Fuck, Steve, God, look at you. You’re gorgeous. Fuck.”

With your mouth, Steve remembered, and leaned forward, letting his tongue dart out to catch those last few, precious beads from the head of Tony’s cock.

“God, God, fuck me, you’re perfect, you’re so good, Steve, fuck,” Tony babbled, watching as Steve curled his tongue into his mouth and caught the taste. “You’re a fucking glorious mess is what you are. Shit. Holy shit.”

I do this to him, Steve thought with a heady surge of pride. No one else. He will have none but me. He promised.

Wrong test.

You fell. I was too slow, and you fell. I’m here now. He sees me. There are other paths. Steve waited, but his mind was clearing of the fog, leaving a warm haze in its wake and Tony, always Tony, there in front of him.

Tony scrubbed his face vigorously with both hands, then shook his head hard, trying to clear it, though he ended up looking at Steve again, letting out a groan of surrender and scraping his hands through his hair, leaving it wild. He was still breathing hard, mouth working around words that wouldn’t come out, his eyes darting from Steve to any other place, then back again, as if he couldn’t quite stop looking. His expression was one Steve had never quite seen before, of nearly unbearable awe and tenderness, pride and possessiveness, all rolled into one that warmed Steve’s skin and made his cock pound with desire.
“I should clean you up,” Tony said, finally, though made no move to do so, just looked at Steve like he was the most beautiful sight to behold. On his knees, naked, save for Tony’s collar, cock hard and body marked with Tony’s seed. Steve swallowed, tasted the salty remains of it on his tongue, in his throat, and held himself still. He wasn’t sure if he wanted Tony to clean him up, which had to be wrong, to want to sit here like this, in such a state. It must be, but Tony was still looking at him with that same amazed satisfaction, and it did something to Steve to know he had put that expression there, so he waited and let it dry on his skin while Tony looked his fill.

Finally, Tony fixed himself in his breeches, got up and Steve heard the familiar splash of water from the basin. The water would be heated and kept warm with hot stones, Steve knew, and knew that was for him, which always made the indulgence feel even better. A moment later, Tony was back, standing in front of Steve with a wet cloth in one hand. He sighed and pulled an exaggerated pout.

“I could look at you like this all day, every day, and never grow tired of it, I think,” Tony murmured. “Mine,” he said, almost to himself, then started gently wiping the mess off Steve’s face. “You’ll not come again tonight,” Tony told him as he cleaned Steve’s chest. “Tomorrow, I think I should make good on keeping you in bed all day, what do you think, hmmm?” Tony asked idly, not seeming to expect an answer. “Not to rest, mind you. If you’re good, perhaps I’ll allow you to come when I’m done with you. Would you like that?”

Yes, Steve thought, though he simply let his head fall to Tony’s shoulder in answer. He felt a pleased laugh vibrate through Tony’s chest and nuzzled his mouth into the curve of Tony’s neck.

When Tony was done, he tossed the towel aside and got an arm under Steve’s and helped him up. Steve found his legs were surprisingly wobbly, though Tony seemed to have expected it. They found the bed and tumbled in together. He heard Tony grunt against his ear and rolled over, body boneless and liquid, stretched out as thin as glass like the heated maple sap they cooled in the snow back home.

“I like you like this. All soft and pliable and free of the cares that weigh you down,” Tony murmured, brushing a strand of hair off Steve’s face before pulling the coverlet over him. “I like you when you are glaring daggers at me, too, though,” he said with a pleasant puff of laughter. “There seems to be something of a commonality to this, I believe,” he hummed, then pressed a quick kiss to Steve’s shoulder.

Tony got up and undressed in a rush, then crawled back into bed and curled up next to Steve with a leg thrown over him, brushing his hands slowly up and down Steve’s arms and chest, not the tantalizing touches from this morning, but just contact. Presence. Steve had the sense of hovering, just slightly above the ground, which would have been terrifying, he decided, except Tony was right there, so close he was able to touch him. It would be impossible to float away, not with Tony so close, so it was safe. He was safe.

Slowly, the ground got closer and closer, until finally, his feet touched, and he was solid again. Tony was there, of course. Had Tony caught him? That wasn’t right, but he thought it might be true. Steve turned his head a bit and looked at Tony, his eyes half-lidded, face soft, a small, fond smile playing on his lips.

“How do you feel?” Tony asked, voice all husky with satisfaction that said he knew quite well how Steve felt.

“Good,” Steve rasped out, thick-tongued and jaw still aching. He worked it around a bit, feeling the pinch, and then swallowed, finding the sensation odd, as if he needed to relearn it to make it rote again, though it wasn’t unpleasant. Just a…reminder, and that was enough to set his cock to
throbbing again, and he realized he was still hard. Somehow, in all of that, his need to come had been pushed to the back of his mind or...left on the ground. He wasn’t sure how to explain it, and nothing made sense in his head, though by the way Tony was looking at him, he didn’t really need to explain anything.

“Even though it was punishment?” Tony asked. One of his hands splayed across Steve’s chest and he was drawing something with his finger. Steve thought it might be numbers, and found the idea strangely endearing.

“I—yes. Yes,” Steve replied with more certainty. He could feel his face heating on the admission.

“Do you understand better what I meant about punishment?” Tony questioned, raising his eyes to Steve’s. “I won’t tell you that there is never pain, but punishment, when properly administered, can bring you to pleasure in a different way.”

“What you did—” Steve began, breaking off and tipping his head back, blinking at the canopy overhead with its colorful swirls and whorls. “What you’re talking about. It isn’t what Zola meant, Tony. It isn’t.”

“Steve,” Tony sighed, curling closer to him and continuing to weave his hand through Steve’s hair. “You hail from a vastly different culture. You were captured and abused, and the idea that you suffered so pains me more than I can say. Then, you found yourself here, your first time sent to serve me with absolutely no training. Can you imagine how worried Zola was that you would do something that would reflect poorly on him? He was likely attempting to...impress upon you the seriousness of the occasion,” Tony suggested with a small shrug and dip of his brow. “Zola has ushered the finest concubines in the world into his harem since before I was born. It is not only where he derives his status and wealth, but it is his pride and reputation on the line, as well. He has long striven to curry favor with me having, let us say, somewhat less success than he sought. My father always enjoyed a variety of concubines, and I think Zola was a little spoiled with his own influence. He believes I am disappointed in his choices. Maybe I was,” Tony shrugged.

“They were...uninteresting. He did not know what he had with you. How special you are. The poor man was probably terrified you would displease me somehow and he would be called to answer for why he sent one such as you to me.”

“That’s...no, that’s—Tony, that’s not what it was. I mean, yes, he didn’t want me to displease you, but if I failed, he was going to—to punish me. Not like you—not like that. What you did. What you’re—what you’re talking about with the—with what you said. Hurt me. Sell me. I don’t know. But, he would have had Cam suffer my fate with me, and he’s just a boy. You can’t find that acceptable. I know you can’t,” Steve argued.

“An attendant’s fate always rises and falls with his or her concubine,” Tony replied. “Had you been ill suited to the harem, the boy would have had to serve with someone new, and generally that means as the lowest among that concubine’s attendants. Yes, it is an inglorious station, I am sure, but—”

Steve made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat and turned to face Tony in the bed.

“That’s not what Zola meant, Tony. I know you believe that to be true. I know you’ve heard that your whole life, but I also know that you don’t actually have any idea what goes on under Zola’s thumb, because if you did, you’d put a stop to it. I know you would. So—so I have to believe that you don’t know,” Steve ground out. “Zola wasn’t talking about sending Cam to clean someone else’s chamber pots or scuttle out the mice from the cellars. He was talking about hurting him. And me. If I did something, misbehaved, rebelled, I don’t know, but he didn’t mean pleasure or status or the kind of pain you—what you mean. He meant punishment. Torture.”
“There are, of course, certain laws that apply to all slaves,” Tony said, slowly, gaze flicking away from Steve for a moment. “Most are nothing for you to worry over. What would you steal, after all? I doubt you’d strike me, unless, of course I asked it of you,” Tony mused, pursing his lips as if in consideration.

“If you asked it of me? You mean…like if we were sparring?” Steve asked, frowning at Tony in confusion.

“Oh, God,” Tony half laughed, half groaned, though his smile was clearly amused. “I should not love your innocence as much as I do,” he said, reaching out his hand to stroke the side of Steve’s cheek, quick and light, though just that one touch was enough to send a flood of calming warmth down Steve’s spine to pool in his stomach. Tony’s hand settled on Steve’s chest again, making slow swirls in the line from the hollow of Steve’s throat down his breastbone. “Would you like that?” Tony asked, seeming to pause to consider the idea. “Sparring, I mean? I usually practice with Rhodey, but there is no reason you and I could not spend a few mornings in the gymnasium, if you wished it. Though, fair warning, I have practiced with the finest knights since I was a boy. Father’s insistence. Not that I would hurt you, of course. You have my word.”

“I—” Steve started, frowning again at the sudden shift in the conversation. “I would like that. Yes. I would like that very much.”

Tony’s brow arched speculatively. He sat up on one elbow and looked down at Steve with a harrumph that sounded intrigued. “You believe you will best me,” Tony observed.

“I know I will,” Steve replied, then grinned, catlike with confidence. Tony stared at him a long beat, then tossed his head back with a loud bark of laughter, surprised and clearly delighted.

“Interesting,” Tony mused, drawing out the word speculatively. “We shall see, my soldier. We shall see,” he smiled in obvious challenge for a moment before the smile dropped off his face. “I am not blind to how hard the transition must be for you,” Tony said, schooling his features carefully, though Steve could see the slight crease of his brow where he held the tension at bay. “Soldier to concubine. Free man to slave. An adult captive turned concubine is virtually unheard of, let alone one who ends up in the royal harem, for exactly this reason. This way of life, for you, I am sure, this must be…difficult to accept. But it is the way of life for most of the world. Has been for thousands of years, and is not likely to change, despite your enclave of Free States or whatever you call yourselves, you must realize this.”

“Just because it is the way it has been doesn’t make it right, Tony. I know you know that,” Steve said. A deep weariness washed over him.

“No. I suppose it doesn’t,” Tony acknowledged with a slight nod. “But, it does make it reality. And but for that reality, you, my soldier, would be in a watery grave, not here, with your every whim catered to,” Tony reminded him with a thread of challenge in his voice that made Steve want to shake him. “Many would trade places with you, gladly, you know.”

“Then let them,” Steve said bitterly and instantly regretted it when he saw Tony’s face go slack with pain at Steve’s words and then turn hard as stone. He was torn between wanting to pull away and bury himself against Tony, as if the mental war he was having could be writ into motion.

“Is it truly so very terrible here? Do you suffer so very much in your servitude?” Tony demanded, voice hard with bitterness and exasperation. “I would give you anyth—” he broke off and looked away, hands curling into fists, almost as if he were trying to hold on to something. When he looked back at Steve, his face was a shell, empty and brittle. “There are other laws,” Tony said, voice low and rough, face etched with something that in another situation, Steve would have called
grief. “Rules that must not be broken. Recalcitrance—true disobedience—will not be tolerated. Wielding a weapon is forbidden. Running away, of course…I am sure you know the punishment for that.”

Desolation and dread opened a pit in Steve’s stomach, churning slowly and sickeningly toward certainty. Tony knew Steve had asked Cam about it.

Wrong test, Steve.

It had been the wrong test, before, and this, this was the test Steve didn’t want to know the answer to, not really, because he’d known the answer before and only told himself he wasn’t sure because it was easier to accept how much he wanted this with Tony. He’d known, though. But, this test, this question, this certainty—he wanted to take it back, take it all back, but he couldn’t. It was loose now, flying away from him, and he couldn’t reel it back, no matter how much he wanted to.

“I would very much hope…I would hope not to be forced to face such a situation,” Tony continued, rolling onto his back and looking up at the canopy instead of at Steve as he spoke, though his shoulder lay against Steve’s, stiff with tension. “Every man in power has enemies who would use any sign of weakness against him, and a king moreso than others. I could not allow my position to be undermined by such a show of defiance. You must understand that. From anyone, Steve. I need you to…you must understand this. Tell me that you understand.”

“I know the laws,” Steve said flatly.

“Good,” Tony said after a long beat of silence, the word seeming to be scraped out of him. “Then we need not speak of this again.”

There are no secrets.

Only lies.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading along! You can find me on tumblr, twitter and dreamwidth as sabrecmc.

Quick note of interest to probably only me, but the bastion fort, or "star fort," design is actually a real thing and was an advancement from the traditional city wall fortification with the advent of more powerful weapons like cannons and gunpowder, so what Steve and Tony are discussing is a real leap forward for city defense. The fact that it is a star was too poetic to resist. I thought that was cool anyway.
“It is good that you look as you do, since you are so stupid,” Cam said as he tilted the pitcher of warm water up and poured it in a steady flow over Steve’s head. Steve couldn’t do more than puff air out through his nose as the water cascaded down, rinsing the soap from his hair and streaming into the tub where he sat. “Why would you deny him? He is the King. He is kind and generous and handsome. And he cares for you above all others. Everyone knows this. Everyone sees this. Except you. And now, he will find another, and we will be cast aside. Or sold. Or sent to the mines, where I will be covered in dirt and have a bird shit on my head. All because you cannot see how fortunate you are. Do you not remember what it was like when you were no one? Now, you are his, and have everything, but do you care? No. Because you are stupid.”

Steve shook the water droplets from his head and scrubbed his hands over his face, then took the small cloth Cam held out to him to blot the rest and wring out his hair, looking pointedly at the boy as he set the pitcher down.

To say that Cam was slightly annoyed with him was probably not quite capturing the extent of the boy’s displeasure, Steve thought grimly. Not that he could blame Cam, not really. Steve wasn’t unaware of how precarious their lives were, particularly this life, the one where they had their own servants at their beck and call, soft, warm beds and more food than either of them could eat. The one where they were favored and protected by Tony’s power, and not subject to the ordinary perils of their status. This life was built on little more than footholds of straw, perhaps even more than Cam realized.

“You don’t know what it is to be free. What it means,” Steve said as he curled his hands around the edge of the bath and leaned back. “He wants something…I don’t have it in me to give, Cam. I’m sorry.”

“You love an idea. But, ideas do not fill your belly, Raj’Inama,” Cam protested. “So, I could be free to be hungry anywhere in the world that I wished? I could be free to huddle in some dirt hut out on the steppes burning donkey dung because I have no wood? Free to scrape together what coin I can come by, working all day for the kind of merchant who cannot afford slaves? Why would I want this oh-so-wonderful freedom you speak about?” Cam demanded, tossing the sponge
into the water with enough force to send up a splash and giving Steve a petulant frown. It was not
their first conversation on the subject, Steve reminded himself with a sigh. The boy’s frustration
and fear had only grown since Steve returned to his room that morning, with rumors of the King’s
displeasure not far on his heels.

“There is no freedom for the likes of you and me. Only different kinds of bondage. But, you are
so stupid, you do not see!” Cam hissed through his teeth. “Can you not just tell him what he
wishes to hear? He will believe you. He wants to believe it, so he will! And things may go back
to the way they were.”

“It…it isn’t that simple,” Steve protested, though it sounded weak, even to his own ears.

Maybe it was that simple to Cam, who had never known or expected any different. It wasn’t as if
Steve didn’t understand what Cam meant. There were enough sleepless nights on an empty belly
in his memory to understand. Had he not watched his mother toil herself to an early grave, working
even when her skin stretched across her bones so thin that Steve wondered if it would simply tear
apart one day? There had been a time when Steve’s own, useless body had promised little more
than a life being a burden or a beggar, and what freedom, what choice, was there really in that? Not
much, save for the hope that it could be better, that he could make it better, somehow, and maybe
that was the only difference. But, God, what a difference, he thought. There is power in that sliver
of hope, that thread that dangles before a man and asks him to reach. Maybe no choice is truly
free, not in a world made by men, but that makes the choices you do have all the more precious.
Worth fighting for.

Not that any of that fine philosophizing would matter if he could not make it back home. And
Steve knew to do that, his chances were far greater outside the city, where he could disappear into
the mountains, and Tony…Tony could tell anyone curious whatever tale suited him, Steve told
himself with a pang of something bright blooming in the center of his chest. An accident, perhaps.
That was plausible. Some terrible fate that befell his concubine. People would nod and
understand. These things happened. No one would question it, or if they did, they would hold their
tongues. Tony could save face. Tony could—Tony could move on. Forget about Steve. Find
someone else, someone who would…cherish Tony. Appreciate him. Someone who would love
him, even, deeply and without reservation, the way Tony deserved. Steve wanted that for Tony.
He did.

He did.

He just didn’t know why, when he tried to think about it—his plan, going back, leaving Tony to
someone else—there was just this deep, gray maw of nothing swirling in his mind that made his
stomach go cold and his throat tighten to the point it hurt to swallow. So, he just…didn’t think of
it. Escape. That was the mission. The rest…the happiness, the joy, the relief at being back home,
that would come once all this was behind him and he was home, where he belonged.

Bucky would have told him that home isn’t a place. ‘Someone asks me where I’m from, I tell
them. Little green patch near a bunch of streams that pour into the sea. Water all around us. So
many streams and brooks. A land full of them, in fact. That’s how it got its name. Brookland.
Someone asks me where my home is, I point at Nat. You. Hell, even Sam, some days, when he
isn’t being a horse’s ass about things,’ that’s what Bucky would have said, though Bucky, in truth,
ever actually spoke like that. He would have meant it, though, Steve was sure of it.

“Not that simple? You are that simple,” Cam shot back, drawing Steve from his reverie. “Ugh,
you—you think life should be fair, but it isn’t. It never will be. You want something that cannot
be, Raj’Inama. He is the King, and you, me, all of this, everything you see, all that you eat, all of
it, belongs to him. He asks nothing save that you care for him, which you do! You do, I know you do! And yet you—you refuse to just—ugh! Why must you make everything so difficult?"

With that, Cam tossed the towel he had been holding in his lap down next to the bath and stalked off to fall dramatically onto the bed, arms thrown akimbo, still muttering. No doubt about Steve’s stupidity, Steve admitted to himself with a small amount of fond exasperation. He pushed himself out of the bath, stood there dripping for a moment, then stepped out and reached for the towel, drying off as best he could. Wrapping a robe around himself, he walked towards the bed, where Cam flipped on his stomach, fisted his hands under his chin and peered out across the balcony. A few, hopeful birds gathered on the edge of the balcony wall waiting for one of Cam’s handouts to appear. Across the sea, the sun was a bright pink fireball slipping into the dark depths below.

Steve couldn’t quite bring himself to blame Cam for the boy’s increasing despondency. Ever since the morning Steve left Tony still sleeping in his chambers after a fitful, sleepless night of listening to loud bangs and low curses from Tony’s workshop, followed by an even louder silence, they had both grown more and more ill at ease. As the days dragged into weeks, something a lot like panic started to edge Cam’s words, all of his usual ebullience slowly drained into a wash of uncertainty, hurt and fear that was like an outward mirror of the turmoil that wound its way through Steve’s stomach whenever he thought of that night.

His words, his thoughts, his feelings, these were the only weapons left to him at the moment, and Steve knew that he had wielded them to hurt Tony. Because he was angry, because he wanted Tony to taste a little of the powerlessness that crawled over him like a second skin, burrowed down into him until giving up seemed like a choice he wanted to make instead of something that only happened when there was no choice at all.

Steve sighed and glanced over at the table, where the stack of ledgers he hadn’t had the heart to sift through sat by a vase filled with white lilies gleamed under the dotted shadows of a hanging oil lamp. Every day, without fail, they appeared, the lilies. He walked over and took one of the velvety petals between his fingers.

*I will give you one each day, and perhaps you shall know my regard for you as well as my people do.*

“Has he sent for another?” Steve asked, not for the first time, though it stung anew on each asking, sending a sharp, cold stab of pain twist through his gut.

“No,” Cam said, tracing a single finger over one of the swirls of golden thread that danced across the bedding. “Not yet,” he added, with a sly look at Steve. “You should go to him. Tell him you have missed him. Tell him you are sorry. Tell him you wish to be only his. He will forgive you, you know he will. And then you will make him happy again, and all will be as it was. You will see.”

“What have you heard?” Steve heard himself ask, again, not for the first time.

“That his bed is rarely slept in. That his plates go back to the kitchen full. That he works all night and spends the day closeted in his Council chambers with General Rhodes and his other advisors, and that they leave in foul moods with more work to be done in less time,” Cam reported.

“Lord Stane?” Steve asked, trying to keep his hands from balling into fists. How galling it had been to learn that Tony’s dear ‘Obie’ was, in fact, Lord Obadiah Stane, the King’s own Lord Chamberlain, who not only ran most of the Royal departments, but carried with him the power to give and revoke audiences with the King, something nearly invaluable to the Lords and Ladies who wanted so badly to earn the King’s favor. It was an immensely powerful position, Steve
knew, and given the close relationship he apparently enjoyed with Tony, one that probably made him feel all but invulnerable. Able to do whatever he wanted without fear of repercussion, Steve thought, glancing over at Cam.

“Yes,” Cam said, not looking at him. “The Lord Chamberlain attends the King regularly, same as the rest of his Council.”

“He did not know, Cam. He would never allow you to be harmed,” Steve assured the boy. Tony could not have known. Steve refused to believe it. Tony had assumed Cam was Steve’s attendant from the beginning. Tony would never countenance such a thing as Stane’s perversion. Even for someone he held in such high regard. He wouldn’t. Steve had to believe that, even as some traitorous voice in the back of his mind kept demanding to know how such a thing could have gone unnoted for so long. And yet, had Hydra not grown right under Fury’s ever-watchful eye? Had not Steve himself spilled blood alongside several of Schmidt’s own?

“What else have you heard of the King?” Steve pressed, trying to turn his mind from the matter of Tony and Stane.

“The King barely attends Court these past weeks, and when he does, one must speak as if each word is as delicate as an eggshell,” Cam added.

“I think you exaggerate,” Steve said, mouth twisting into a grimace.

“I would never make things up just so you would stop being stupid,” Cam protested, side-eyeing Steve from his place on the bed. “He misses you. He would welcome you back to his bed, you know this.”

“He has not sent for me,” Steve pointed out.

“As if he would, after what you said? He is the King. His pride will not allow him to send for you, Raj’Inama, not this time. You must know this,” Cam said, flopping over onto his back on the bed and waving his arms in the air as he admonished Steve. “He wishes for you to want him, and you do! That is why you are so stupid. Because he wants you to want him, and you want him, and yet, here you are and there he is! You are both as difficult as a mountain to move! But, he is a king, and so it is his right to be so. You must go to him, make your apologies, take him to bed and make him forget why he was ever angered,” Cam finished with a firm nod.

Steve sighed again and raked a hand through his wet hair. The boy wasn’t wrong, Steve knew. This…distance between him and Tony wasn’t sustainable if Steve had any hope of getting out of the city, Steve told himself. That was the easier story to tell himself for why he so desperately wanted to seek Tony out, to explain, to soothe, to—he didn’t know. The idea of Tony in pain, hurting because of Steve’s words, even if they carried truth, it didn’t sit well with him. His own nights were fitful, plagued by lack of sleep, long stretches of aching need without release and dreams of cold hands pulling at him, covering his mouth until he woke up choking on air and reaching for a warmth next to him that was no longer there.

He had thought…well, admittedly, he had not given his words to Tony that much thought and had let his frustration speak for him, but if he had thought about it, he would not have imagined Tony pushing him away like this. Though, he supposed, given their interactions so far, he should have anticipated it. The more days passed, the more Steve’s mind conjured all kinds of worries and obstacles. Soon, too much time would have gone by and whatever it was that had kindled between them would fade, and who knew what Steve or Cam’s fate would be then? Clinging to being in the right had gotten him exactly nowhere, but Tony had listened when Steve spoke of Zola and his threats, even if he had believed Steve mistaken, Steve reminded himself.
Tony did not see that he had become part of a story that had to be told lest the whole thing founder with rot, but he was not unkind or heartless, just...blinded, Steve thought. Maybe they all were, a little. Cam was right, in a way, after all. Steve couldn’t deny that. Freedom was an idea that demanded far more sacrifice from those who needed it most, and it could be wielded as a bludgeon by those who would exploit it as much as any ideal. He had seen that himself, even in the Free States, where the want of wealth and resources could hold people in thrall as truly as shackles or collars.

Still, Tony listened, even if it wasn’t what he wanted to hear, even if he denied it or rationalized it, he listened, and that was something. Something Zola and his ilk feared, Steve knew. Zola and this Lord Stane and whoever else was pulling at the threads around here, they never wanted Steve to mean anything to Tony. They never wanted him to be more than a passing distraction, turning Tony’s attention from whatever it was they didn’t want him to see. And here Steve was, giving those forces exactly what they hoped. He knew what he would say to Tony. It was the truth, as hard as it may be for Tony to hear, but it was a truth that Steve knew served his own purposes, too, and he couldn’t help but wonder if it could really be both a truth and a manipulation.

His best chance of escape came with getting out of the city on Tony’s caravan to the desert, where a path to the sea and ships that sail it ran through the Red Mountains they would pass and a legion of guards didn’t stand between Steve and whatever it was that freedom meant. He knew that. And that meant he needed to stay by Tony’s side and in his good graces, but he could not deny that a part of him, perhaps a very large part, wanted to be with Tony for reasons he couldn’t quite name, but had little resemblance to strategy. Nor could he deny that the reason he had resisted seeking Tony out sooner was more his own fear of why he was doing it than any true fear of what might come to pass if he did.

He shouldn’t want this. He shouldn’t want to be with Tony. Had he not told Tony to find someone else? And that was the right thing to want, he was sure of it. It must be. Wanting this, wanting Tony, were those not the same? But the thought of that happening hurt more than he could say, and he had no idea how to reconcile those things. So, he had waited, hoping that the choice would be taken from his hands, he supposed.

Tony would listen to him, surely. Tony would believe him. Even if it wasn’t what Tony wanted to hear, even if it would hurt him, as Steve suspected it would. It was a risk, certainly, Steve knew that much. It would be easier to simply offer himself to Tony in supplication and hope Tony’s desire for him was enough to sustain whatever this was long enough to gain a place at Tony’s side when he did take his desert journey. Steve couldn’t do that, though. It wasn’t sustainable. He knew that much about himself. He had to know if he was truly right about the kind of man Tony was or if he was weaving little more than a fanciful story so as to keep from hating himself.

“You are right,” Steve said finally, turning from the vase of lilies to glance at Cam where he lounged on the bed. “Fine. I will go to him.” Cam’s head snapped around to Steve and a smile broke across the boy’s face.

“Truly?” Cam asked, sitting up. “You are not jesting with me?”

“No jests,” Steve assured him. “I’ll need…” he gestured lamely towards the closet where garments of all kinds and colors beckoned. “Whatever you think he will like.” Cam let out some kind of high-pitched squeal and scooted off the bed, heading for the closet like his heels were on fire.

“I will make you beautiful for him. You will see. He will not care that you are stupid,” Cam said, tossing the last over his shoulder with a sly grin. “Something simple. So that he can see you and
will want you. It will be better if you do not talk that much, I think.”

Steve shook his head and doffed the robe, tossing it onto the bed. His hair was still damp, but knowing Cam, he didn’t imagine that was where Tony would be looking.

“Here,” Cam said, walking out of the closet with his arms extended in front of him, a cascading waterfall of diamonds hanging from his fingers with a large, teardrop-shaped jewel suspended in the middle. “This, and this, I think,” Cam said, holding out the necklace and a simple, white silk wrap embroidered with silver beads.

Steve allowed Cam to affix the necklace around his throat, just below where the ruby collar sat. The wrap went low on his hips, knotted in front where the folds hung slightly lower, just enough to cover him, though just barely, Steve noted, catching Cam’s pleased look at his handiwork. He was half-hard as it was, just from the thought of seeing Tony again. He had been good. He didn’t know why that mattered, or if it still did, but it wasn’t his own touch that he craved. It was Tony’s hands he wanted on him, in him, opening him up. A shudder went down his spine, pooling heat in his groin. He wanted Tony. That was both the simplest and most difficult part of all of this. Tony wanted him, too, though Steve wasn’t quite sure he understood exactly why.

Steve turned to study his reflection in the looking glass, wondering, for a moment, what Tony saw when he looked at him. He was far from the sickly youth he had once been, though perhaps not as different in his own mind’s eye than in the gaze of others. He had been told too many times that his look was pleasing to completely deny it, but there were more beautiful concubines at Tony’s beck and call than him. More exotic and talented and certainly more suited to this, to be sure. Yet, Tony apparently rarely indulged, to hear Zola tell it. At least until now. He was different, is all, Steve told himself. Different from what Tony was used to. Something new and unusual to catch the King’s fancy, though the words hung hollow in his chest. The fascination would dim soon, certainly. Tony would likely barely miss him when he was gone. Perhaps he would not even search. That would be better, of course. It would be better if he did not care to bother to look.

Steve swallowed thickly, sliding his finger under the collar for a moment when it seemed to tighten around his throat. He glanced at Cam, where the boy stood at his shoulder, his smile reflected in the glass.

“He may not even be in his chambers,” Steve offered.

“He will be,” Cam assured him. “He spends his nights in his workshop, I told you. Rattling the servants’ ears for more of that brew he drinks,” Cam added, making the same face of disgust he’d made when Tony allowed him a sip of the bitter concoction. “Or wine. Always more wine,” Cam said with a slight frown. “It is not good for him. Too much of it. My mother said it hollows out men’s insides a little at a time until there is a big hole there, and a shadow spirit might see the space and think, this is a good place for me to stay, and so it will enter the man when he sleeps and live there, as long as there is space.”

It wasn’t just Steve who had missed Tony, Steve realized with a jolt. Cam, for all his talk about their status and the largesse that Tony provided, missed the King’s company almost as much as Steve did, he thought.

“My mother said something like that, too,” Steve replied, though his own mother had been far more blunt about the matter.

“That is what happened to my father,” Cam told him, shifting his foot along the design woven into the rug. “He was a kind master, and then,” Cam shrugged. “We were sold. And he could buy more drink.”
“I’m sorry,” Steve said after a long moment.

“It’s okay,” Cam said. “I think…maybe he wasn’t so kind, anyway.”

Sometimes, Steve thought Cam saw things perfectly clearly when he wanted to, but what child could stand to truly look at all of this for any length of time?

“Nor was my father,” Steve admitted. Cam caught his gaze in the glass, then looked away, biting his lip.

“The King will be happy to see you,” Cam said. “Even if he does not seem so at first. You must just…tell him you want him. That you wish to be with him. That you did not understand the way of things, and did not mean to offend him. He will forgive you.”

“You seem pretty certain of that,” Steve observed.

“People are always quick to believe what they want to believe,” Cam replied, looking away again, a hint of sadness clinging to his voice. “I want to believe you will be happy here, and that you will make the King happy, and that I shall serve you well, and that one day, the King will say, ‘Cam, you have served my concubine well, and for this, I will give you a reward,’ and I will say, ‘Your Highness, my mother is a hard worker, and she makes the best potato hash you have ever tasted. For my reward, I would ask that you bring her here, and let her serve you for all her days.’ And he would. This is what I want to believe. So, I will,” Cam said, lifting his eyes to Steve’s.

Ideas. Reality. Freedom. Who was right. Who was wrong. Accusations. Arguments. Barbed words meant to do damage when he had no other way to inflict it. He truly wondered sometimes, why everything had to be a fight to be won, no matter who got hurt.

Yeah, that’s a real tough nut to crack, Rogers. Going to have to think on that some, Steve mentally admonished himself.

“We will get your mother here, Cam. I promise,” Steve told him, though he had no idea how to even begin to accomplish such a thing.

“I believe you,” Cam said with a small, sad smile. “See? Easy. Now. You are ready, yes?”

Steve nodded, and reached out to rough the boy’s hair, giving him a slight shake that ended with Cam darting out of reach with a laugh. “Remember,” Cam called out. “When in doubt, do not speak! You are prettier when you are quiet,” Cam teased, parroting Tony’s voice as best he could.

The familiar walk to Tony’s chambers was largely barren, save for the guards outside his door and a servant hurrying through one of the compound’s corridors with a stack of precariously-balanced trays in his hands, who jumped aside and bowed his head so as to lower his eyes as Steve passed. When Steve reached the doors to Tony’s rooms, he hesitated, stomach clenching with nerves that he quickly pushed away.

He could do this. Whatever this night would bring, at least it would be better than sitting in his room, wondering if Tony was thinking of him, if Tony even cared anymore that Steve was not around or had already moved on, and Zola would be on the other side of the door with whatever waited for Steve once Tony decided he was done with him.

He knocked. The taller of the two guards opened the door, frowning deeply at Steve from under bushy brows peppered with flecks of gray.

“His Highness is not to be disturbed,” the guard announced and started to shut the door.
“Wait! Wait, I—” Steve started, reaching out a hand to stop the door from closing in his face.

“No one is to have entry, save General Rhodes and Ms. Potts. Not even you,” the guard reiterated. “He was quite specific.”

“Please. Please,” Steve entreated. “I need to see him. I think…maybe he needs to see me, too. I know you are only doing what you believe to be your duty to your King, but I know that you are not blind to him. Tell me that you have no concerns, that he is happy and well, and I will return to my chamber until he calls for me.”

“We are to follow orders. It is not our place to judge the King,” the smaller of the guards said, though his voice was low and stiff. “Nor is it yours, Raj’Inama,” he finished pointedly, though the two guards exchanged displeased looks.

“I am not judging him. I want to…help,” Steve finished, feeling the air go out of his chest at their looks.

“You have done more than enough, I think,” the taller of the two said with a slight snort of disapproval.

“If you believe what troubles him to be of my doing, then am I not the one who can fix it?” Steve asked. “You know he will not send for me,” Steve pressed, the words stinging even as they were pulled from him, making his throat tighten as he tried to swallow. “He will not do it, you know he won’t. Is he better now than he was the night I left? Is he happier? Does he sleep and eat better as the days have worn on?”

The taller guard pursed his lips and glanced down at his compatriot, who pulled a disgruntled face. “Peran, don’t, it could mean our heads to disobey the King’s order,” the smaller one whispered through his teeth.

“The King is not like that,” the taller one said. He looked at Steve and let out a long puff of air through his nose. “You do not know him as I do. He is not his father, God give his soul peace. Truth is, I’ve not seen him thusly since he was a young man, barely of age and even then…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “This one,” he said, pointing a gauntleted finger at Steve, “has him in more knots than a witch’s nose hairs, and he isn’t getting better. He is miserable, you know this,” the taller one urged. “You,” he continued, pointing his finger between Steve’s eyes, “Will fix this. Now.”

“I will,” Steve promised.

“You’d better,” the guard said. “Fancy collar or no,” the tall guard told him, reaching out and placing a hand on Steve’s chest as he started to enter. “He is our King, and that comes with an Oath I hold dearer than mine own children, but I have known him since he was a lad brandishing a wooden sword and vanquishing the suits of armor up and down these halls. He is also a good man, with a good heart, though few are as careful with it as they should be. Mind that you do not treat it with such disdain again.”

“Peran, you can’t just—” the smaller one started.

“He keeps his sketchbook, Josiah. Looks through it when he has had too much of the plum wine. You’ve seen him. He cannot continue as he is, you know that. One way or the other, he needs…whatever this will be. Maybe it is to be done with you once and for all,” the taller one—Peran—said, eyes narrowing on Steve, before he shrugged and looked down at the other guard. “Or maybe it isn’t. Not for me to say. But, this one is here, and this is where the King wants him, whether he
gives him leave or not. The other one,” Peran spat out, looking back at Steve, “he only came back when he wanted something. What do you want, King’s Prize?”

“To be with him,” Steve replied evenly. It was true. Perhaps it held too much truth, but it slipped easily from his tongue, and whatever it was the old guard heard, it seemed to satisfying him.

“Go then. He is in his workshop, as he always is these days,” the one called Peran said. Steve nodded once, slowly, and the guard’s hand dropped away. Steve gave them each a last, lingering look, then passed between them. He wove his way through the vestibule and into Tony’s bedchamber, resolutely not looking at the bed.

He could hear the sounds of metal clanging, and the rush of air that he knew was the forge’s large bellows. A muttered curse, and something in a low tone that Steve couldn’t quite parse, though he knew Tony was sometimes wont to speak to the parts of his forge as if they could hear him. Steve felt a smile curve his lips, the first in a long time, and though his steps slowed, something in his chest lightened, lifted and was gone. He had missed this. Tony. The swirl of energy around him. The constant sense of being slightly off-balance, as if caught mid-fall. The hum of activity. The feeling that something, some happening, some incredible possibility that shouldn’t find footing was imminent, though he could never quite name what it was.

Shadows danced across the floor where the firelight spilled out of the workroom. Torches glowed along the walls and candles dripped in the chandelier that hung above, but the large glow came from the fireplace, where Tony stood in a soot-stained tunic with the sleeves cut off nearly to his shoulders and dark breeches, stoking a flat piece of metal in the flames.

Until then, Steve had believed he understood how much he had missed Tony, but seeing him again, the air left Steve’s chest in a rush, and he felt almost dizzy with relief, as if he had spun round and round in MacGregor’s field until he fell down in a heap while Bucky laughed and told him he looked like Old Duncan, who made drink from the sap that dripped from the pines and stumbled through town trying to trade acorns and mushrooms he’d gathered when he got hungry enough. He and Bucky had tried them, once, trading the few turnips and potatoes Steve had on him that day for the mushrooms, a sip of the concoction and Old Duncan’s promise that they would feel like they were flying. They had ended up with stomach cramps for their troubles, and Steve had gotten his ears boxed by his mom and a good talking to, but he still remembered the thrill of that first bite, closing his eyes and expecting something amazing to happen. That, finally, they would have something that was on the other side of hunger and work and another day of the same.

This felt a little like that, he realized, stepping into Tony’s workshop. Like if he closed his eyes now and opened them again in a moment, everything could be different, even just for a short time. Even if it all went back to what it was when this was over. He could have this moment, this time, when his life was something else. No battles. No wars. No death. No wondering if today would be the last sunrise or if he would have to do it again tomorrow. Or what he would do if he couldn’t do it tomorrow.

He stopped at the workshop’s threshold and watched Tony pull the fire-bright metal out of the forge, pick up a flat-faced mallet and hammer it until sparks flew. When he was satisfied, he dropped it into a bucket of cool water, sending a cloud of steam into the air. Something stirred in Steve’s chest, reaching, trying to claw its way out. He hadn’t quite realized until this moment just how much he had missed Tony. The deep aching wound inside, that part of him that he kept trying to weave together with hands covered in blood, it was less in here, somehow. Easier. Lighter. A few moments ago, he would have sworn it was because in here, he didn’t have to think, didn’t have to be himself, could let go, but it didn’t feel like letting go, seeing Tony there. It didn’t feel like less of himself. He hadn’t felt this alive since he watched Bucky fall. Maybe before that. He
couldn’t remember, not for certain, except that each breath in here wasn’t a burden, and that was saying something.

“Tony,” Steve said. It was loud. Louder than he’d meant. Whip-cracking through the room and snapping Tony’s head around to where Steve stood. Tony stared at him a long moment, gaze roving up and down over Steve’s form. Steve felt his face warm. He could never hide that reaction, much as he hated it. Now, he wasn’t sure he wanted to. Tony liked it, and that was… pleasing in some way Steve couldn’t define.

He resisted the urge to shift on his feet and held still, waiting. Tony’s jaw worked, like he was trying to hold back whatever he might want to say. Steve could see the line of his shoulders tense as his hands curled into fists, and he huffed, a low, bitter sound. He rubbed his arm across his face and looked away, then back at Steve with a shake of his head. Whatever wisp-thin hope Steve might have had that this would go well and simply faded in an instant.

Tony was not going to make this easy. On either of them. Perhaps it was better that way, Steve thought, bracing his back a bit straighter and squaring his shoulders, body suddenly thrumming with a jittery energy. They were not so very different, the two of them. Neither could trust something that wasn’t hard won.

“Get out,” Tony said flatly, then stalked over to his worktable and slammed the hammer down, making the items on the table jump and roll.

“Tony,” Steve repeated. “Please. I want to—”

“You want. Huh. You want. What is it that you want? Hmmm?” Tony cut in sharply. He leaned his hands on the table, splaying his fingers and rocked forward, closing his eyes for a moment before turning his head to look at Steve. “Tell me. What do you want that I have not already given you? That is why you are here, is it not? Finally figured it out, did you? Well. Out with it. What is it? What is it that you want so very badly that you come here like this? Speak it. This thing that you want,” Tony sneered, nearly vibrating with the effort to keep his anger contained.

There was venom in his voice in a way that Steve had never heard, so much that he felt his back bristle against it. Tony turned away, shook his head and let it drop between his shoulders, slumping a little as he did. His eyes were closed, Steve could see, brow drawn together as his throat worked, fighting some kind of battle for control. Steve wasn’t sure if he wanted Tony to win it or not. Maybe one of them needed to lose control. Maybe that was inevitable.

“I missed you,” Steve replied, surprising himself a bit with how rough and thick with emotion his voice sounded. He had. So much. He saw Tony’s expression spasm, as if he had been slapped, though the mask of anger fell into place too quickly, barricading the hurt away. Whatever shame Steve felt in admitting it had left him when he faced Tony’s pain. They were hurting each other,
and neither of them wanted to do that, but it was as if they could not stop themselves, caught in some spiral with the ground rushing up at them, seeing it, but unable to move from the path they were on.

“Fine. Go get in bed and spread yourself for me. You may show me how much you missed me,” Tony mocked in a harsh, brittle voice. Steve drew back, dropped his eyes and sucked in a breath. It hurt. The dismissal. The cavalier manner of it. The way it made Steve feel less real in some way, just a thing to be used. Even with the truth behind it, it hurt. Perhaps more so because there was truth behind it, and Steve knew it. They both knew it. And yet…not since the beginning had Tony truly treated him as anything less than someone to be cared for like some priceless gift.

Whatever the reason, it hurt to hear those words fall from Tony’s lips. He wasn’t even sure who the pain was for, himself, at what he was seeking by coming here tonight instead of making a break for the wall or hurling himself off some nearby tower, or Tony, for being willing to get so little in return for all that he was willing to give.

“That’s not why I’m here,” Steve replied, then realized he was using his Captain’s voice, the one that barked orders and expected to be obeyed, and how ridiculous that sounded given how he was dressed. Tony laughed, hard and brutal and not a laugh at all, making Steve wince at the discordant sound of it, like a note plucked wrong on some player’s lyre.

“Really?” Tony asked, giving Steve a caustic, pointed look that burned along Steve’s skin.

Steve swallowed, or tried to. His throat was dry. He looked down, feeling every bit the fool in the finery Cam had chosen. His stomach twisted and recoiled with embarrassment. How had he misread this so badly? This was supposed to—what? Soften Tony to him? Distract him? That sounded like a familiar tactic, Steve thought with a grimace. Everyone believes this is what Tony wants—the decadence, the indulgence, the hedonistic pleasures that go only skin deep—but it isn’t, not really, he wants…me, Steve thought, but quickly pushed it away for the folly it was. Steve didn’t know, but it wasn’t this. He couldn’t exactly change now, though, and had little choice but to push ahead with it.

“I know what it looks like. I just, I wanted—” Steve stammered. “I wanted to be beautiful for you, he thought, though it seemed the height of stupidity to say out loud, so he held his tongue. I wanted you to want me, but not like that. Not with rage and pain. Not to prove a point. Not because you can, and it doesn’t matter. I wanted you to want me the way you always do, when I feel like you would give me the stars if I should ask it of you.

“You wanted something. And here you are,” Tony said with a snort, spreading his hands wide before crossing them across his chest. “Do tell. How may the King be of service to his concubine today?”


“I believe you were perfectly clear,” Tony replied, pushing himself off the worktable and finding his chair. He plucked his goblet up, took a long drink, then leaned back and regarded Steve from over the rim, waving it in the air in front of his face with a disingenuous smile. “But, by all means. As you stand there in adornments I have given you, enlighten me all the more about how eager you are for someone to take your place after I have played the fool for the whole Court and city to see. Please. Go ahead,” he continued, lifting the goblet in a mock salute. “Believe me, you have my full attention.”
Steve’s teeth ground together, but the jarring clack did have the benefit of biting back the retort that sprang to his lips. He looked over at Tony, reclining in his chair with an air of disinterest that was belied by the tight grip he had on his goblet and the way his other hand curled around the arm of the chair so forcefully that Steve could see the whites of his knuckles. Tony was not as indifferent as he wanted to seem. Nor did Steve truly have his full attention, he realized, not when there was so much anger and pain clouding Tony’s mind. He could, though. Have Tony’s full attention.

Steve walked across the workshop floor and sank down to his knees in front of where Tony sat in his chair. He looked up. Tony was watching him, eyes wide and dark, gaze still hard, but confusion filtered across his expression before he masked it. Steve waited. Tony looked away, across the workroom to the fire in the forge, staring at the flames for a long moment, as if searching for guidance there. When he looked back at Steve, something in his face had softened, ever so slightly, though his eyes remained hooded and his mouth tight.

“You have my full attention,” Tony repeated, though this time, the bitter mockery was gone and something like wry admiration remained in its stead.

“I did not want this life,” Steve began, voice cracking a bit on the last. He dropped his eyes for a moment, then raised his gaze back to Tony’s face. A plea, maybe. He wasn’t sure.

“You have made that abundantly clear,” Tony replied, raising his eyebrows.

“Everything here is so different,” Steve continued, ignoring the jibe. “I went in the water. I never meant to come out. That was my end. I’d done what I needed to do, and…it was over. I could put it down. I could rest,” Steve grimaced, shuddering at the phantom coldness that enveloped him like a caress. “I woke up in the hold of a ship, on a death tide to this place I didn’t know, told that I was nothing, that I didn’t matter, except for what price I might bring. Then there was Rumlow, and—I knew I couldn’t do this. It wasn’t in me to live this kind of life, even if that meant death. I didn’t care. Maybe a part of me even wanted to chase that end,” Steve said, shaking his head.

He saw Tony’s jaw work, chewing on the words like he wanted to spit them out, and his gaze flicked away for a moment before settling back on Steve.

“Then,” Steve continued, “I was sold to Zola. Sent here. I didn’t know you or understand…well, any of it, really. I thought I would hate everything here. And I did. It was exactly what I thought it would be. I was told I would be sent to you, and you seemed to be the only one here who Zola feared. What kind of man strikes fear in the heart of someone such as Zola, I wondered. Then, I met you. And you were not anything like I thought you would be.”

“Glad to have exceeded your extremely low expectations, I suppose,” Tony offered with a sardonic twist of his mouth.

“Tony…I’m trying to—” Steve broke off, brow furrowing in frustration. “You weren’t what I was expecting. At all. And I haven’t known what to feel about that since that first night. I didn’t want to like you. I didn’t want to like any part of being here. This was supposed to be—if it was terrible, if you were terrible, then it made sense, and I could hate this. Hate you. In so many ways, that would be easier. But, you weren’t terrible. You weren’t cruel or heartless or any of those things,” Steve said. It was true, all of it, and he could see the minute loosening of tension around Tony’s mouth. Tony could hear the truth in Steve’s words, Steve knew he could. It was true, but it wasn’t truth, not really, and Steve felt that distinction more keenly now than perhaps any other time.

There are no secrets. Only lies.
“So, am I to be heartened that you did not find me to be this abomination you imagined?” Tony asked. “You judge easily for someone who knows little of me.”

“I know that you are a good man. A good king. You care for your realm and your people, likely far more than they credit you for. You work harder than almost anyone I have ever met. You are brilliant, but you know that,” Steve said with a small smile that Tony almost returned before he caught himself. “Some may call it ego, but it isn’t, not really. If you had a sword in your hand, people would call it bravery or confidence, but it is your mind you wield best, and that is something they can’t achieve no matter how hard they studied, and so it is smugness that they see. But, the truth is, you like learning. You like being challenged. You like being pushed.”

“You flatter me. Finally. Cam would be proud,” Tony snorted. “Keep going. I like it, as any member of my Court can attest. Little pleases me more than hearing a listing of my more admirable qualities by someone who is about to ask me for something. Or we can just be done with this mummer’s farce and skip to the part where you tell me what you want. Put that mouth to better use than fine words,” Tony suggested, taking another drink.

“You are kind,” Steve said, plunging on as if his mind didn’t conjure up just the image Tony put into it. If he didn’t say this now, the moment would be gone, and they would have nothing but what they could find when everything except feeling was stripped away.

“If I were a kind man, as you say, I would not be thinking the things I think of doing to you. Do you want to know what they are?” Tony questioned lightly. “They are not kind, I can assure you.”

“You are kind,” Steve gritted out with a flash of annoyance. Tony grinned, a savage, feral thing. “Perhaps kinder than you allow yourself to be, I think, because you worry people will see that as a weakness,” Steve said. “Or maybe people have already used that, and so you keep it close to you, and keep people too far away to really see it, and trade generosity for affection.”

“It has worked well for me up until tonight, I must admit,” Tony mused, taking another drink. “Go on, go on, do not let me give you pause,” he said with a wave of his hand. “This is truly delightful. Let me hear all about how you hold me in such high regard that you wish for someone else to take your place.”

“I didn’t want to like you,” Steve said again. “But, I did. You made me laugh. You made me think. You made me remember what it was like to—to be someone I haven’t been in a long time. I didn’t know what to do with that. I wasn’t supposed to want to be with you. You were supposed to be this—this monster, and I would get through it, for Cam, I suppose, and then, eventually, I wouldn’t get through it, and this would all stop. The ocean was supposed to take me, you see. I wasn’t supposed to be the one who lived. What was the point? I had nothing to return to, no one waiting on me, no life ahead to live, just the next fight. And then the next. So, this? All of this? It didn’t matter. Not really. None of this was supposed to matter. You weren’t supposed to matter. But, you did. You do.”

“Steve,” Tony said, brow furrowing into a frown. His expression flickered with something almost desolate, it was so barren of any emotion Steve could identify. He opened his mouth, closed it, then shook his head and tightened his mouth into a thin line. He cleared his throat, drank again and leaned back in his chair. “If you hold me in such regard, tell me, why is it that you would risk everything to be away from me? Hmmm? Do you honestly think word does not reach my ears when the King’s own concubine asks questions that should need not be asked? Well?” he demanded, wagging the goblet between his fingers like a pendulum keeping time as the beats of silence ticked off. “Speak. My patience grows thin.”

“I care for you, Tony,” Steve said carefully. It didn’t feel like a lie. He wondered if he would
recognize one now. “I like you. More than I ever imagined that I would, but you want me to look past everything else and see only this,” Steve said, holding up the diamond pendant that dangled from his neck. “You. Not this—these things,” he continued, pulling a face of disgust. “But, this, with you, it is not forever. This was only meant to be for a night, and I know you care, I do, but one day, it will end, and what then? I will be sent to someone else, someone who—who will not be as you are. Or worse. I can’t do that. I won’t. And what of Cam, then, what about--”

“Whoa, wait, wait,” Tony interrupted, holding up his hand in a stop motion as his eyes went wide. “This? This is what has been preying on your mind?” Tony demanded, his voice high with something that might have been relief. He let his hand fall down against his thighs with a loud clap that reverberated through Steve’s chest. “That I will—will,” he sputtered, as if searching for the word, “What? Tire of you and you will end up in some—God, does Cam still go on about the mines and the birds? I really must take him on a tour or something. Our mines are very modernized, you know, with proper ventilation and the latest—why am I saying this?” he shook his head and looked askance at Steve. “You truly believe I would ever allow—” he stopped abruptly, mouth pursing in frustration as he tapped a finger to his goblet. “I must remind myself that you know nothing of our ways, and all of this is foreign to you,” he sighed. “Steve, you are a Royal concubine, a position that very few ever hold, and not only that, but you are—you are placed above all others. Sold to others? You would never be…that would not happen. I promise you.”

Steve blinked at him in surprise. That was…not what he had expected to hear, and it threw the rest of his words from his mind, but it was too unguarded to be anything except the truth.

“You are speaking of a lifetime, Tony. You don’t know what will happen. You cannot possibly promise that,” Steve protested, but something like certainty had already settled warm and low in his chest. Tony had no intention of selling him or sending him away. Even these past weeks, when anger burned like a candle in Tony’s heart, he kept Steve close. Perhaps it shouldn’t give him comfort, but it did.

“Think you that I cannot? Do you really believe that we simply allow those who have served this House to be pushed out as soon as the luster has worn off?” Tony asked, voice laced with disbelief. “Royal concubines retire to live their days in comfort in the Old Palace. Even those who have bought their freedom or chosen to be sold to a favorite patron often return there, in time,” Tony explained. “It has always been thus, and so it will always be. You would, undoubtedly, find it quite pleasant there, should you—that is, were you to—in the event that you should find yourself there. Some day.”

“You would send me to this place?” Steve asked, trying to picture it in his head, him and the likes of Kadina and Danen doddering around like relics well past their prime. He shook his head. It was a crazy idea, and yet, no, it had not occurred to him, nor had he thought to ask. Zola’s threats clouded everything. He couldn’t even get his mind to settle on how such a concept even fit in with his notions of this world. A kindness? An obligation? To people who were your property? Did such a place even exist, or was this some fantasy fed to Tony by those who did not want him to question what was underneath all the gilt and fancy baubles? Not that it mattered, of course. Steve would be long gone by then, one way or the other, he reminded himself with a mental shake.

“This is why you begged me to pick another? Why you thought of leaving—running away? That I would…cast you aside?” Tony asked, his voice breaking softly on the words. “Steve,” Tony said with a low laugh in his voice, drawing out Steve’s name into a long, pained-sounding lament. “I would never—you are mine,” Tony said. “Mine.”

Tony’s hand found Steve’s cheek, and Steve felt himself leaning in, eyes closing at the rush of warmth that flowed through him, the deep, hushed kind of warmth that loosened his limbs and
eased the sharp points of his thoughts where they cut away inside his mind. Tony’s hand convulsed on his cheek, the fingers digging in for a moment before he stilled himself. His eyes were bright and watery, the kind of deep, earthen brown of wet leaves still flecked with gold from their fall.

“I am sorry, my beautiful one. I thought—well. It does not matter what I thought. I am an idiot who let old mistakes grow into new ones. My old manservant would say they do that if you tend to them as well and often as I do. Forgive me. I shall make it up to you, I promise,” Tony told him.

“You must have many questions. I should have realized to assure you, though as to why Zola did not have this explained, I will find out,” Tony said, frowning.

“Tony, no—no,” Steve stammered, his head still spinning with surprise. “That’s not—I mean, that’s—yes, I did not know, but…” he cut himself off, let out a huff of air and shook his head.

“You misunderstood,” Tony said smoothly, head shaking as he reached out to run his hand through Steve’s hair, stroking the nearly dry strands into place. “Or Zola sought to frighten you into good behavior. Clearly not knowing that is rather as good as trying to cajole a lion to compromise by tossing stones at it,” Tony huffed with an apologetic look at Steve.

“That is not what happened,” Steve said firmly. “That is not what Zola meant. Tony, Zola is not who you think he is.”

“He has been Harem Master since my father was a Prince. I will say that his methods of late—I have raised my concerns with him. As pleased as I am that you are here, the whole manner of how it was handled is troubling. Perhaps it is time for him to retire. You could help me select the new Harem Master. I had not considered it, but it would be good to have the input of someone in your position,” Tony suggested with a slight nod of his head. “I’ll send word to the training houses that we are in need of a new Har—”

“Tony!” Steve shouted. “That is not—Tony, Zola is not set in his ways or making mistakes in his dotage. He is evil. He uses pain and threats to keep everyone too scared to say or do anything against him, but he is not who you think he is.”

“Tell me who he is, then,” Tony commanded.

Steve drew in a stuttering breath. It went down his throat and settled in his chest like ice water. There are no secrets. Only lies. He wasn’t even sure what was a lie anymore and what he just wished were not true. Maybe it didn’t matter, not now. Maybe they were the same thing. He had a truth left to tell, though, and he thought—no, he knew—that Zola was living out his last breaths on the lies he had told.

“The night you met Cam, Zola sent me to serve Lord Hammer,” Steve said, his eyes boring into Tony’s.

“What?” Tony snapped, eyes going wide as his body spasmed so violently that the wine sloshed over the rim of the goblet and ran down the sides, dripping onto his hands and pants, not that he seemed to notice. “That’s not possible.”

“I’m telling you the truth, Tony, I swear it. Question Zola’s guards who accompanied me, or Lord Hammer, if you must, though I don’t suppose they will tell you the truth now, but I tell you, that is what happened,” Steve replied.
What do you mean?” Tony countered, shaking his head. “What is this you speak of? I would caution you against lying to me, Steve,” Tony seethed, voice low and hard. “I will not countenance being played for a fool, chasing at whatever tales my concubine dangles in front of me, trying to set me against one of my Lords. All here know of my enmity with Hammer. Using that to try to sway me—”

“I’m not lying, Tony!” Steve shouted, then shook himself, trying to find some calm in a storm of emotions that threatened to swallow him. “I am not lying, and I am not mistaken or untrained or unused to the ways of your world or whatever you would like to tell yourself this time so that you may discount what I say. I know what happened. Zola said Lord Hammer always likes to have the concubines after they have been with you,” Steve told him. Tony had his mouth open, as if to protest, then recoiled as if he had been slapped. “He took me there, and left me, and I—Would you like me to describe Lord Hammer’s room? His cock? There is not much to describe there, but I will be happy to try,” Steve spat out.

Tony stared at him, aghast, some fleeting emotion dappling his features for a moment. Steve thought it might have been horror.

“What happened?” Tony asked finally, a tremor marking his words. His face had gone as ashen as the soot that lined his forge, as gray and pale as death, with wine-stained lips and glassy eyes that held desolation.

“Nothing,” Steve replied quickly. “You called for me, and Zola returned. Nothing happened, really, but you should know—I—I thought you should know. About Zola, and how he is, because I know you don’t believe me, but Tony, he is not who you think he is. He is not someone you would ever—I do not think you would ever allow someone like him to—to be in charge of… anyone you would care about, that is all, I—nothing—” He broke off and shook himself, letting his eyes fall closed for a moment at the memory. He never thought of it, though he couldn’t say why not. It hadn’t been bad, not really. He had seen and been through much worse. He didn’t know why it even bothered him. Nothing had happened. “Nothing happened,” he said again, raising his eyes in time to catch Tony’s stricken expression. “You called for me, and Zola returned, and that was it. I was here, and yours. For that night.”

“Steve,” Tony breathed out. He reached out and seemed to suddenly realize he was still clutching the wine goblet. Setting it aside, he cupped Steve’s cheek and tilted his head up. “I did not—you must believe me—I knew nothing of this. I would never allow—never. Never. You are mine! How could Zola possibly think I would ever—” he cut off and looked away at the fire for a long span of heartbeats, then back at Steve, a frown darkening his features. “I never called again for a concubine he sent. Once the night was past, I cared not. He would have assumed you were the same. He would have no reason to think you were different. That you mattered. Because he believed the others didn’t.”

“You would not allow it? For any of them?” Steve asked, frowning as he recalled the words of the other concubines in the baths that day. His voice sounded tired. Weary. But, his cheek was warm in Tony’s hand. One of Tony’s fingers was stroking along Steve’s jaw, almost absently. He leaned in a bit to the pressure, the solidity of it, letting it ground him like an anchor dragging along the ocean floor, keeping him from drifting. A surge of heat pooled just below his stomach. How had he gone so long without this feeling? He had no idea. But, he was here now, and Tony was listening, really, truly listening, though Steve supposed this was the first time Steve had really and truly spoken.

“Of course I would not allow it,” Tony snapped. “Royal Concubines belong to the Crown itself, and are under its protection. They can travel the length and breadth of the realm without fear of
harm. You really think I would allow them to serve someone as vile as Justin Hammer? Zola knows this! Why would he--” he broke off and closed his eyes, taking a bracing breath, then opening them to look down upon Steve. Finally, he dropped his hand from Steve’s cheek, and his expression cloaked with an odd detachment.

“Zola took you to Hammer?” Tony questioned, voice almost mild, as if they discussed the day’s weather.

“Yes,” Steve responded. “It was a standing request from Lord Hammer, I believe.”

“Did he touch you? Hammer?” Tony asked, almost as if it were an afterthought.

“Nothing happened,” Steve replied. The words sounded hollow somehow, though he couldn’t say why. It was true. Nothing had happened.

“What did happen? This nothing?” Tony asked. Again, his voice was calm, but there was a puncturing sort of rigidity to it. An effort.

“Oh, nothing,” Steve replied, then glanced away and flattened his mouth. “He had me crawl to him. That was all.” The words hung there, between them, for long moments. Steve could feel the heat of the forge. It felt stifling all of a sudden, as if it was creeping into his nose and down his throat, burrowing into his lungs, all this heat, everywhere. He could feel a sweat dampening his brow, but when he brought a hand up, his skin was cool to the touch.

“Did he now?” Tony said finally in a flat, thick voice that was filled with enough menace to make Steve want to draw back from it. Steve nodded, slowly. Tony watched him for a long moment, then got up and walked to the stand of books, jars and other odds and ends that sat in the corner of the workshop. “Drink,” Tony said a moment later, shoving a goblet to Steve’s lips. Steve looked dumbly at him. “Drink,” Tony urged, voice gentle. Steve opened his lips and cool, wonderful water flowed down his parched throat. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until he tasted the water. “Slower,” Tony said, still holding the cup. The water came again. Just enough. Then a little more. “Better?” Tony asked. Steve nodded again.

“What I told you about Zola…about what he said he would do. To me. To Cam,” Steve blurted out, the words spilling out of him in a rush. “I know you want to think that I did not understand. That I am untrained and unfamiliar with Zola’s ways. That he was trying to frighten me to ensure you would be pleased and worried because of who I was—who I am, and that I would cause a problem,” Steve told him, looking up at where Tony hovered at his side. He hated how his voice shook, but he couldn’t seem to stop it. He didn’t want to think upon any of that, but Tony had to know. And he had to know what Tony would do, if he would care, if he was the man Steve thought he was. “Maybe he is as you say. For you. For those concubines who are valuable. Perhaps for them, he is a kindly Master. I don’t know. But, for me? For the ones who don’t matter? He would have sold me off as soon as he could. He had no interest in keeping me beyond entertaining you for an evening, all because I looked like someone you once…” he trailed off, looking up at Tony, whose face had gone ashen, even in the firelight.

“You ask me how I could want to get away from this life? I ask you, how could I not? I would serve you for a time, then be sold off to God knows what kind of person. Running away, whatever the risk, was better than this. And then…then there was you. I didn’t hate being with you. I wanted to. A part of me still wants to hate it, but I don’t. God help me, I don’t. I don’t,” Steve said, voice shaking on the last.

Tony sat back down in the chair and studied him, then closed his eyes again, and let his head sink back for a moment. He stared at the ceiling, eyes wide and unseeing. Finally, Tony took a
shuddering breath and swiped a hand over his face, chest heaving and breath coming in a harsh, wet shudder. Only then did Steve notice the gleam of dampness on Tony's cheeks. Tony looked down at him, shook his head, and a terrible, broken expression worked its way onto his face as if it struggled forth from some place behind his eyes.

“I think myself able to see so much beyond this meager world we are given,” Tony began. He stopped and his expression went far away for a moment before returning to Steve with a flat sort of smile. “The holy men,” he started again, “teach that we have free will, and so the Devil cannot force a man’s mind to his cause, so he must set his shadows against us. Covetousness and her husband, Greed, which dwell together in a man’s heart and multiply. Sloth, which weighs down his legs and stills his hands. Gluttony, which takes up all the space in his stomach so that he is never full. Wrath, which crawls into his ears, so he cannot hear reason or mercy. But worst of all among them is Hubris, which blinds a man to his true form and hides the other sins from his sight,” Tony said, picking up his goblet again and taking a long drink. “I would have told you it was all nonsense meant to terrify the simple into behaving.”

“I don’t understand,” Steve said, shaking his head and frowning. Tony looked down at him, his expression full of such regret it pulled at somewhere deep in Steve's chest. He wanted Tony to stop, swallow back the words, dispense with the thoughts and take him to bed, make him feel and forget, and let Steve wipe away whatever it was that troubled Tony this much.

“I know you,” Tony replied. “Better than you would have me know you, I think. Your feelings are often as easy to discern as if reading that book laying open over there. You are many things, but easily fooled is not one of them. You would never have done that—what Hammer had you do—had you not truly feared for the boy’s safety,” Tony said.

“You believe me?” Steve asked, a swoosh of relief hollowing out his stomach.

“This is my fault,” Tony said. “I failed you. Countless others, by the sounds of it, but you—I would not see you hurt for all that I have in the world, Steve, you must know this,” he whispered in a broken, urgent plea.

“You did not fail me,” Steve replied. “You did not, Tony. This was not your doing. You cannot blame yourself for what you did not know.”

“Kings do not get to cling to ignorance to absolve them of wrongs done in their name. Besides, you tried to tell me,” Tony shot back, grimacing. “You tried to tell me what Zola was, and I—well. I did not care to believe it. I did not know,” Tony said again. “I did not know. I would never—” he sucked in a breath, wet and garbled, and drew his hand to his mouth. “I would never allow—you must believe me, I would not—you are—” he broke off, clenching his eyes together and holding his fist to his mouth.

He blinked down at Steve, then slowly slid out of his chair and let his knees fall to the stone in front of Steve. He pulled Steve close, pressing their foreheads together, hands grasping at Steve’s face. “I am sorry,” Tony said finally. “I am so sorry. More than I can say.”

“It was not your fault,” Steve argued, drawing his head down to lean against the curve of Tony’s cheek. He thought that was true. He wanted it to be true with a blind, groping desperation. His fists found the front of Tony’s shirt, pulling him closer. Steve’s body felt light and heavy at the same time, limbs limp and waxen, as if he was melting, his whole being slipping into some soft, warm place. He didn’t know why. Relief, maybe. Something else underneath it, though. Tony. Tony was here. Touching him, holding him, calling him by his endearments, as if he mattered. He felt more real here than he had in so long, though that made no sense.
“I will see to this,” Tony promised, pulling back slightly. “You must allow me to—I will fix this. Make it up to you.”

“There is more. You will not want to hear it, Tony,” Steve warned.

“I do not believe I am owed what I want to hear at this point,” Tony replied. He drew away and regarded Steve with a grim determination. “Tell me what you must.”

“It is about Cam,” Steve started. “You took him for my assistant, but he was not. Not then, anyway.”

“He’s young for it, admittedly, but clearly capable. I can see why Zola would’ve chosen one so young to use against you,” Tony added, then frowned, eyes narrowing on Steve. “But, this is not what you have to tell me, I take it.”

“No,” Steve replied. “No, it isn’t. I wish that were it, Tony. I really do. Cam was not my assistant, or anyone’s assistant. That night you met him, when you called him from Lord Stane’s party to help with your machine,” Steve said, voice faltering a bit as he went. He did not want to be the one to do this to Tony, to tear that blindfold away from his eyes when he knew the bright light of truth would only bring pain. And what would it do to whatever it was between them? Was it not the one who tells the unwelcome news who bore the stain of it forever? He shook his head. There was nothing for it. Tony had to know. Maybe Steve had to know, too. How Tony would react. A test.

“I remember,” Tony nodded. “You were worried about him. Nervous, I could tell. That he would mess up, I assumed. Spill wine on Obie’s coat front or some such.”

“He was not there to serve wine, Tony,” Steve said, letting his eyes shut for a moment before locking his gaze on Tony’s. “He was there to be Lord Stane’s entertainment for the evening. To serve him as a concubine or whatever one would call it. That is what Stane prefers, and Zola would gleefully feed such—tastes.”

“That—no,” Tony choked out, jerking back and dropping his hands from Steve. “You are mistaken.”

“Tony…Tony, I’m not. I’m sorry,” Steve said. “I told you that you would not want to hear it. I know how hard it is for you to believe. I know who Stane is to you.”

“I tell you, this…accusation, it is not true. I would know,” Tony countered. “Steve, Zola is—I can see now how I could have missed his transgressions. I’ve never spent much time with the concubines, not since I was a young man, newly come of age. I don’t offer an excuse, but…Obadiah, he is with me all the time. I’ve meetings to attend with him tomorrow. There is simply no way such a perversion as this would have gone unnoticed. I would have noticed.”

“He was careful, smart, and preyed on your trust, Tony, the way all men like that do,” Steve retorted.

“That…no. No, you are wrong about Obie. I promise you, I am not dismissing you, but I tell you, it is simply not true. Cam misunderstood, perhaps? He’s but a boy, untrained at that time and new to the Castle. Who knows what he saw or heard at Obie’s little party that set this horrible notion in his mind,” Tony argued, shaking his head. “No. No, it—no.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed, feeling suddenly helpless.
“I’ve known him my whole life, Steve. My whole life. Since I was a boy. He’s been by my side longer than you have been alive. I rode on his shoulders through the bailey, for God’s sake, making an absolute fool of him. Everything I know about running a kingdom, it came from Obie,” Tony protested.

“And what do you think he taught you so well?” Steve asked carefully, though Tony flinched nonetheless.

“No, no, this is a mistake,” Tony insisted, shaking his head. “A mistake. That is what this is. You are overwrought. All of this, Zola, Hammer...you see horrors behind every curtain. I’m not blaming you,” Tony said quickly, holding up a placating hand. “But, I tell you, you or Cam, you misunderstood, or Zola was toying with you, perhaps, or—”

“Ask Cam, if you must,” Steve interrupted sharply. “He will answer your questions truthfully. Ask about how they brought him a white wrap to wear. Ask about how Zola didn’t have the overseer prepare him as he did me, because that was how Stane wanted him. Ask the other boys who are still at the compound, if Zola hasn’t already gotten rid of all of them. Ask the other children who hide there, trying to go unnoticed, what it is they do for Zola!” Steve finished, his voice raising to nearly a shout. At Tony’s fathomless expression, Steve stopped.

“Tony,” Steve ground out, his voice lowering with tension. Slowly, Tony’s eyes drew back to his from where Tony had been staring at the flames, blinking against each of Steve’s demands as if he could avoid looking at whatever it was Steve’s words conjured in his mind. “Tony, you said that you have known Stane since you were a boy. You have seen Cam. Tell me, does he not resemble you when you were his age? Why do I imagine that if we lined up all the boys Zola has sent Stane over these years, we would find them much the same?”

“No,” Tony mumbled, though his eyes were wide and blank. His face flickered with something horrible. Realization, maybe. Not quite memory, Steve thought, but something. A knowing. That’s what Steve’s mother would have said. Rotten and old and long-buried. A dank, dark tide of knowing, the worse for it having lingered, unknown, for so long. “No.”

The last wasn’t a denial. Steve thought it might be a prayer.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Steve said gently, and reached out to grasp Tony’s hand. “Please do not blame yourself for this. Not this.”

Tony stared at him, mouth wagging open and closed, then pushed himself to a stand. He staggered over to where a bottle of wine sat on the workroom table, his gait so ungainly, his hip banged against the table’s edge, sending two of his map table figures lurching forward onto their carved faces. He grasped the bottle, but did not drink, just held the neck wrapped in his fingers. The next thing Steve knew, the bottle exploded against the far wall, flung with such force the glass shattered into pieces no bigger than Steve’s palm.

Steve was up and had his arms around Tony before the thought had finished forming. Tony tried to wrench away, but Steve held him fast, pulling him tight to his chest, his arms locked behind Tony’s back.

“It was not your fault,” Steve whispered, his words blowing through Tony’s hair. A sob wracked Tony’s body, then a high, keening wail. Steve held him. Tony’s head shook back and forth, grinding into Steve’s chest. “It was not, Tony. It is the fault of those who carried it out and used your trust to protect themselves.”

A laugh, then, one of those awful ones that held no mirth. “I will tell that to Cam and the others
who came before him. Forgive me, for I trusted,” Tony spat out in a cruel, wet voice that was twisted with bile. “I’m sure they will understand.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed.

“How do I fix this thing? What do I do with this?” Tony asked in a stilted, raw scrape of a voice.

“You—you—I don’t know,” Steve finally settled on. “I don’t know. I don’t think this is the kind of thing you fix.” He was quiet for a long time, just standing there, holding Tony to him, as if letting him go would be a judgment he did not want Tony to think he was making. “You know,” he started, voice quiet in the room, with only the occasional crackle of the fire underneath it.

“When Hydra started to grow, we said, it isn’t so bad. It is a small group. What can come of it, we asked. Some even agreed with what Schmidt was saying. The divide between the First People and the Freemen was so old we barely knew what drove it in the first place, but it remained. We looked away. Far too long. We looked away, and plowed our lands, and planted our crops, and raised our families. And then Schmidt came for the rest of us, and we said, why will no one help us in our time of need? I asked that of you, remember?” Steve reminded him. “We only saw an enemy when he was at our door, and by then, it was almost too late. He was us. In our ranks, in our government, standing next to us on the battle line with a knife at our backs. You are not the only one to miss something you did not want to see.”

“I am the King,” Tony bit out harshly, lifting his head from Steve’s chest to look up at him, his eyes glazed with pain. He shook his head and looked down, dropping his forehead to Steve’s chest again. Finally, he lifted his gaze again, reached up and cupped Steve’s cheek. “I thank you. I have given you little reason to trust me, and yet you extended me more faith than almost anyone in this kingdom would have. For that, I am in your debt.”

Steve shook his head. “You don’t owe me anything for telling you the truth, Tony. That’s not how this works.” Tony’s hand slipped away, falling to a fist at his side. Steve reached for it and brought it up to his face again, placing his own hand over Tony’s cheek. “I thank you. I have given you little reason to trust me, and yet you extended me more faith than almost anyone in this kingdom would have. For that, I am in your debt.”

Steve shook his head. “You don’t owe me anything for telling you the truth, Tony. That’s not how this works.” Tony’s hand slipped away, falling to a fist at his side. Steve reached for it and brought it up to his face again, placing his own hand over Tony’s. A grim smile flattened Tony’s mouth, but he held his hand still against Steve’s cheek for a long moment.

“You will rest now,” Tony told him.

“I am not tired,” Steve replied. He knew the words for a lie as soon as he said them. He was exhausted. His head pounded. His muscles ached with tension. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and wrap himself around Tony for the night and probably the day after, but he knew, looking at Tony, that this was not going to happen. Already, what energy had seemed to leech out of Tony as the horror of it all dawned on him was returning. Steve could see it in the set of Tony’s mouth, the way his eyes roved around the room, and the way his hands moved, tapping at his chest and clicking together, as if his body needed to release some of the momentum of his mind.

“Sleep,” Tony repeated, then turned and pulled Steve by the hand towards the bedchamber. When they reached the bed, he nudged at Steve’s shoulders with a grunt, then gave Steve a satisfied look when Steve sat down heavily on the bed. “Sleep, my soldier. Rest your mind from all of this.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Steve objected. “What about you?”

“I have things to do,” Tony replied, the words laced with steel. Steve lay down on the bed, but watched as Tony quickly changed into something more suited for Court than his workshop. When he was ready, he walked over to stand by the bed and looked down at Steve, though said nothing, just took Steve’s hand and squeezed. “I will return when this is taken care of. You are to remain here. I’ll send for Cam as well. Peran and Josiah?” Tony called out without looking away from Steve.
“Yes, Your Highness?” the older one, Peran, Steve remembered, asked, stepping out of the alcove and snapping to a smart stance.

“You will keep him safe for me,” Tony ordered.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Josiah replied.

“And for not listening to my orders,” Tony started, turning his head slightly to eye the guard. “I know it was you, old bull. Lands in the Western Steppes. Where you hail from, is it not?”

“I—yes! Yes, it is, Your Highness. I couldn’t possibly, though, Your Highness, I—” Peran spluttered, clearly at a loss.

“You can, and you will. So orders your King,” Tony replied, looking back at Steve. “Do not give my poor guards any more grief lest they find an early grave,” Tony admonished. “Rest,” he said, stroking a hand through Steve’s hair and down his cheek. “I will handle this. I promise you. This will not stand,” Tony ground out, then turned on his heel and stalked out of the room as the guards rushed to open the door.

To Steve’s surprise, sleep came almost immediately once Tony left. When he woke the next morning, it was to two serving women delivering a tray laden with food and a basket of clothing for Steve. The younger of the two, a brass-haired girl with fawn-colored brown eyes that matched her freckles, braved a glance at where Steve sat up in bed. He tried to smile at her in greeting, but her eyes just went wide, and she blushed a furious shade of red, bit her cheek to capture her giggle and quickly looked away, while the older servant shushed her and the guards hovered.

Tony was nowhere in sight. Nor was he the whole day. Or the day after that, though Steve woke long enough in the night to feel Tony slide into the bed next to him, wrap his arms around Steve’s back and bury his head into the curve of Steve’s neck. When Steve tried to question him, it was met with a hushed order to sleep, and soon enough, Tony’s soft, even breathing. It was nearly a week gone now, and Tony had only been back to his chambers to bathe, change clothes and find sleep, though never seeming to stay still long enough for Steve to get any kind of real information out of him. Steve had awoken during two of the nights to find Tony sitting by the fire, staring at the flames, face drawn and haggard, but he had said no more than to entreat Steve to sleep, though he had joined Steve in the bed, then, so Steve counted that in his tally.

Confined to Tony’s quarters as he was, Steve had little access to information, save for the gossip Cam was able to glean. The boy had a bit more freedom to come and go than Steve did, and for that, Steve was grateful. Sitting here, not knowing what was happening, but seeing the toll it was exacting from Tony was maddening. Cam, of course, was thrilled with the circumstances. He spent his days being feted by the servants who were trying to outdo themselves in taking care of the King’s guests, playing chess with Steve or roaming the gardens and feeding the peacocks and other animals who called the gardens home. Steve had a good half dozen unfinished sketches of the boy and the fan-tailed birds dancing in attendance around him. That grew dull enough after a few days, though, so he busied himself by spending time in Tony’s workshop, pouring over the various designs in Tony’s leather-bound journals, sometimes making notes, sometimes re-drawing the whole thing. Tony’s ideas were nothing short of amazing, beyond anything Steve could conjure, but Tony lacked any actual, practical experience with war, which sometimes meant things were missed or could be improved in small ways to work better for the soldiers who would eventually have to actually try to use one of these machines, as Tony called them.

“And any news of Zola?” Steve asked Cam when the boy finally made an appearance in a robe that still bore grass stains on it from whatever he had been doing out in the gardens. It was the same question he had asked the boy each successive evening when they dined, and tonight’s answer was
“None have seen him since Miss Potts delivered the King’s summons and started making her inquiries. They say he fled by stuffing himself into an empty casket of mead and catching a ride on a river barge. Or slipped out the city wall through the sewer. Or tied a bag of pig entrails to his stomach and played the corpse for the Mercy Men’s wagon,” Cam said with no small amount of glee.

“The speculation seems not to have abated much, I see,” Steve interjected. “Everyone does like their stories.”

“He is gone. What does it matter the how of it?” Cam asked with a shrug. “I liked her. Ms. Potts. She was nice. She gave me a jar of honeyed figs and said I could get more from the kitchens anytime I liked,” Cam added.

“Your stomach speaks for your mind far too often,” Steve shot back with a low chuckle and shake of his head as Cam dug into the bounty before them.

“She has no love for Zola, this I know,” Cam added, scowling a bit. “When I told her what Zola said, that he would hurt me if you did not cooperate, her face got as red as a beet, and all her freckles disappeared.”

“Hmmm. And what of Stane?” Steve asked, trying to keep his voice neutral.

“Under arrest and confined to his chambers while the inquiry is going on, though he denies everything, and what proof is there?” Cam asked, the air seeming to go out of his body as he flopped back against the chair and tosses the sugar-covered fried dough roll back onto the platter that sat between them. He always went for the sweets first, not that Steve minded. It was hard sometimes, in all of this, to remember that he was only twelve, barely out of childhood to have seen and endured so much. “Slaves cannot give testimony, and with Zola gone, there is no one to name him a liar.”

“Tony believes us,” Steve said.

Cam looked at Steve, as if trying to figure out a puzzle, then grinned and picked up his roll again. “It is a good thing you are pretty, King’s Prize,” the boy said, smiling as he chewed. “Do you want to hear about Lord Hammer again?”

“No,” Steve replied in a clipped tone, then sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward when Cam just smiled in return. The boy delighted in the story, and Steve felt sure that he was embellishing the details, since Cam seemed to have something of a bard’s tongue when it came to stories.

“Lord Hammer was called in front of the whole Court, and he begged and pleaded and cried for the King to grant him mercy,” Cam crowed, eyes sparkling and voice going lower as the story built. “My friend Myrsha said he blubbered like a baby,” Cam added with a conspiratorial whisper behind his hand. “And so, the King, being a kind and just ruler, said that he would merely strip Lord Hammer of his title and lands, but he could leave the city with his life,” Cam recited, arching his neck into a benevolent nod as if making the pronouncement himself. “Provided that he do so on his hands and knees, to show how penitent he is for his transgression,” Cam finished with a gleeful smile, then popped the rest of the dough into his mouth. “He crawled all the way to the city gates, did you know? Crying and cursing the whole way.”

“You told me,” Steve reminded him.
“The whole city came out to throw garbage at him,” Cam grinned, then sighed. “I would have liked to do that very much.”

Steve shook his head at the boy’s clear delight at the tale’s rendition. The story seemed to grow slightly more dramatic with each retelling, but the substance remained the same. Hammer kept his life, but only by crawling from the throne room to the city gates, and while Steve had no doubt the citizenry quite enjoyed the spectacle of someone like Hammer brought low, only a handful of people would ever understand why Tony demanded such a thing. For me, Steve thought, the same warm tightness filling his chest as it had the first time Cam burst into Tony’s chambers with the news.

Tony had done that for him. Yes, to assuage Tony’s own anger, certainly, but there was no denying that the nature of his choice of punishment for Hammer was for Steve’s benefit. All Tony would say when Steve tried to question him was that it was fitting, and then asked Steve, in a tired, ragged voice, to leave it alone. Steve obliged him at the time, but he knew he could not hold his tongue forever, though he wasn’t even sure what he wanted to say. Thank you, he supposed, though that sounded so small. Steve was often left with small words for Tony’s grand gestures, though it hadn’t escaped his notice that his words seemed to satisfy Tony in some way that made Steve remember his mother making ornaments from painted eggshells she had carefully hollowed out with a needle, where too much pressure or a wrong move crumbled the whole thing to pieces.

He sighed, and spent the rest of the meal distracting Cam with stories of the war, of which Cam never tired of hearing. This time, the story was about Clint climbing to the top of a crumbling bell tower to find his targets from there, losing his footing and ending up setting the old, iron bell to ringing trying to right himself. The Hydra soldiers had been so spooked and thrown by the sudden, otherworldly noise, they had all but run away with their tails tucked between their legs. Clint insisted it was always his plan. Bucky insisted the bell won them the day. Later, as they rested, Sam would thread tiny, silver bells into the folds of Clint’s tunic, so it tinkled lightly when he moved, leading Clint to pull the bells off and lob them, one by one, at Sam’s head as they rode back to base camp. It had been a good day, Steve remembered, one of the few when they could all walk away from a skirmish with a smile on their faces. Cam, of course, thought it was completely hilarious and fantastic, to win a fight with a bell.

Behind him, Steve heard the chamber’s door open. Steve turned and, much to his surprise, Tony appeared, slowing his pace to come stand next to Steve’s chair. It was barely dark outside.

“Good eve, Your Highness,” Cam said, standing up to bow low and formal, as was his wont, mostly for the thrill of the show, in Steve’s opinion.

“Good eve to you, Small Hands,” Tony replied with an easy grin. He looked, Steve noticed, more full of color than he had in days. His eyes were bright, his hair neat and clothes pressed, and he seemed far more at ease than Steve had seen him since that night so long ago after their trip outside the city walls. “Please, don’t let me interrupt,” Tony said, nodding at the remains of the dinner that sat between Steve and Cam.

“Would you care for some?” Cam asked. “There is…a leg of mutton left. No. I ate that. There is…”

“Huh. Appears the vegetables are all that is left for your poor King,” Tony huffed, gave Cam a stern look, then laughed. “I ate with the Court, do not fear, I am quite full. If you are ready to retire, you may return to your room. A surprise awaits you. I’m told,” he continued, looking briefly down at Steve, “that it is one that will please you quite a bit.” Tony said, his tone growing more serious as he studied Cam. “I cannot wholly undo what was done in my name, but I can
Cam smiled widely and gave a whoop of excitement. They both watched the boy scamper out of the room. Steve thought he even caught the younger of the two guards smiling a bit as he held the door for the boy.

“His mother?” Steve asked, though he knew already.

“Ummhm,” Tony nodded affirmatively. “Pepper located her at a merchant’s in Bowerston. She… Pepper said she wept when she told her she would be with her son,” Tony shook his head.

“Children are not supposed to be separated from their mothers until they come of age. Cam is old enough, now, but, it still strikes me as too young…” he stopped and looked at Steve. “A thought for another time,” he said.

“What thought?” Steve pressed.

“This…situation has brought certain things to light,” Tony replied. “Things I knew well enough, I suppose, but had not truly…” he sighed. “We can do better. You,” he continued, coming around to stand in front of Steve and nudging Steve’s legs to part so he could stand between them. “You could help me with that.”

“What with?” Steve asked, frowning.

“Reforms. Changes. Improvements. I don’t know, but just because it is the way my father did it or how it has been done since time immemorial, what does it matter if we can make it better?” Tony asked. Steve felt his eyes widen in surprise, and opened his mouth to say something, though he wasn’t sure what. To say that he thought it amazing of Tony to hear him out and seek to make changes? Or to tell Tony that the system could not stand, no matter what reforms he made? Could he not at least try to make things better for so long as he was here and had the King’s ear?

“I would like that,” Steve finally settled on. He thought it might even be true.

“But, not tonight,” Tony said, reaching out and cupping Steve’s cheek. One thumb stroked up and down, just grazing Steve’s lips so that Steve could feel the coarse pad roughen across his mouth.

“How you been good for me?” Tony asked.

The words sent a shock of fiery need spiking down Steve’s groin to the tip of his cock, which grew hard almost instantly. It had been so long, Steve thought with a plaintive, needy sort of desire thrumming through his belly. So long. God, he wanted it so badly. He tried not to think of it, not with everything happening with Tony, but as soon as the words left Tony’s mouth, it was all his mind could settle on, this need, clouding his head and drumming out everything else.

“Yes,” Steve replied. Tony’s thumb had stopped its movement and sat there on Steve’s mouth, just at the seam of his lips. The tip of it flicked at Steve’s upper lip, just barely a motion, but Steve felt his mouth water and opened his lips, letting Tony slide his thumb inside, settling it on Steve’s tongue, so hard and heavy, but not what Steve wanted. Not nearly enough. He needed more, needed to be filled, he was so empty, everywhere in him, it felt like it was crating open, these big, gaping wounds of need deep down inside him, and all he wanted was Tony. Tony everywhere, all around him, over him, in him, it had been so long, and he had been so good for Tony.

Steve laved his tongue against Tony’s thumb, swirling around it and suckling lightly as Tony drew it out, painting Steve’s lips with his own saliva before dropping his hand to his side and regarding Steve with a warm, pleased look.
“Good,” Tony husked out, voice rough and low. I did that, Steve thought, and felt a surge of something like power. “What shall I do with you, hmmm?”

“I need no reward,” Steve protested. “You’ve already—”

“Who said anything of a reward?” Tony asked, eyebrows raising. “We are discussing your punishment.”

“My—my what?” Steve stammered, mouth going suddenly dry as he frowned up at Tony in confusion. His cock jerked and thickened, though, and something in his stomach roiled and lurched like he had eaten stones for dinner.

“What did I tell you would happen if you left my bed again without permission?” Tony asked, almost nonchalantly, voice silky and smooth.

Steve’s mind reeled as Tony’s earlier words filled his head. If you ever leave my bed without permission again, I’ll chain you to it. Steve’s eyes darted to the bed. He licked his lips. A pull just below his stomach sent a sharp tingle down the length of his cock. Warmth pooled behind hit, tightening his balls. He could feel a small spurt of liquid leak out the head of his cock and drip down between his thighs, hidden by the robe, but there. His breath came out in a gasp, then settled into long, deep breaths. He looked up at Tony. Waited.

“I see you remember,” Tony said with a low chuckle, before his expression turned into something darker, possessive, his eyes roving over Steve in a way that made Steve’s cock ache and leak, heat twisting and clawing at his insides. He was Tony’s, and when Tony looked at him like this, it felt real, this belongingness. “Take off your clothes and get into bed. On your back. Hands above your head. Legs spread as wide as you can at the knees.”

Steve startled at the series of commands, his stomach dropping and breath hitching, though he clung to Tony’s eyes, seeking something there. “What did I tell you about punishment in here?” Tony asked.

“That it was,” Steve began, struggling to form words that didn’t come out garbled and thick. “That it was a part of it. The other side of pleasure.”

“Good,” Tony said, giving Steve a small smile. Warmth burst into Steve’s chest at the praise, seeping across his skin, the way the sun did when you turned over while lying on the grass naming the shapes of the clouds, happening both slowly and all at once.

Steve nodded slowly, the motion strangely difficult, as if he had forgotten how to do it. He stood. Unbelted the robe and let it fall away. Heat from the fireplace danced across his skin, adding real warmth to the heat that flowed to his skin from embarrassment. He was nude underneath, except for the gold bands on his upper arms that he almost always wore and his collar, the weight of which almost went unnoticed until now, when it was all he had. It felt good, the weight of it, like it kept him tethered in place somehow. Anchored him. He should hate it, chafe against it, but he didn’t. Not here, anyway. It meant something between them, at least in here, though he didn’t know why or if that even mattered. He felt it, though, as sure as he felt the heat of Tony’s gaze, in a way he couldn’t quantify or name, but was nonetheless real for it.

The bed loomed before him. It seemed bigger now than it had. He wondered what Tony would do with him. Chain him, his mind supplied, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. The last time he had been in chains…he stopped at the edge of the bed and looked back at Tony.

“You are exquisite,” Tony told him, walking over to stand next to him. Steve felt a hand splay
over his lower back, steadying him, and he realized he had been rocking. Like a ship, he thought, nonsensical though it was. The hand was good. Not pushing him, just there, with enough pressure that Steve could feel it on the ridge of the bones at his back, hard and sure. Tony’s other hand came up to catch Steve’s chin and turn his face to Tony’s. “Trust me, beautiful one.”

“I do,” Steve replied, feeling resolve harden his limbs as he stared down at the bed. He wanted this. He didn’t know why, but he could no longer deny it. Whatever it was, whatever Tony would give him, he wanted it. This time he had with Tony, if that was to be it, he would stop pretending that it wasn’t what he wanted. This part, at least, no matter what happened, this part would not be a lie. He would not do that to Tony.

He crawled into the bed, to the center and laid down on his back, lifting his hands above his head so his fingers scraped against the headboard. He stared up at the familiar canopy above him and followed the pattern of the fabric as he spread his legs for Tony. His cock throbbed against his stomach, a near-painful aching need burning up and down the shaft and pulsing liquid heat from the head.

“Wider,” Tony ordered. Steve spread his legs wider, feeling his skin redden even more as he did, knowing what Tony would see. He had shaved earlier in the day, not really in anticipation, but…he had thought that Tony would like it. It felt good, making the effort for something so small that was only done to please Tony. He could see Tony’s eyes grazing across his body, taking it all in, eyes wide and the deep, rich brown of the most luxurious furs imaginable. That was because of him, Steve knew, and was suddenly glad he had taken the time to clean up properly. It wasn’t like Tony hadn’t seen him before, but…it was different, though. Doing it himself, for Tony, putting himself on display like this. “Good,” Tony hummed approvingly. “Just like that. So beautiful.”

Steve’s breaths were coming in pants, and Tony still hadn’t touched him. Just the thought of it, though…Tony looking at him like this, being open for Tony, waiting…it filled his mind, pushing out everything else to the far fringes. Just him, his body and Tony, that was all that was left. To his left, he heard the heavy clink of something metal and his body jerked a bit at the sound. Chains. Oh, God, there are chains, Steve thought, though he wasn’t sure which sensation to associate with the thought. Fear, anticipation, curiosity, shame, all of it warred with the steady thrum of need pounding through him.

The bed dipped next to him, and Tony leaned over him, tracing a finger down Steve’s cheek. “So good for me,” Tony said. Steve blinked, let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding, and then startled a bit as he felt cold metal wrap around his wrists. A grating snap, and the manacles locked into place. Above him, Tony fixed the chain through some part of the bed that Steve hadn’t noticed or thought to question, but now made a terrible sort of sense.

“Beautiful,” Tony murmured, glancing down at Steve. He moved away then, to the side of the bed, and Steve heard the rustling clank of metal again. His heart skipped a beat, then thudded at his ribs, counting off against each sound as Tony pulled the chain from the base of the bed and wrapped it around Steve’s thighs, one, then the other, tightening it until Steve’s ass was pulled apart far enough that he felt a rush of cold air tingle across his hole. His cock juddered and spurted. Tony glanced at it, seemingly uninterested, then hummed again, low under his breath, and lifted Steve’s right leg up, affixing a smaller chain from the base of the bed around Steve’s knee to the headboard. The other leg got the same treatment, until he was chained and spread wide, pulled apart and exposed for Tony to see. To use. Steve swallowed.

“Please Tony, he begged. He wasn’t sure what he was asking for. To be taken, filled, used up, whatever Tony wanted. He didn’t need to think about it. Didn’t need to think about whether he should feel this way or why he shouldn’t. He was chained up. Immobile. Helpless. There was
nothing he could do except let Tony do whatever he wanted. He was Tony’s, like this, but, he thought, looking up at Tony who was watching him with an intensity usually reserved for one of Tony’s machines that was giving him a problem, Tony was his like this, too. Perhaps never more so than now, when the combined focus of his mind, body and heart were all for Steve. The realization shook through him, lighting gooseflesh over his skin. It was almost too much. He wanted it all. More. This.

“You have been so good for me, all this time,” Tony soothed, running a hand down the inside of Steve’s thigh to the juncture where his cock spasmed at the proximity. Steve let out a high, keening whine of pure need.

“Yes. Yes, please, Tony. Please,” Steve entreated.

“You’ll be good for me a little longer, I think,” Tony said, a satisfied grin flashing across his features as Steve groaned. Tony pulled a thick, gold ring with another ring attached to it out of his coat pocket and held it up for Steve to see. Steve’s eyes blinked and watered, and the chains rattled as his body jerked in silent protest. “If you come when I put this on you, it will be the last time you come until you earn the privilege back, do you understand?”

Steve gulped, throat bobbing, but nodded. He sucked in a sharp breath as Tony took his cock in hand, and bit back a soft whine, letting only a gasp out that he couldn’t hold back. Tony frowned and flicked his thumb over the slit of Steve’s cock, then dug it in, pushing hard. Steve’s body bucked and his cock jerked in Tony’s hand, sliding against Tony’s thumb as more fluid dripped from the head.

“I would have the sounds you would give me,” Tony said in a low voice of warning. Steve looked at him beseechinglly, then nodded. “Good,” Tony said, and slipped the first ring over the head of Steve’s cock and down the shaft to the base. The other ring, he unclasped and tightened around Steve’s balls until the pressure was somewhere near pain, but not enough to be pleasure, either. Steve’s head couldn’t decide, and each time he tried to grab for the sensation, it floated further away, until he stopped trying and just let his eyes fall shut, waiting. When he opened them, Tony was watching him with a soft, adoring expression.

“So good for me, Steve,” Tony told him, and Steve remembered. He hadn’t come. He was good. He was good for Tony. Maybe Tony would let him. Maybe not. He wondered why it had mattered so much a moment ago.

Tony stretched out beside him and stroked his hand up and down Steve’s chest, up his arms to where his wrists were encased in the shackles, across his fingers, teasing at them until Steve wrapped his hand around Tony’s, and then down his arms again. He repeated the same motions from Steve’s toes to the curve of his ass, up and down, over the chains and between the shackles and Steve’s skin. It took Steve’s fog-clouded brain far too long to realize that Tony was testing the bindings to make certain they weren’t tight enough to do any real damage.

“You’ll likely bruise,” Tony observed. “Your skin is so fair,” he added, glancing down at Steve. “I’ll have you sit for me in only your bruises. How would you like that?”

The image hit Steve’s head with a clang—bell, Steve thought hazily—kneeling at Tony’s feet while he worked and talked, naked, but for his collar and the bands of yellowing blues and purples around his wrists, knees and thighs that Tony had put there, that were a part of Steve’s punishment. Reminders. Steve’s eyes found Tony’s and whatever Tony saw there made him smile, soft and gentle. “You would be beautiful,” Tony said. Steve breathed out, soft and even, keeping some sort of mental tally as he did. One breath, two breaths, three, he wondered if the bruises were forming even now. Four, five breaths, six, and Tony was looking at him, but he was distant, as if Steve was
looking up at him from under the water, though he could breathe just fine, and Tony was right
there.

Tony leaned down, breaking the invisible surface, and parted Steve’s lips with his own. Steve’s
mouth fell open with a soft, strangled moan, and Tony’s tongue swiped inside, hot and deep,
pressing against Steve’s own. Tony urged Steve’s mouth wider, and the kiss turned hot, insistent,
Tony’s tongue plunging deep to explore, then drawing back and flicking the tip over Steve’s,
teasing, licking and nipping along Steve’s lips, even tugging the bottom one between his teeth,
sharp enough to sting. Steve groaned again, throat full of gravel, and craned his neck forward,
straining his arms where the chain rattled against the loop on the headboard, keeping him in place.
Tony suckled lightly at Steve’s lip, almost as if in apology, then released it and huffed out a warm
breath of laughter against Steve’s mouth.

His mouth trailed lower, down Steve’s throat beyond the collar, nipping and sucking at the skin
where it stretched down to Steve’s shoulder. There would be a mark there, too, Steve thought
dazedly, as his back arched to reach more of the wet heat of Tony’s mouth. Tony’s head dipped
lower, to the hollow of Steve’s throat, then lower still, down the breastbone to the fold of skin
where Steve’s muscles were stretched across his chest by the position of the chains. Another puff
of warm breath over his wet skin as Tony chuckled, and Steve realized his hips were canting up
and down, trying to find some kind of friction that Tony refused to provide.

“Tony,” Steve groaned, drawing out the name. Tony looked up at him under hooded lashes,
smiled wickedly, then sank his mouth down to Steve’s nipple, keeping his eyes gleaming on
Steve’s as he took the nub into his mouth and teased at it with his tongue, rolling it with his teeth,
almost a threat, and then he did, biting hard and making Steve jump and cry out. Tony sucked the
nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the delicate skin, soothing the ache away, then
finally released it with a wet-sounding plop. He smiled up at Steve, then pushed himself up onto
his hands, regarding Steve with a keen sort of speculative interest.

“Now,” Tony said, sitting up and reaching again into his coat. He pulled out a pair of golden clips,
studded with some kind of deep, pink stones and held together by a length of delicate, filigreed
chain. “Something special I had made for you.”

He reached out a hand and plucked at Steve’s nipple again, still wet from Tony’s mouth. Steve
knew what the thing in Tony’s hand was for, of course, though it didn’t hurt any less for knowing
when Tony pinched the clip apart and let its fine, blunt teeth clasp onto the hard point of Steve’s
nipple. Steve hissed and tossed his head back as the pain crested over his body, sending sharp,
stabbing pangs of pressure burning down his cock and pulsing at the head.

“You were so brave, that night when you told me everything you had been trying to say. So
brave,” Tony continued.

He leaned down again and took Steve’s other nipple in his mouth. For a moment, the dueling
sensations were nearly overwhelming. Steve couldn’t figure out which one to feel, so he let
himself sink down into both. One on top of him, pushing down, one below him, lifting him up,
and he was floating in between, that was how his mind could find some sense of it. Tony sucked
hard, mimicking his treatment of the other nipple, and then drew back and sank the clasp into
place. The second one hurt less, or more, Steve wasn’t sure. Either way, the pain was somehow
behind him, racing to catch up, but he knew it wouldn’t, not now.

“Few would have done what you did at all, you know?” Tony continued, his voice low and gentle,
almost awe-filled as he looked at Steve. “How many here knew, but let fear keep them from so
much as whispering it to me? Or perhaps they held their silence so that they could gain some boon
from Zola and the rest of them, exploit their knowledge for their own profit? And yet, you—you walked in here and told me, with no certainty that I would even believe you. Let me take care of you. Put it all aside, and let me take care of you.”

Steve nodded. Yes. He wanted that. Desperately. No intrigue, no plans, no secrets, no lies, just him and Tony, and for tonight, for all the nights they had, he could give that to Tony. Maybe that was his own penance, in a way, because he doubted he would ever find anything that approached this again. He would always be Tony’s, collar or no. He blinked and glanced away from Tony’s face, up to the canopy with its rich, vibrant colors threaded with gold. He nodded again, eyes watering at the edges, and looked down at Tony. One tear slipped out and left a thin line down his cheek. Tony reached out his hand and cupped the side of Steve’s face as Steve leaned into the warm, familiar solidity of it, closing his eyes. He felt Tony wipe his thumb down the path of the tear, and when he opened his eyes, Tony’s expression was filled with such yearning, it split open Steve’s heart and burrowed there, warm and bright, lighting up his chest with pinpricks of heat.

“You are truly beyond measure, my beautiful one,” Tony whispered, voice ragged and tight with desire and what Steve would have said was hope, though he had no idea what to make of that.

“As much as I love how prettily you beg, tonight, you will say nothing, I think. You have spoken enough for now, my treasure.” Tony continued. “Tonight, you will not speak, except sounds of pleasure,” Tony said, then lifted the chain that connected the clasps on Steve’s nipples and held it aloft in front of Steve’s face. It tugged hard at Steve’s nipples, making him choke off a gasp before he remembered himself and let Tony hear his moan. “Open,” Tony commanded. Oh. Steve’s mouth fell open, and Tony threaded the length of chain between Steve’s lips. Steve pulled it between his teeth, holding it fast, the strange taste of it, almost like blood, but not nearly so bitter, filled his mouth. It pulled at his nipples. Not hard enough to hurt, exactly, but enough that he felt it, and if he moved very much, it would hurt, Steve realized with sudden understanding. If he moved his head, thrashed around or did much more than just lie there and take whatever Tony did to him, it was going to hurt, perhaps fairly badly, but it was also a pain that was within his control, and the idea of that sent a fluttery, watery feeling to his stomach and made his cock strain and throb against the confines of its ring.

“Good,” Tony said, sitting back and admiring his handiwork. “That’s good, Steve. You’re so beautiful for me,” he sighed, looking almost wistful. “I’m going to fuck you now.”

Steve jolted at the blunt words and the promise they carried with them. He let out a muffled cry in surprise as the movement jerked at his nipples, sending spikes of pain-filled want down to his cock. His eyes widened, and he groaned again, pulling a bit at his chains as if he could find some small sliver of relief that way, though there was little give to be had. His mouth watered around the chain. A small rivulet of saliva spilled out the corner of his lips, onto his chin. He was going to drool all over himself like a child, he thought with dawning horror. He sucked at the chain a bit, trying to swallow, but it was hard with the chain draped through his mouth. He caught Tony watching him, and realized that Tony probably knew this, which made it excruciatingly worse and infinitely better at the same time.

“You’ll get two fingers, that’s it,” Tony warned.

Steve tried to nod without thinking, but the movement just sent another burst of pain through his nipples, so he stilled himself and watched Tony. Tony grinned, all wolf’s teeth in the firelight, Steve thought, a shiver running over his skin. It would not be soft and easy this time, the way it sometimes was with Tony, but hard and brutal, because Steve was here to be used, all open and ready like this. This was his punishment for leaving Tony’s bed. To be literally chained to it and used the way Tony wanted, not even able to use his voice for anything other than the little sounds
of pleasure Tony liked, to be able to control how much pain was worth whatever he could manage
to do with his body other than to lay there and take it.

His cock throbbed painfully against his stomach. He shouldn’t want this. He shouldn’t. But, God,
he did, he wanted this so badly. Exactly this. To not think, to not be able to do anything, to just
have to be here, a hole for Tony to fill, to use for his pleasure, it was almost too much. The only
thing that kept him here at all was the constant, aching pull of the chain on his nipples, a painful
reminder each time he moved that wouldn’t quite allow him to drift completely away. He
suspected that was Tony’s purpose in this. Part of it, part of whatever this was, was that Steve
needed to give himself this, too.

I should have told Tony sooner, Steve thought, and arched his neck up, pulling the chain taut to the
point that he was sure his nipples were stretched obscenely from his chest. He relaxed then, and
looked up at Tony, who had his head tilted to one side, eyes dark and pupils blown wide as he
watched Steve. “Fucking hell,” Tony rasped under his breath, then shook his head and reached for
the bedside table where the pot of oil warmed over a small flame.

The first touch of the warm, oil-coated finger at his entrance was enough to make Steve stiffen,
though he tried to force himself to relax. It didn’t work. Tony traced the circle of his rim, once,
twice, as Steve watched, Tony’s gaze completely captivated by the sight before him. He pushed
his finger into Steve’s hole, burying it deep in one, quick thrust. Steve grunted at the sudden
intrusion, then groaned. It hurt, but not terribly so, more the surprise of it than anything. He only
barely moved, letting his hips roll with it and trying to tamp down on the need to thrust, to reach
for more of that sensation of being filled, yet still being far too empty. Tony pulled his finger out,
then slid it back in again, repeating the motion over and over while he watched Steve. Steve’s
breathing was coming in fast, shallow pants. His heart thudded in his ears. The pressure on his
cock and balls, the ache from his nipples, the burning stretch of Tony’s finger, it kept pushing him
higher and higher, lifting him up and towards some crest that he couldn’t see, but could feel, just a
little bit out of reach.

Tony pulled his finger out and reached over to dip his hand in the warm oil again. This time, he
looked up at Steve and kept his eyes locked there while he slowly pushed two fingers in. It was
still a tight fit. It had been so long, Steve thought, with a bright burst of need. Tony’s fingers
worked him, stretching and tugging at his rim, pushing deep inside him so they brushed lightly
against that place that sent sparks of aching want to the tip of his cock, a burning sort of pleasure-
pain that overrode everything else for those seconds. Steve couldn’t help but let his hips try to rise
to meet Tony’s fingers, though the chains kept him from doing much. Tony smiled at his efforts
though, and patted his knee.

“You’re doing so good for me,” Tony said, voice low and husky with emotion. “Beautiful like
this, all open for me. God, you’re so tight. Fuck,” Tony ground out, making a V with his fingers
and pushing hard at the edges of Steve’s hole.

Steve could feel his body loosening, though he knew it wouldn’t be enough, and it would hurt
when Tony finally took him, but it was anticipation and desperate want that filled his mind, not
fear. It would feel so good, to stretch and open for Tony like that, to give that to Tony, that pain,
that faith that it would be good. The need to do that burned through him sharper than any pain. He
cought Tony’s eye, then slowly turned his head to the side, pulling the chain that held his right
nipple until it stretched tight, a deep, pulsating stab of pain and want pushing at the head of his
cock until Steve thought he might explode. He wouldn’t, though. He would be good for Tony.

Steve closed his eyes. Let the pain of it lift him higher. He heard Tony curse, and suddenly felt
empty as Tony’s fingers left him. Steve smiled. Breathed. Went higher. He turned his head the
other way and pinpricks of painful relief burst through one nipple while the other burned hot and
taut with the pull of it. A rustle of clothes, and soon, Steve felt the thick, blunt head of Tony’s
cock at his entrance. It was warm and slick from the oil, but still too big. It would hurt. It would
feel good. It didn’t matter. He went higher.

Tony pushed in, slowly, excruciatingly slowly, stretching Steve around him to the point it felt like
Steve’s body would come apart, that this wouldn’t work any other way. It burned, bright and pure,
and he was too full, almost choking with how full he was, the pressure of it too much, too much,
too much, and then he turned to face Tony, the stabbing ache of sensation rushing back to his
nipple coupled with the deep, burning stretch of Tony pushing inside him, claiming him, and he
was gone. Over the edge. Flying. Soaring. The pain was all below him, and there was just him and
Tony, and this budding sense of pleasure, fine and delicate and deep, but there.

Tony thrust inside him, burying his cock to the hilt, and the incredible, burning pressure was gone.
Steve was just full. Everywhere. In his body, in his head, his arms were full, his hands were full,
everywhere was Tony. He let his head arch back again as Tony withdrew and plunged in again,
setting a fast, hard rhythm that shook Steve’s body in the shackles, digging them in to his skin.
There will be marks, Steve thought. I’ll kneel for him in my marks. I will be beautiful for him.

His whole chest ached. It didn’t matter. He was above it, below it, all around the pain. He arched
his neck again. Heard Tony moan and say his name like a chant, over and over as he thrust in and
out of Steve’s body, using him, taking him, making him his. Making Tony his, Steve mind
hummed with pleasure. He could feel it building, that bud of something deep inside, awakening on
each of Tony’s thrusts. He arched his back again, straining against the cuffs on his wrists and
lifted his hips to meet Tony’s cock as he drove back into Steve’s body. Pleasure burst deep and
rolled down the length of Steve’s cock, gathering at the head with a pounding, pulsing demand.
Steve moaned, long and low as his body jerked and rocked in time with Tony’s thrusts. Steve
arched his neck again, then down, then again, keeping time with Tony’s thrusts. There were words
spilling from Tony’s lips. Good words. Beautiful words. Warm words that sat on Steve’s skin
and seeped inside, to his bones. It didn’t matter what, not then, but Steve thought he would wish
later that he had listened.

Tony’s hand wrapped around Steve’s cock, stroking it long and hard. Steve shouted and struggled
against the bindings in earnest for a moment, hips thrusting uselessly as he tried to find that friction
again. Tony rammed into him again and flicked the clasp on the band around Steve’s cock and
balls, releasing it as the head of his cock found that place deep inside again. Steve screamed, he
thought maybe Tony’s name, but it came out garbled by the chain between his teeth, and he jerked
his head back, pulling the clasps on his nipples tight and stretching them from his chest.

Tony was snapping his hips against Steve in hard, pounding, short thrusts that left no room
between them for Steve to gain any kind of purchase. Steve gasped and strained, letting out a low,
keening moan. “Come for me, my love,” Tony said, and Steve came, hard, spurts of it covering
his stomach and chest and hitting his chin. He felt Tony spill inside him with a sharp shout, hips
thrusting with a juddering, loose rhythm through the last of it. Tony’s head fell forward and he
collapsed to his hands, braced on either side of Steve. He was breathing heavily and coated with a
bright sheen of sweat that made his skin glisten like molten gold in the firelight. Steve waited,
breathing deep. There was spittle on his chin and cheeks and covering his lips, though he couldn’t
find the energy to care. Tony finally lifted his head, eyes roving over Steve’s face and chest, a
dark, satisfied pleasure contorting his features.

“God, you are incredible,” Tony breathed out. “A beautiful, glorious mess, that’s what you are.
The most God-damned beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”
Tony dipped his head and pressed his mouth to Steve’s, nudging Steve’s lips to part with his tongue. His tongue flicked inside Steve’s mouth, slow and languorous, exploring. It traced the metal chain, then dipped deeper, pushing against Steve’s own, and curled around the chain, drawing it out of Steve’s mouth and holding it between his own teeth with a feral smile. A thin line of drool hung from Steve’s mouth to the chain, breaking away and falling to Steve’s chest. A dull ache throbbed in his jaw. He hadn’t realized how tightly he had clamped down on the chain. A horse with a bit, Steve thought, hating how much the thought made his insides churn and something stir with interest deep inside him as an image arose in his mind. No. He wouldn’t think that.

Tony watched Steve work his jaw with the newfound freedom, then grinned, delighted, as if he had some inkling what thoughts rose unbidden in Steve’s mind. Still smiling, with the chain caught between his teeth, Tony lifted his head and pulled the chain back, stretching Steve’s nipples again, making Steve gasp and cry out as his body throbbed.

Tony took the chain from his mouth and laid it across Steve’s chest with gentle, careful hands. He was coming down. Sinking, Steve thought, though the word held little meaning.

“Beautiful one. You were perfect for me,” Tony whispered. Heat curled in Steve’s chest again, bursting bright.

Tony reached one hand down and carefully undid the clasp on Steve’s right nipple. The sudden pain was almost blinding, and then, it got worse, seeming to build on itself as sensation returned. Tony bent his head and took the abused nub into his mouth, laving it gently with his tongue. He sucked lightly, keeping it warm, and somehow, helping keep the pinpricks of burning cold somewhat at bay. He repeated the ritual with the other nipple, though Steve was better prepared this time, and the shock of it wasn’t as bad. When it was over, Tony kissed him again, softer this time, and placed a hand on each side of Steve’s face, holding him there for a long moment.

Finally, Tony pulled out of him. The emptiness was sudden and wrong in some deep, awful way that Steve couldn’t name, but it made his throat tighten until the need to breathe became a struggle.

“Shhhh,” Tony soothed. “I’ve got you.” He was rubbing Steve’s skin with his hands, massaging the muscles where they were taut with tension. “Shhhh…shhhh, you were wonderful, Steve. Perfect. Be still for me, now, alright?”

“Yes, Tony,” Steve replied. It barely sounded like his voice, cracking like a split of wood, but he stopped pulling against the chains and felt some of the tightness leak out of his body at Tony’s words. He could be good a little longer, if Tony wanted him to.

Tony got up and walked to the cabinet on the far side of the room, though Steve couldn’t see what he was doing. When he returned, he held something in his hand, a long, bulbous shaft of perfectly smooth ivory, ringed in rubies around the base and with a handle intricately carved into two embracing figures.

“Let us keep my seed inside you for a while, shall we?” Tony asked, already dipping the piece into the oil.

Steve groaned, and felt his hole twitch where some of Tony’s come leaked out of him. Yes, his mind buzzed. His stomach dipped again, and he wasn’t sinking anymore, just laying there, not flying, not falling, not anymore. Hovering. Floating. Something above him and below. Tony. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again when he felt the thing pushing at his hole. It wasn’t quite as large as Tony, but it was big and unyielding, and he was more sore than he had
realized, but Tony was pushing it in, slowly, but inexorably. It didn’t hurt, not exactly, but he felt it, deep inside him, filling him up, keeping Tony’s seed inside his body, where it belonged. He felt it in his head, too, the invasion of it, the impropriety, the shame, the need for it and the embarrassment at that. He knew what it looked like, this thing sticking out of him, with the base ringed in red to match his hole. It should be obscene. Vulgar. Depraved. He should object.

He didn’t.

Tony was looking at him with such awe, his face soft and eyes crinkled at the corners, wet with emotion. He was beautiful. He had only to look at Tony to know this. What did it matter if this was only for another couple of months? He could have this. He would have this, and give this to Tony in return, this wondrous, indescribable feeling, this joy, this pleasure, this everything.

“Now,” Tony said, holding out a long strip of red silk embroidered with gold threads. He held it in front of Steve until Steve gave a small nod, then placed it gently over Steve’s eyes and tied it behind his head. “You need not do anything. You need not think, or speak, or see, only feel. Only me, and this, that is all that matters for tonight. You will be good for me, and I will take care of you.”

Yes, Steve thought. He could do that. It was dark. There was nothing but Tony’s voice, murmuring soft words of praise as his hands stroked Steve’s skin. At some point, a warm, wet cloth cleaned him off, swiping delicately over his chest and stomach and around his cock, then dabbing lightly at his rim and the seam of his ass where some of Tony’s seed had leaked out of him. A goblet of water was placed to his lips. He drank. Steve kept drifting. Tony was there beside him. Sometimes, he heard Tony murmuring to him or felt Tony’s fingers gently tracing his skin, as if drawing patterns there for only Tony to see. Steve thought of the time he and Bucky sailed a leaf boat down a stream the rains had made, with the water rushing over the rocks and the wind pushing it over, over, over and on, until it emptied into the wide, still part of the river and then ambled on, bobbing gently at the edges where the reeds caught it. Tony was here, in the reeds, Steve, thought nonsensically, though the thought pleased him nonetheless.

He didn’t know how much time had passed. It didn’t matter. Tony was here. He thought he might have dozed, since he startled when he felt the first chain fall away. Tony’s hands were on him, working the muscles, keeping him from stretching out too quickly. He was sore. A deep, aching soreness, like after a long run or a particularly grueling training session, but not a bad soreness.

When his legs were finally free and Tony was satisfied, he carefully helped Steve stretch out. The plug inside him shifted, and Steve groaned a little. Finally, his hands were out of the cuffs, and Tony was working his fingers into Steve’s wrists and arms, lowering them back down to Steve’s sides in increments.

“I’m going to take this out,” Tony said, tugging lightly at the handle of the plug and letting it slide in and out of Steve’s hole ever so slightly. Steve shifted against the motion, pushing his hips down, seeking, wanting more. “You may come, if you can, but don’t touch yourself.” Steve hadn’t realized he was hard again until the statement, but now, he felt it, his cock hard and pounding with blood where it rested against his thigh.

Tony pulled the plug almost all the way out, then thrust it in again, hard and fast, and then again, hitting that spot like he knew exactly how to angle it. Steve came with a loud, stuttering cry, rolling to his side and curling in on himself as his hips jerked with it. The plug slid out of him, leaving him empty again, but it wasn’t the terrible, awful lack that it had been before.

“Shhh,” Tony urged, making Steve realize he was making soft, hiccupping sighs. “I’ve got you. Ready?” Tony asked, his hands reaching up and stilling on the blindfold where it was knotted
behind Steve’s head. Steve nodded. The silk fell away, and there was Tony, haloed by so much brightness, it hurt to look at him. Steve blinked and felt his eyes watering. Tony tossed the blindfold aside and reached for him, pulling Steve close, heedless of the mess that Steve had made. “I’ve got you. You’re fine. You did so good for me, Steve. So very, very good. You were so amazing, my love. So beautiful for me.”

“T—Tony,” Steve gasped, clutching at Tony’s back. He squelched his eyes shut and grasped for Tony, finding his mouth and kissing him. It was a terrible kiss, all teeth and nose and bad angles, but Steve didn’t care. He could feel a laugh well up inside him, and suddenly, there was nothing for it, so he just let it, except it came out as something more akin to a sob, and he was crying, though he didn’t know why. He was happy. He was so incredibly happy. Beyond happy. He didn’t know what it was, except that it was Tony. He kissed him again, better this time, and Tony kissed him back, passionately, deeply, like kissing Steve was the only thing he ever wanted to do. When they broke apart, Steve grinned and buried his face into the front of Tony’s tunic.

“I like you like this, my treasure,” Tony said with a warm laugh in his voice. He placed a light, lingering kiss on Steve’s head. “Let me get you cleaned up. You need a bath, but we will save that for tomorrow. Tonight, this will have to do. You will not make it through a bath, and I cannot carry you back to bed.”

“I’m not tired,” Steve insisted. In fact, he felt wonderful. Energy coursed through his veins. He felt like he could run across half the country at blazing speed, the way Pietro did. He could do anything.

“You will be in a moment,” Tony laughed, grinning fondly down at him. Steve shook his head, though Tony only sighed and eyed him dubiously. He finally disentangled himself long enough to get up and return with a cloth to wipe Steve and the bed as best he could, and a soft, silken nightrobe that he helped Steve struggle to get into. It was harder than it should have been, Steve thought, as if his limbs had yet to remember how to work properly. Tony snuffed the torches, and took off the rest of his clothes, climbing into bed next to Steve. He wrapped an arm around Steve’s stomach and kissed the top of Steve’s shoulder. “Sleep now, my treasure.”

Steve turned in Tony’s arms and looked down at Tony. It was so much, what he felt. He had no words, not the way Tony did. He didn’t know what to say or how to give Tony a sliver of what Tony gave to him so freely. He just knew he wanted Tony to be happy, to feel the way Steve felt, at least for these months. He could give Tony this. He knew Tony wanted it from him. Tony, who believed him and tried so excruciatingly hard to remedy the wrongs that had been done, who wanted to listen to Steve and make things better.

Would it make it harder or easier to look back on this time, Steve wondered, then shoved the thought away. It would come to pass, however it happened, and this would end, either in his escape or his death, because he wouldn’t come back and put Tony in a position of having to pass sentence on him. He couldn’t do that. They had this, this time, just for the two of them, and here, now, he could give everything of himself. Him. Steve Rogers. That was who Tony wanted. Not someone behind a mask. Just Steve. Steve was enough. And Tony was…more than everything. So much more. He didn’t know how to say it, and then he did.

“I love you,” Steve said, mouth curling into a soft, lazy smile. He did, he realized. He loved Tony. He loved Tony, and maybe this was all they got, the two of them, but it didn’t make it less real. He thought maybe that was even true. He wanted it to be true.

*There are no secrets, only lies.* It didn’t feel like a lie. Loving Tony. It felt less like a lie than almost anything Steve had ever said, and yet, it hurt to say, wreathed in regret that slashed through
Steve’s mind like the sharpest blade and left behind an open, gaping wound in its wake. Tony’s gaze flickered with surprise, joy and then, strangely, sadness, the bone-deep kind that wrenched at Steve’s heart even before Tony could speak.

“No. No, you don’t. You think I don’t know that you cannot? I told you. I know you,” Tony husked out, his voice tight, the words clicking in his throat as he sucked in a watery breath. “But, know this. Love me or not, you are mine, you will always be mine, and I will burn the world to the ground if someone tries to take you from me. That is the only promise I can give you.”
“How do you feel?” Tony asked, dragging the soapy sponge over Steve’s back. The lather smelled like lavender, Steve noted, remembering the sprigs that his mother would sometimes pick and hang over her bed or stuff into the mattress to combat the smell of the hay as it dried out.

“Good,” Steve murmured. His head was pillowed on his arms where they were folded on the edge of Tony’s large bathtub, while Tony bathed what was left of last night’s activities from his body. The cool tiles that lined the bath felt wonderful against his skin, heated as it was from the warm water and Tony’s touch. He’d woken up a short time ago with Tony still wrapped around him, breathing deeply against Steve’s chest, though he had stirred awake when Steve did. Tony somehow managed to get both of them into the tub, even though Steve’s legs didn’t seem quite ready to work yet and his body felt a bit like it was slogging through mud instead of simply trying to walk a few steps.

“Particularly descriptive this morning, are we?” Tony teased, tracing the sponge along Steve’s back.

Steve huffed out a short, languid hum of a laugh, then looked over at Tony, who leaned around to capture his gaze.

“You should eat more,” Tony said more seriously, nodding at the tray of fruits, breads and cheeses arranged around the colorful flowers that Steve recognized from Tony’s garden which sat along the edge of the bath. “That poor, embarrassed servant who nearly tripped over her own skirts trying to bow and avert her eyes at the same time brought that all the way in here, just for you.”

“I’m good, Tony,” Steve repeated, though he reached out, plucked a few of the deep, purple grapes and popped them into his mouth. “A little sore. Not bad, though. Good-sore, I think.”

He was sore, that much was true. Moreso than he felt like admitting to Tony, but it wasn’t bad, and in a strange way, he liked this vestige of last night that his body seemed to carry into the morning. Each stab of pain, each moment of discomfort, it all carried a memory of pleasure along with it, all tied up in his head, the way his mother’s ball of old strings of yarn got so twisted up together, you couldn’t quite tell where one color ended and another began. His muscles pulled where they had been stretched and tense last night. His nipples ached and even just the touch of the water on them was enough to make Steve hiss when Tony helped him into the bath this morning, but it wasn’t terrible. Greyish bruises, still faint, but there, darkened his skin where the chains had been. His limbs were a little stiff at first, but the warm water loosened them. Other parts of him were tender, too, he thought, as he felt a deeper pang of soreness when he shifted his position, but, overall, he felt…good, he decided, letting the word drift around in his mind, vibrating aloft on some kind of pleasant hum that echoed in his head.

Very good.

“Are you sure?” Tony pressed, eyes narrowing as he regarded Steve. Seemingly satisfied with whatever he found there, Tony relaxed and his gaze softened. “You were amazing last night. Truly. I hadn’t been sure…you dreamed last night. Called out my name. Others, I didn’t recognize.”
“I did?” Steve asked, surprise making his voice rise, though still sluggish and thick-tongued. He frowned. “I don’t remember. I’m sorry if I disturbed your sleep.”

“Your distress is never a disturbance, Steve. You calmed soon enough, but I—I worried. That last night had perhaps been too much and too soon. I wondered that I shouldn’t push you too far, not with everything you’ve been through, but you…” he broke off and shook his head, mouth curling into a rueful smile. “You always surprise me. You were beautiful. Incredibly so. I don’t think I could ever tire of the feeling of watching you give yourself to me. Your pleasure…it is truly a wondrous gift, my treasure.”

The praise flowed warm, like sunlight, dappling Steve’s skin, like Tony’s words always did. A deep contentment stirred in his chest, easing away everything else except the vague sense of remembered pleasure, hazy and bright at the same time.

“It was…I liked it, Tony,” Steve assured him, catching Tony’s gaze for a moment before dipping his head back to his arms with a rush of heat to his cheeks. Liked it, he thought. Small words, for something far grander. He didn’t know how to express what he felt about last night. It had hurt and felt good. He’d been not scared, but…concerned, he decided after a moment’s thought. Concerned about it. The chains, so like and unlike the ones he wore on the road here from Rumlow’s, and yet completely different. Being held down, but in a way that felt like being cherished instead of being a prisoner. The…thing Tony put in him, how full he’d felt, how invaded and open and taken, the same thing and not the same thing as when Zola’s overseer used something similar to open him for Tony’s use. He didn’t quite understand how one thing could be experienced entirely differently, but there it was. Tony, he supposed. Tony was the difference.

“I liked it. I would tell you if I did not,” Steve said finally. That was true. He would, and Tony would listen, and that was, he supposed, all that mattered.

Tony clucked his tongue approvingly, then grinned at Steve, wagging his eyebrows up and down. “This is something I know well,” he agreed, and tossed the sponge at Steve’s face. Steve caught it one-handed, and glared at Tony, who held his hands up in submission and backed away, sending water cascading over the sides of the tub. “Your King? You would not dare,” Tony challenged, then laughed as Steve pushed himself up off the tub’s ledge and moved across the tub in one, quick stride, brushing his chest against Tony’s and pinning him against the back of the tub, an arm braced on either side. “Okay, fine, you would dare,” Tony grinned again.

“You like that I would,” Steve replied, then held the sponge up high over Tony’s head, while Tony raised his eyes speculatively, waiting. Instead of squeezing, Steve brought the sponge down in a long stroke over Tony’s back, then back up again and repeated the motion a few more times, until soapy bubbles clung to the tanned muscles of Tony’s back.

“I like most everything about you,” Tony admitted. He leaned in to Steve’s chest with a sigh, letting Steve continue to bathe him. After a while, Steve nudged at Tony to turn, then worked the lather into Tony’s hair with firm fingers. It felt good. Taking care of Tony like this, Steve thought, as he massaged his hands into Tony’s scalp. Tony always took care of him, and he liked that, too. Almost immeasurably so. But, this…this was nice, too, he thought, feeling Tony go soft and pliant under his hands. He wondered if this was something of what Tony felt when Steve let himself go and just gave himself over to Tony. This feeling of—he wasn’t even sure how to describe it. Immense responsibility coupled with incredible pride that he could.

“Just most everything, huh?” Steve teased, moving his hands down to Tony’s neck and digging his fingers in until the other man groaned in pleasure.

“Unlike me, you’ve a few faults—very minor, mind you, which I am willing to overlook, being the
magnanimous ruler that I am,” Tony teased.

“Do tell,” Steve prodded, working his hands harder into Tony’s skin.

“Oh, let me think…you’re all but intractable when convinced you are right, you care too deeply for people you deem in need of protection, you are far too wont to pick a fight, even when doing so is the last thing that is in your interest,” Tony pointed out, craning his head to the side to regard Steve for a moment as Steve’s fingers stilled on his neck. “You don’t know when to quit. I swear, if you came upon a wall between you and where you thought you should be, you’d chew your way through it before giving up. Hell, you were bound in chains, injured, weaponless, and on your knees. You bit him, for God’s sake,” Tony harrumphed, then shook his head and closed his eyes, opening them finally and looking back at Steve, his mouth a thin line. “Did you think Rhodey did not question Rumlow before justice was meted out?” Tony asked with a dismissive snort. “Your lack of self-preservation will, no doubt, keep me up many nights in the years to come.”

“Sounds like you’ve given this some thought,” Steve smiled, though his mind stuck on the word years, tripping over and over it, unable to reconcile the fear and contentment that the word brought with it. Years. Tony saw them together for years. Would he then retire to this Old Palace Tony mentioned, spending his days in luxury with the rest of the concubines who were past their prime? He shook his head, trying to clear it, forcing the frown that furrowed his brow to soften. Too many questions over one word, he thought, though it stayed there, hovering in the back of his mind. “I…may have heard your complaints before. Once or twice,” Steve admitted, trying to return Tony’s smile and managing something akin to it by Tony’s pleased look. Tony grunted in utter lack of surprise and dipped his chin to his chest while Steve went back to massaging the ridge of Tony’s shoulder.

“That, I can certainly believe,” Tony huffed. “Speaking of your, ah…”

“Lack of self-preservation skills,” Steve supplied, working his hands through the suds down Tony’s back.

“Yes. That. The other night, when you told me…what you told me. About Zola and--everything,” Tony began.

“Yes?” Steve prompted when Tony fell silent.

“You spoke of—of how difficult it was for you, after you were found,” Tony continued in a quiet, careful voice. “How you were—how you felt as if---” he broke off and turned to look at Steve, stilling Steve’s hands for the moment. “It pained me to hear it. Your pain. More than I knew possible,” he continued, frowning a bit, as if still somewhat mystified. “But, that you told me of it…this means a great deal to me, Steve. Not just Zola and Stane, but all of it. I would…I---it would please me to have you feel that you could speak to me of these things. And not only when you need to completely disrupt my entire kingdom,” he finished with an apologetic flattening of his mouth he aimed at Steve.

“I don’t—there’s nothing really to say,” Steve replied. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

“Everything’s fine and nothing happened. Right,” Tony huffed out, giving Steve a long look before turning forward again, allowing Steve to keep up his ministrations. It gave Steve something to do, and he liked the feeling of Tony under his hands, solid and here, right here, which was good. Grounding. Like grabbing hold of the chain to an anchor, and knowing he wouldn’t float away.

“What do you want me to say?” Steve asked. It came out harsher than he meant it to, but Tony’s solicitousness twisted inside Steve’s chest like a knife sometimes, because Tony would dig deep,
open him up and hollow him out of everything that hurt him, and take it unto himself, if Steve
allowed it, and that was far too tempting. He would take my heart with him, as well, Steve
thought, and knew it was true. There was danger there, giving too much to Tony, letting Tony take
too much of him, because it would be the pain first, and then—then it would the rest of him, and
he wouldn’t be able to leave, because everything would be Tony’s. Better to hold onto it. Better to
hold onto himself. He thought it might be the only way.

“I know you miss where you are from. Your friends. Then finding yourself as you did with
Rumlw, and with years of war only barely behind you. At first, I wanted you to put all of that
behind you. Your longing for the past, it…well, the truth of it is, I was jealous of it, small man
that I sometimes am,” Tony grimaced, shaking his head and letting out a breath. He reached up
and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and squeezed his eyes shut for a long
moment.

“You wanted me to be happy,” Steve reminded him, Tony’s words filtering through his mind
again.  *I think your happiness would be breathtaking to behold.* That is what Tony had said to him
all those nights ago. Steve could hear it, clear in his mind as the night Tony said it, imprinted
there, the way the tracks of giants were sometimes captured by the rocks back home, that one
moment in time held forever. Tony wanted that, Steve knew, perhaps more than Steve had quite
realized, and it terrified him in some deep, fundamental way that he couldn’t quite explain, because
he could find it here, with Tony. He knew that now. He could choose this, and be happy, let Tony
make him happy and give the same to Tony, but he could never wear a collar and carry the star
shield. He could never have this and be who he was, but he could be this, he could be Tony’s, and
the burst of warmth in his chest at the thought was perhaps the worst part of it.

“I did. I do. But,” Tony sighed, turning around in the cradle of Steve’s arms to face him. “The
place you are from, the people you care for, you carry them with you. Trying to excise those parts,
I thought, would help you adjust. Help you settle. I was wrong. Wrong to try to take that from
you. The man you are…for all your faults,” he gave Steve a lopsided smile that was almost sad, “I
would not change you, and all of those things, those people, they are a part of you. A part of this
strength you bear so well, if not so easily. I try to…in my mind, sometimes, I try to put myself into
your place, and I—I think I might have gone mad from it,” Tony admitted, letting out a nervous
laugh that held no mirth. “You—though. You have this strength, this heart in you, that I—” he
stopped, shaking his head. “I used to read all those tales of the knights of old and their quests when
I was a boy, you know. I would…dream of something like that, some great adventure, meeting
some hero like in the stories,” he said, looking over his shoulder at Steve for a long moment,
before lowering his eyes, almost demurely, Steve thought, as if he had embarrassed himself. “A
child’s silly daydreaming, nothing more, as I told you before. It was Rhodey who became the
knight,” Tony grimaced. “And he is certainly a legend at least unto his own mind,” Tony said,
trying for a lighter tone that didn’t quite stick.

“I’m not a hero, Tony,” Steve said.  “I’m not. Just a man. You credit me far too much, and
yourself far too little. I haven’t done anything that anyone else in my position wouldn’t do,” Steve
protested.

“That you think yourself common makes you all the more remarkable. I assure you, there is
nothing common about you. There is a force in you, this strength and certainty you have, and yes,
righteousness, even in a world that refuses to bend to it. You are far from perfect, my soldier,”
Tony breathed out, mouth quinking up at the corners, “but, you are a good man, and that is,
perhaps, the hardest thing to be in a world that rewards those who can set that aside when it suits
them. Not you, though. Never you. That much, I know. You have endured more than any one
man should in such a meager span of years, my dearest one,” Tony said, glancing up at Steve, this
time with heavy, liquid eyes that grew soft, almost pleading, as he looked at Steve. His hands
found Steve’s hips, resting there, just beneath where the water lapped at Steve’s waist. “I would…
consider it a great accomplishment if you did not have to endure anymore,” he said at long last.

“I would…like that, too,” Steve replied finally.

“Then so it shall be,” Tony said.

He let his hands fall from Steve’s waist, turned away again and bowed his head. Steve lifted the
pitcher of warm water up and held it there for a moment, hesitating. Then, he dipped the handle
and let the warm water pour over Tony’s hair, washing out the soap and leaving wet curls clinging
to the sides of his head. Anointed, Steve thought, with a flash of memory, shadows on a cave wall
that grew into something else, his heart melting into the holy man’s chants as ash and oil were
painted over his eyes like a mask. One is life, one is death, over and over, until it was a drumbeat
in Steve’s ears, and he’d asked, the draught at his lips, which one was it to be for him. Each of you
are both, the man had said, with his strange laugh echoing in Steve’s ears even as the potion
burned a path of fire through his body. They had poured water over his head to cleanse the ash and
oil off when it was over, Steve remembered. Warm water, to wash it all away, and then handed
him a shield. His hand curled into a fist of its own accord, and for a moment, Steve could almost
feel the familiar weight of it under his fingers. A shiver made its way up Steve’s spine, and the
feeling that something had passed between them, some moment he only barely missed, fell over
him with a vague sense of disquiet.

“Did you always wish to be a soldier or was it a choice born of necessity?” Tony asked, running his
hands through his wet hair and reaching for one of the soft cloths that sat on the edge of the tub,
using it to wipe the water droplets off his face. There was a sense of effort to the lightness of his
words, but he turned around to face Steve with a curious look on his face. “You’ve the bearing of a
soldier, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean it was a calling. Rhodey wanted to study the stars, or so
he tells me when he’s far into his cups.”

“I didn’t even consider it, actually. Not until there was a war on,” Steve told him, trying to meet
Tony’s attempt to change the mood. “When I was young, I was far too frail and sickly as a boy to
even consider it.”

“No, no, it’s true. Scrawny weed of a thing,“ Steve grinned, remembering, though it was only
now, when his breaths no longer grew tight and small and his body no longer fought against every
single thing he wanted to do that he could find the fondness for those memories. “About this
high,” he said, holding out his hand. “Maybe seven stone soaking wet. My mom swore whatever
weight there was on me, it was made up of half potatoes, half stubbornness,” Steve laughed lightly
at the memory, looking askance at Tony. “Bu—my friend. My best friend,” Steve stumbled a bit
over the words before catching himself and drawing in a resolute breath. “Bucky. My best friend.
He was a year older than me, but he and I grew up together. Him at the top of the hill, me and
mom at the bottom, but…anyway, he—Bucky, he always said it was like God had a sense of
humor about it, you know? So, he gave a kitten the good nature of a badger just for the jest,”
Steve grinned and shook his head. He felt his eyes prickle at the corners and glanced away.

“Bucky…he always looked out for me, you know? I didn’t always have the best judgment when it
came to picking fights I could win—”

“Shocking,” Tony deadpanned, smiling fondly up at him.

“I know,” Steve grinned. “And he—Bucky’d always be there, like he had the Sight or something,
pulling me out of trouble whenever I managed to get into it. Which was often,” Steve admitted
with a low chuckle.
“I can’t even begin to picture you as you describe, but that last part sounds about right,” Tony smiled in return, then it faltered and fell from his face as his eyes gentled. “This…Bucky. You must miss him quite a bit. Perhaps, in time, when you are more settled, you could, I don’t know, invite him here, if he wanted to come. There will be enough ships making the journey soon, now that the war is over. A companion. You should have companions,” Tony said, snapping his fingers together to punctuate the idea. Steve’s heart thudded in his chest, part surprise, part a sort of slow horror that he couldn’t look away from, dawning bright and brutal in his mind at the idea of Bucky, or any of them, seeing him like this. What they would think of him. “Most of the other concubines do, I’m given to understand. It would be good for you, I think,” Tony continued, unaware of the tumult his words worked on Steve’s mind. “I am not unaware that you are… isolated, just you and the boy. Not by design—or, it wasn’t my intent, let us say, though Zola, well. Enough of that, I suppose. But, no matter, it would be pleasing to see you enjoying the company of a friend, especially one with whom you share so much—what?” Tony stopped short, drawing back at what must have been plain on Steve’s face. “Oh,” Tony said, expression softening as his eyes filled with sadness. He shook his head and looked down, then back up at Steve, his face a mask of anguish. “Oh, Steve. I’m so sorry. I should have—I don’t know what I was thinking, I—”

“It’s fine, Tony,” Steve cut in. “It’s…” he sighed and looked away from Tony’s stricken face. “We were on a mission,” Steve began, voice halting and scuttling across the words like a rock skipping across a pond, displacing everything as it went. “We were on a mission,” he repeated, forcing his voice to remain steady.

“Steve,” Tony breathed out, reaching for Steve, only to let his hand fall short, hovering there in the space between them. “You don’t have to. I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t know why—I—I wanted to help, not…this, never this. I did not mean to cause you pain. We need not speak of it-”

“No…no, it’s—I want to. To tell you,” Steve insisted.

“Alright,” Tony said slowly. “If you wish it.”

“It should’ve been a routine mission, really,” Steve began. “Nothing suggested otherwise. We were to ambush a convoy as it made its way through a pass in the mountains. The pass narrowed at a certain point where it hugged the mountain. It was the best place. They couldn’t turn and mount a counterattack. Their only path was forward. We only had to defend one route. It all made sense,” Steve said, shaking his head and leaning back against the stone edge of the tub. Tony was watching him closely, his face tight with tension and sympathy at what he must know was coming. “We got separated. Me and Bucky. Cut off in the melee. Clint, he’d set the supply wagons on fire, like he was supposed to. It was easier to destroy their supplies than try to take them, but whatever was in those wagons, it wasn’t like anything we’d seen before. It just went up, all at once, this huge explosion,” Steve recalled, the thunderous boom seeming to echo in his ears as he spoke.

They would see the same substance again, much later, on ships that next time, and Steve would end up in the sea with what was left of the Valkyrie and the rest of Schmidt’s fleet, but they had stopped it from reaching the city harbor, where Schmidt’s massive cannons could have launched a devastating assault. He remembered Schmidt, the man’s face horribly disfigured, raving about power, and all around him, the smell of a kind of fire that had never known the taste of wood, but burned on its own, wild and free, wherever it went, on rocks and stone, melting steel, even on water, like some demon’s blood from the old tales. Everything burned. Everything, except his shield, which kept him alive long enough to wake up wanting to die. It was likely in its own watery grave now, Steve supposed. Waiting for him.
“Steve,” Tony husked out, frowning at the lull. “You truly don’t have to.”

“No. No, it’s,” Steve broke off, shaking his head. “I need to say it. Please. I want you to know, to—I want you to know of him.”

“Then I would hear it, when you are ready,” Tony replied softly, eyes sharp on Steve’s face.

“There was so much smoke. I couldn’t see him. All around us, there were shouts and cries. Soldiers and horses were screaming. I couldn’t find him, and he was always right there with me, always. But, I couldn’t find him. And then when I did—when I did,” Steve gulped, swallowing back the bile that suddenly tasted like it was doused with ash and soot. “When I did, he was clinging to the axle of one of the wagons where it was hanging off the side of the mountain. I ran for him. Faster than I thought I could run. I almost had him,” Steve said, mouth twisting as his voice broke on the last. “I almost got there. Almost. But, I didn’t. I didn’t. I was too slow, too slow, and he fell, and I—I watched him fall. That was all I could do, just watch it happen. All the times he was there for me, saving me, knowing exactly where to find me, and when it was me—when it was my turn, I—I was too slow.”

“Steve. Steve, that—it was not your fault. It was terrible. I hate that it happened, I do, but it was war. The man you described, he knew what a fight was. He knew the risks. And he made a choice to do what he thought was right, even knowing that. Same as you. He would not want you to carry this guilt, of that I am sure,” Tony said, voice rough and thick. “He would hate that you do, as I hate it. It was not your fault. But, I am still sorry for it. For your pain. More sorry than I can say,” Tony replied, then glanced away, blinking rapidly. He scrubbed a hand over his face and looked back at Steve.

“I—I know. I know, he wouldn’t blame me,” Steve said, swiping a hand over his eyes and drawing in a shuddering breath. “Kind of makes it worse, you know?” he huffed out around a bitter laugh.

“Because if it is your fault, if it isn’t happenstance, but something you can control, then you can stop it from happening again?” Tony asked in a gentle, knowing voice. “That path leads to nothing, my treasure. Trust me. I told you about my parents. The accident,” he said, and Steve nodded. “When I was away at the university in Mita, I spent nearly half a year redesigning rudders. One rudder, then another, then another. Something was always wrong with them. They were never good enough. Of course, they weren’t going to be good enough, were they?” he asked with a note of self-recrimination lacing his voice, though it was old, Steve recognized.

“Your parents’ cog,” Steve guessed with a slight frown.

Tony nodded. “It probably wasn’t even the rudder,” he snorted. “It probably wasn’t anything. Ships sink, don’t they? The sea is fickle, sending one ship on placid waters and bashing another against the banks for no reason other than that it can. It’s something beyond the province of men, or so I am told by those who don’t know how. I should take it up with the sea queen or whatever other useless deity they want us to pay homage to, if I want to control it, right?” he demanded, bright-eyed and tight-lipped. His hands were gripping the ledge of the tub, whiting his knuckles as fresh pain wracked his features before he carefully masked it. Steve closed the distance between them and ducked his head to Tony’s.

“Ships sink,” Tony said, taking a shaky breath. “Ships sink, and soldiers die, but that doesn’t make it easy, does it?”

“No,” Steve replied. “I wanted to be fast enough.”
“I know,” Tony acknowledged softly. “And I wanted to build them a better ship,” Tony said, one half of his mouth lifting into a bitter half-smile as he pulled away enough to look up at Steve with an expression that nearly rent Steve’s heart in two. “You see? Blame has been my constant far longer than it has been yours, my soldier,” Tony whispered, looking up at Steve under dark, hooded eyes that almost seemed to ask for something Steve wasn’t sure he had in his power to give. And then, he knew. Understood. I almost found him, Steve thought, just a little sooner, and I’d have reached him. One faster step, one less wrong turn, one difference, and so on and so on, until it all looped back on itself, because blame was an infinite circle, never offering an end, just the opportunity to keep convincing yourself that next time could be different.

“It wouldn’t have changed anything, if you’d been there,” Steve said.

“You don’t know that,” Tony said, then looked away, blinking at the small hearth where a fire crackled below a pot of fragrant herbs that scented the air.

“Neither do you,” Steve pointed out.

“I did not want to leave the frivolity of the university to spend my time behaving myself and entertaining a bunch of insipid young Lords and Ladies, all of whom were boring and fawning enough to be chosen to accompany the King and Queen. Mother was terribly disappointed,” Tony said with a bitter twist to his lips. “I could have had the ship inspected before launch. It was old, my Grandfather’s actually. But, gaudy, all painted and edged in gilt, the way my mother liked almost everything. I might have noticed something wrong, or seen the shoal in time, or—” he stopped. “Or. You see? I do understand not being fast enough, my soldier. I have spent years understanding that.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Any more than Bucky’s death was mine,” Steve said after a long beat of silence. It felt good to say it, even if there was still a part of him that refused to believe it.

“Keep saying that. Maybe one of us will believe it,” Tony said.

“I’ll believe for both us,” Steve replied.

Tony let out a puff of breath, then wiped a hand over his mouth, looking back up at Steve. “I believe that you will,” he said, shaking his head, eyes gleaming with something that was caught between amusement and a strange, hopeful sort of gratitude, as if a part of him truly wanted to let it be that simple. It wasn’t, but Steve thought maybe it was, too, in a way, because it might be enough for Tony that Steve believed this, though why Tony would grant him that much faith, Steve couldn’t fathom.

Steve stared down at Tony for a beat, then leaned his head down and kissed him. Lightly. Softly. With just the barest touch of his lips. He felt Tony sigh against his mouth, then join the kiss, hardening his mouth against Steve’s with a surge of almost desperation, until he pulled away slightly, giving Steve a narrow look.

“I would know that what you felt when you first found yourself here—that despair you described—that it no longer has hold of you,” Tony whispered, breath warm across Steve’s lips.

“No. Not anymore. I haven’t felt like that since,” Steve stopped, trying to recall. It hadn’t been a singular moment that he could point to, but it was gone, now, that terrible, cold feeling that once greeted him each time he woke to a new day. “I don’t know,” Steve said honestly. “But, no. It’s not—it’s not like that.”

“This, all of this—all that you lost, being here, being a concubine—this has been far more difficult
on you than it ever should have been. I can’t change the past, much as I would like to,” Tony told him, mouth flattening into a moue of distaste as he tilted his head to the side. He leaned forward, wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist and tracing his hands up and down the planes of Steve’s back. “But, allow me to make recompense for my failings.”

“You don’t owe me—” Steve began.

“I owe you happiness. Did we not just agree to that?” Tony asked, then went on without waiting for Steve’s reply. “Now, tell me, when you were in the war, did you not dream of what you would do when it was over?”

“Of course,” Steve said, confusion at Tony’s question making him draw back, though Tony’s moods being as changeable as the sea he so wanted to control were becoming somewhat comfortingly familiar to Steve. He tried to remember what his thoughts had been. He must have dreamed of life after the war. Everyone had. Vague notions of Bucky and Nat, a small cottage and warm hearth with red-haired hellions running to and fro, with Sam by his side, talking his ear off, and Clint threatening to use Redwing’s feathers for his arrows. Pietro and Wanda arguing about the importance of a twelve minute difference in their entries into this world. And Steve, watching it all. I would watch them live their lives, Steve thought. Their lives after the war, in that blank space of time that had never seemed to exist for Steve, though he didn’t want to say this to Tony. “I guess I thought we—my team, I mean—we’d all end up together. Somehow. That, ah. Actually, that doesn’t make much sense,” Steve said with a small laugh. “They were all from different corners of the country, truth be told. Clint had a farm and a family. Wanda and Pietro—they were siblings. Twins, actually, though they looked little alike. Their village was all but destroyed, but they’d talked of helping rebuild one day. I’d have probably followed Bucky and Nat around until they got tired of me, I guess. Nat—Natasha—she and Bucky were married. Well, not truly married, not with a holy man or anything, but they said their vows in a circle of standing stones, the way people used to, and Natasha said that was just as good, if it was truly meant.”

“I’m sure it was,” Tony agreed softly. “Sometimes…sometimes, I think those vows, the ones that are truly meant, can mean even more than the ones said in front of a hall of people with the High Chaplain himself presiding.”

Steve nodded, felt a flicker of unease, then brushed it aside. “It did to them.”

“You’ve told me what your team would have done when the war ended. Now, tell me what it is you would have wanted to do when your soldiering days were behind you? What did you dream of, hmm? There must have been something,” Tony said, then smiled encouragingly. “Come now, I told you how I fancied being a knight, slaying dragons and fire wyrms and such.”

“I—no—I,” Steve stammered. “Nothing, really. Nothing serious. I couldn’t have earned a living at it, that’s for sure. Probably would have stayed with the army,” he shrugged. “Or fished, I don’t know. I never had the patience for that, to tell you the truth. They were offering plots of the land taken from Hydra, though it was far from fertile soil,” Steve said.

“A farmer? A fisherman? You’d have been miserable, my dearest one,” Tony smiled knowingly, making Steve’s mouth curl into a lopsided half-smile in acknowledgment of the truth in those words. Farming, fishing, he would have hated it. Maybe not at first, but eventually. He’d have stayed with Fury and Coulson, followed orders, chasing Bucky into an early grave, or so Nat said. He wouldn’t want that, Steve, he remembered her telling him one evening as they sat around a fire that was little more than warm embers. It’s the last thing Bucky would have wanted, and yet, it was the only thing Steve could picture himself doing. Certainly not this. Never this. The rest of his days were supposed to have been spent doing penance. This didn’t feel at all like that, not
Steve looked around the opulent bathroom, with its wonderful pipes of hot water that steamed up from below. He wasn’t supposed to be here. He wasn’t supposed to be one of the ones who got to walk away from the war. Not him, not when Bucky—when so many—who had something waiting for them were resting in unmarked graves while their families clung to memories and the lie that they had all died heroes. He sighed. An endless circle, that’s what guilt was, he reminded himself. Once, some version of himself, the one that had nothing to do except spend days at a time confined to bed, he supposed, but once, he had dreamed. Not of this, of course, but he had dreamed. Simple dreams, though they seemed anything but that at the time. Impossible things, but that was what dreams should be, he had told himself even as he burned with fever or tried to find air when it was all around him. Someone to love and who loved him, even though he was no one and had nothing to offer except himself. A family. A place he belonged where he was useful, where he mattered and contributed, instead of the constant burden he had been to his mother. A place where he was wanted. A place filled with happiness and laughter and love, the kind of love that spoke the old words in front of standing stones and danced when the first snow fell. He looked down at Tony. Simple, impossible dreams.

A home.

“I know you too well to believe you dreamt of nothing more than fishing and farming. You’re talking corn and star forts,” Tony challenged, making a harrumphing noise in this throat. “Besides, who said it had to be serious? You’ve no need of money, no cause to worry about your next meal or storing enough to pay taxes and still have plenty to feed your family come the winter. I speak of dreams. What did you dream of, when you would let yourself?” Tony asked.

I think I dreamt of you. The thought was bright and sharp, cutting through Steve’s mind like a blade, hot and cold at the same time, and just as painful. He didn’t say it, of course. It was true, Steve supposed. He could admit that much to himself now. But, it was a useless thought, as most dreams were. I didn’t dream of this, Steve told himself firmly. He swallowed thickly and felt the collar bob against his throat. Not this. This wasn’t what he wanted, he reminded himself, remembering Tony’s response to his declaration with a pang of hurt. This wasn’t anything like what he wanted.

He shouldn’t have said anything. What had he been thinking? Tony was the King, of course he wasn’t going to fall in love with his concubine, no matter the fanciful terms of endearment he liked to use. That was for...what they did in here. It wasn’t real. Steve knew that, and yet, last night, he had been so happy, bound and chained, yet free, somehow, as if each chain that held him was keeping some tidal force at bay. All the worries, all the reasons why not, everything that stood between them seemed to fade away in that moment, and it was completely clear to him. He loved Tony. No matter what came to pass, that much was true. It wasn’t a lie, and he didn’t want it to be a secret. He wanted to share it, shout it, paint it into being, let it leave some mark on the world long after all of this was over, that he had loved Tony, and been loved by him. Let them at least have that. Of course, Steve should have known that was not to be. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Tony had asked him a question.

What did he dream of?

You, Steve thought.

There are no secrets, only lies.

“I wanted to—well, I thought maybe to, ah,” Steve demurred, feeling a sudden, niggling embarrassment squirm into his stomach.
“To what?” Tony asked as he turned and leaned back, propping his elbows up on the ledge.

“Be an artist,” Steve blurted out. That was true enough. “I mean, there’s no way I could have, of course, it’s…what use is there for that kind of thing? Painted shields and leathers, maybe, but…” he trailed off, shaking his head, though Tony had canted his head to the side and was regarding him with a look of utter delight.

“I’ve seen your sketches,” Tony said, making Steve remember what the guard had said about Tony looking through his sketchbook. “You’ve a good eye and a good hand. They are truly quite well done.”

“They’re mostly of you,” Steve pointed out, smiling ruefully back at Tony, who raised his eyebrows skyward.

“Well, you have good taste,” Tony grinned. He stepped forward until their chests were touching again and ran his hands over Steve’s chest, palms grazing gently over Steve’s nipples, though as sensitive as they were, Steve couldn’t help sucking in a sharp breath. Tony gave him a look, then repeated the motion, humming lightly as he did. “You’ve talent, too. Raw, perhaps, but there. Biased as I might be, I am not wrong. Pepper was quite impressed, in fact, and she is far more knowledgeable about art than I am, or so she tells me, and as I make it a point never to argue with her,” Tony said with a small shrug. “I’ll send for a tutor. One of the Enclaves will be delighted to spare one of its instructors for the Royal household.”

“A…tutor?” Steve questioned, frowning down at Tony with a confused look.

“Well, you have good taste,” Tony grinned. He stepped forward until their chests were touching again and ran his hands over Steve’s chest, palms grazing gently over Steve’s nipples, though as sensitive as they were, Steve couldn’t help sucking in a sharp breath. Tony gave him a look, then repeated the motion, humming lightly as he did. “You’ve talent, too. Raw, perhaps, but there. Biased as I might be, I am not wrong. Pepper was quite impressed, in fact, and she is far more knowledgeable about art than I am, or so she tells me, and as I make it a point never to argue with her,” Tony said with a small shrug. “I’ll send for a tutor. One of the Enclaves will be delighted to spare one of its instructors for the Royal household.”

“A…tutor?” Steve questioned, frowning down at Tony with a confused look.

“Of course. Why not? You must grow bored, cooped up here all the time, with little more than myself and Cam to entertain you. Not that I do not do my part,” Tony winked and bit his lip, nudging his hip into Steve’s thigh. “I already know you have a good head for the practicalities of war. I noticed the improvements you made to my own sketches. I don’t choose that word lightly, either. It is not flattery to say that not many could manage to do that. I have who I am assured are the University’s best engineers earning Crown gold and a retinue of generals with enough metal on their chests to start their own armory, yet you…you see things, I don’t know…in a different way.”

“It was just a few ideas. Not much, really,” Steve replied, feeling his cheeks warm at the praise in a different way than the other types of praise Tony heaped on him, but good nonetheless.

“Good ideas. Do not lessen them for having been your own. God knows, I never do,” Tony quipped, the corners of his mouth quirking up.

“I just wanted to help,” Steve said.

“I like that you want to help. I like it very much,” Tony admitted, eyes going soft and turning down at the corners. “I like that you care about this kingdom and the people here. That you want it to be a better place. That, well…” Tony stopped, letting out a breath and looking away for a moment before drawing his gaze back to Steve. “It means a great deal to me. That you care.”

“Of course I care,” Steve said.

“Of course. Of course, you do, because you are you. You don’t realize how unusual you are,” Tony told him, shaking his head a bit and looking up at Steve with what might have been awe on a lesser man. “A simpler man would find himself content with all of this. A cruel man would have used my interest to worm his way into Zola’s good graces and find a life of profit. A coward would not have taken the boy’s safety as his calling. You, my dear one, are none of those. You care. About Cam, about me, about this realm, about the soldiers who will wield the weapons we
build them, about people you have never met who you still want to help protect.”

“I—” Steve started, but Tony cut him off, his voice low, almost whispering to himself, in a way, as if trying to talk through a riddle he could not quite solve. “For as long as I remember, I just wanted to do what was right. That’s all. It’s—you make it sound more than it is, Tony.”

“Because it is more than it is. You could hate us all. Blame us, blame me, blame this whole kingdom for your circumstances. But, you don’t,” Tony pointed out, almost sounding only mildly curious, though Steve knew that was hardly the case. “It would be understandable, I suppose, if you did. After all, a slave is not required to care for his Master. Only obey. And yet, you care far too readily and far more deeply than you likely should, and dole out obedience in careful measure, as if you only have so much of it to give,” Tony mused, then let out a sharp laugh. “Perhaps you do.”

“I don’t—I—” Steve stammered, a hundred thoughts seeming to slam together in his head at once. “I don’t know how to do this,” he finally settled on, since that much, at least, was true.

“I know,” Tony said, his expression flicking with a terrible sort of resignation before it shuttered. “Let us not pretend, not with each other, not anymore. I know that this,” Tony said, reaching up and tracing the underside of the collar around Steve’s throat with the pad of his finger, “Chafes at you. You are not a man meant to be ruled. Do you think me blind to that?” Tony asked with a low chuckle at what must have been surprise flickering across Steve’s face. “Perhaps at first, yes, before I knew you better, I admit. I know that this is not what you wanted or what you planned. A part of you will always rail against it. I thought I didn’t want that, that I wanted to rid you of that, but it’s the same part of you that places yourself in front of Cam. It’s the same part of you that comes to me with truths I don’t want to hear when it would be far easier to turn a blind eye, as so many others must have over the years. It’s the same part of you that comes up with ways to strengthen the very walls that hold you here because it is safer for the other people behind them. I can’t take that away from you. I wouldn’t, even if I could.”

“I don’t hate it here, Tony. Not with you. I don’t. I told you—last night. What I said,” Steve reminded him, feeling a rush of heat to his cheeks and cold that curdled his stomach.

Tony looked at him a long moment, then reached up and cupped his hands on either side of Steve’s jaw. Steve couldn’t help but lean in, seeking the warmth and pressure, the solidity that Tony always provided.

“You’ve no idea how much it meant to me to hear your words,” Tony said, voice wavering and tight with some emotion Steve couldn’t identify. His eyes were wide, wet and filled with a wretched misery that made Steve’s heart thud against his chest, a denial springing to his lips before Tony spoke words he didn’t want to hear, though he couldn’t quite let it out. “Steve…” Tony broke off, shaking his head, brow furrowing into a frown as his mouth tightened. His hands spasmed against Steve’s jaw, fingers digging in almost hard enough to be painful. Clutching, grasping, trying to hold on. Almost, Steve thought, though it wafted through his mind like empty air through his fingers. “I will make you happy, keep you safe, see you free from want and strife. We will make this realm better, you and I. Together. I see that as clearly as I see you before me. You will challenge me, anger me, make me laugh, and make me think. You will do all of these things, and I will lay the world at your feet in return,” Tony promised, gazing up at him, eyes burning hard with the force of it. Tony’s hands dropped away, and he stepped back, putting the distance of the tub between them. He reached for the towel again and dried his hands, keeping his eyes down while he completed the task. Finally, he looked back up at Steve. “I know all of these things. As surely as I know that you will never love the man who asks you to call him Master.”
With that, Tony climbed out, heedlessly sloshing water over the side as he stepped down. He grabbed his robe from where he’d tossed it on a nearby bench when they stumbled into the room, still sleep-warm and heady from the night before.

“Tony—” Steve started, stretching out a hand, reaching for Tony, for something, he didn’t know.

“Don’t ask it of me,” Tony said. He was staring at the wall, hands held still in the middle of tying the corded belt at his waist. “Please. Don’t ask it. I can’t. They talked before, the Court, of course they did. My past—I spent far too much time trying to be a ruin in my father’s eyes than I should have. It was forgotten, or forgiven, but now...now, they all seem to suddenly remember it. Already, the Court chatters about how much sway a concubine holds that he could bring down the Lord Chancellor. That I rule with my—well, not my head, let’s say. It would weaken me far too much, Steve, you must see that. Power is not laws or wealth or armies or weapons, my soldier. Those are its levers, true, but power…it is a matter of belief. Belief. That the one who holds it, holds it by right. Whether ordained by God or battle or purchase, whatever your measure, it is as thin as a thread, and there are always those ready to cut it. After Ty…” he shook his head, looked up at the ceiling, blinking, then slowly turned back to look down at Steve. “I can’t. Besides, as Rhodey has pointed out to me one too many times, you know far too much of our defenses to ever be allowed to leave.”

“I—I would never use that against you, Tony, you must know that,” Steve protested, swallowing thickly. His heart thudded against his chest, raging in his ears. He didn’t want to hear this. It had been the one hope he did not dare speak. And now, it, too, slipped through his fingers. Politics, intrigue, the grasping tenuousness of it all...it would hardly surprise Natasha that these things would be the fights he finally couldn’t win.

“Well, I’m sure your assurances would quiet the Council,” Tony said with a derisive snort. “Steve, you’re a man of war, not some crofter who picked up his scythe, trotted off to some skirmish and came home calling himself a soldier. Tell me, would your precious Free States give up one with such knowledge?” Tony demanded, voice flecked with annoyance. “I thought not,” he said, catching Steve’s expression. “This is the life we were given, much as I may wish it were different. It is not. So be it. You are mine. Fate has willed it so. That will have to be enough. For the both of us.” A low, bitter huff of a laugh escaped, and he finished tying his robe with a shake of his head. “Would that you had been a prince from some far-off kingdom. The youngest son, of course, with nothing but a large dowry and good trade pact—or perhaps a nice army—to your name,” he continued, giving Steve a long, desolate look before turning away. He stopped, one hand reaching up to grip the edge of the door, though he did not turn back. “You see? I can dream, too.”

Steve opened his mouth, though to say what, he had no idea. Instead, all he could manage to do was watch Tony leave, only realizing he was shaking once Tony’s back disappeared down the hallway into the bedroom. He was cold. The water was warm, but it didn’t seem to matter. Sluggishly, he stepped out of the tub on feet that seemed tied down with rocks. He picked up his robe and went through the motions of putting it on, tying it, smoothing it down. Adjusting it around his collar.

Tony wouldn’t free him. Couldn’t. Perhaps one day, long into the future, but even then, Steve wouldn’t be allowed to leave. What was freedom, if this was a prison, even then? There was a tall looking glass on the far wall. Steve stared at his reflection there for a long time, fingering the collar where the ruby glittered in the morning light that seeped in through the windows.

You will never love the man who asks you to call him Master
Slowly, Steve made his way back to Tony’s bedchamber, finding Tony halfway through dressing himself, with his breeches still undone and tunic open, though two manservants hovered around, doing little more than bearing the brunt of Tony’s glare.

Tony glanced over his shoulder, watching Steve for a moment, then went back to lacing up his breeches and reaching for the boots one of the servants held out for him with a bow. Tony waved the two off, frowning after them until the doors closed behind them. “I must attend Court today,” he announced, not looking at Steve. “Then meetings. But, I have the afternoon free. Well, Pepper would say that I don’t, but nevermind that. You’ve been stuck in here too long. Gives you too much time to think,” he continued, and that did earn Steve a quick, knowing glance. “I thought, perhaps, you might enjoy what you mentioned once. Sparring. If you still wish to be humiliated, that is,” he said, turning around now that he was dressed in his finery to face Steve. “Feel free to bow out,” he offered, waving a hand in the air, then bending to open a velvet-lined box that one of the servants must have brought. He settled a simple golden circlet dotted with jewels on his head and slid two large, crested rings, one onto each hand, before turning back to Steve. “I will not judge you for it. There are always other, far more pleasant, reasons for finding yourself flat on your back.”

Tony was trying too hard for joviality, Steve could see that plainly enough, but he was trying, reaching out for something he thought Steve would enjoy. The least Steve could do was meet Tony’s attempt halfway.

“I think I would quite enjoy sparring with you,” Steve replied.

“Still sure you’ll best me, hmmm?” Tony asked, biting his lip and giving Steve a considering look. “Very well, I’ll send for you this afternoon, and we shall see. Though, as I’ve warned you before, I’ve trained since I was a boy with the finest knights in the realm. I think your overconfidence a tad misplaced, my soldier.”

“Fine knights who taught their boy-prince from all their years of experience on the tourney field,” Steve remarked, tilting his head to the side and returning Tony’s look. Tony barked out a laugh, eyes dancing, then walked over to where Steve stood and cupped Steve’s jaw in his hand, expression going somber.

“I will give you anything, but that one thing,” Tony said in a low, husky whisper. “That one thing, Steve. One thing. Anything else, ask, and it is yours. Please. I—I know what I ask, but…it doesn’t have to be that way, not between us. For them, out there, yes, but,” he stopped, wet his lips and looked down, closing his eyes. Finally, he opened them and looked back up at Steve. “In here, it could just be us. Like this. Like it was just a moment ago,” he added. His thumb stroked Steve’s cheek once, then his hand dropped away. He turned, and Steve watched as one of the guards leapt to open the door, then shut it behind him.

One thing, Steve thought. Just one thing.

Our flag bleeds rivulets of red, reminders of what we lost for that one thing. It bears the map of the stars that serves as a guide across the Dark Sea for those who leave everything behind for that one thing. Bucky died, because he believed that one thing was worth fighting for. He shouldn’t want anything as much as that one thing, but God help him, he did. He wanted Tony. He wanted this, in here, like it was just a moment ago.

He was going to have to choose, but there was a weight on his neck, and his hand was empty, and he thought he already had. Soldiers are the shield for those who cannot raise a sword, he thought grimly, remembering Phillips’ words.
You will never love the man who asks you to call him Master

Steve looked out the window, where the sea churned below, deep blue capped with white. There had never really been a choice. The price of freedom was high. It always had been. But, it was a price he had always been willing to pay. Even if the price was everything he ever wanted.

It was late afternoon before a knock sounded at the door, drawing Steve’s attention from where he had been reading one of the many books that were strewn about the room, this one a treatise on various painting techniques that he was sure Tony had supplied just for him. To Steve’s surprise, it was General Rhodes who strode into the room. By sending for him, Tony apparently meant that he would send his highest ranking military leader, Steve thought, stifling the urge to grin at Rhodes’ dour expression.


“I can,” Steve acknowledged. Rhodes pursed his mouth and covered it with one hand, giving Steve a considering look.

“Did he tell you that he’s trained with the finest knights in the realm since he was a boy?” Rhodes asked.

“He may have mentioned that,” Steve replied.

Rhodes snorted and glanced away from a brief moment, wiping a grin off his face with one hand. “I’ll just bet he did. You ready? He hates waiting.”

Steve nodded. A servant had brought a simple white robe edged with golden swirls on the sleeves and hem and matching pair of loose-fitting pants earlier, which Steve supposed passed for a training outfit when you were sparring with the King.

The guards held the doors open for them, then silently kept pace behind Steve as he followed Rhodes down the now familiar corridor, down the stairs at the end, and through a wooden door that Steve had noticed, but never seen used. The door opened into a long, narrow hallway that, as Steve soon discovered, zigged and zagged, and sometimes sprouted stairs, almost at random, it seemed to Steve. Occasionally, long, slim windows appeared to one side, and Steve caught glimpses of the gardens, a bailey at one point, and what appeared to be another courtyard. Confined, as he had been, to Zola’s compound and Tony’s suite of rooms, Steve hadn’t had a chance to do much more than look out over the castle grounds from his balcony or peer out one of the windows in Tony’s chambers, and he wished he could stop and look longer at what was below. No one passed them in the corridor, though Steve could hear the bustle of movement coming from nearby as they walked.

“The King’s Walk,” Rhodes said, looking over at Steve as he guided Steve through the labyrinthine corridors. “Part of the original castle design, before all the renovations Tony’s grandfather, and then his father, took on. Lets the King move between most areas he needs to be in private, away from prying eyes and the demands of Courtiers, and, of course, in the event of attack, gives the King and his family a way to escape,” Rhody explained, in answer to Steve’s unasked question. “Tony swears this whole thing was some ancient Stark’s attempt to keep his nighttime activities secret from his consort,” Rhodes said with a roll of his eyes, “but I can’t say it is without use. We used to escape our tutors through here. Me and Tony,” Rhodes said with an air of fond remembrance. “Disappear when it got too tedious, pop back out when it was time for dinner.”
“He said you were brought here to help keep his mind on his studies,” Steve remarked.

“And how well do you think that went?” Rhodes asked, shaking his head as they walked, though Steve could see the smile Rhodes was trying to keep from forming. “Exactly. Even accompanied him to university before taking my commission.”

“Did you always want to be a knight?” Steve inquired, glancing over at the smaller man.

“My father was,” Rhodes said, as if that answered the question. Maybe it did.

“My mine as well. A soldier, at least, though not a knight,” Steve replied. Rhodes slowed and looked Steve’s way, then back at the guards. He reached out to place a hand on Steve’s arm, urging him to slow as well. Rhodes opened his mouth, stopped, a grimace twisting it, and closed it again.

“This…all of this, it must be hard on you,” Rhodes started, flattening his mouth as if he didn’t care for the taste of the words. “Going from a soldier to…this,” he said, motioning into the air.

“It…yes,” Steve said, somewhat hesitantly. Rhodes was Tony’s best friend, confidant and military advisor, after all. And, Tony was Rhodes’ King. “It has been.”

“Yeah,” Rhodes sighed. “My first commission, right out of university, I just wanted to do well,” Rhodes said, making Steve frown at the seeming change in conversation. “Show everyone what I was made of. Serve my country. Make my family proud. Make my King proud. Earn my way to knighthood, kneel before him and offer my sword. That was all I wanted,” Rhodes told him, mouth tight. “We’ve known peace here for a long time. Few have the might to attack us, and fewer still would dare. But, the borders still draw skirmishes at times. We were sent to put down some self-styled warlord who’d gotten a little too powerful and kept causing problems with some minor Lord’s holdings. Burning the common folk’s homes, stealing food and cattle, that kind of thing. I thought it was beneath me, to tell you the truth,” he said, shaking his head. “Why send Crown soldiers to do what the Lord’s militia should be able to handle?”

“It wasn’t as simple as you expected,” Steve guessed.

“No. No, it wasn’t,” Rhodes admitted, voice heavy and quiet in the deserted corridor with only their footsteps and the clank of the guards’ armor behind them to mark their way. “We won, but the guy who had been telling me about his son the night before? His chest was caved in. The guy who gave me his leftover ration, just a kid with his face still marked? Half his head was gone. I thought I knew about death and battle and what it meant to be a soldier, but I didn’t know shit,” Rhodes ground out, though there was no bitterness there, just an acceptance Steve recognized all too well.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. He wasn’t sure what else to say or why Rhodes was telling him this, but he understood the pain, the frustration, the questioning, why them and not me? “It’s never fair. And it always hurts. Until it doesn’t, and then…”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Rhodes said after a long pause. “I’m saying…nothing can prepare you for that. It was something I’ll never be able to put behind me, not really. I’ll carry it with me the rest of my days, those men, how they died, what I could have done differently, what was lost. But, it is what a soldier does. It’s who we are. It’s the life—the risk we all signed up for when we pledged ourselves to whatever cause we honor. This,” he shook his head. “Look, I’m just—I’m trying to say that I understand why this is hard to accept, even with everything Tony keeps doing to try to make it, I don’t know, appealing or whatever is in his head. Tony, he…he’s a great King. And better, a good man. The best I’ve known. But, he’s not a soldier. He plays at war on a table, going over and over it in his head, and I’m damned glad we have him doing that, but it isn’t the same as
being out there, breathing in the smell of blood and death, wondering if it’s you next and why it’s not. It’s hard to walk away from a battlefield. Harder than he realizes. I’ve seen far too many who can’t leave it behind, or have left too much of themselves there to ever truly leave. But, you have a chance here, Steve. A real chance. Tony, he—he cares for you. He’ll do anything to make you happy, you must see that.”

“I…” Steve started, then let out a long breath. “I know.” He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a quick moment.

“What you did, telling Tony about Zola and Stane,” Rhodes began, glancing over at Steve again with a hard, searching look. “That was,” he broke off, slowing his steps again until he finally stopped. Steve halted beside him and held his gaze. “Tony blames himself. But, that was on my watch, too. What did you? That was good. You could do a lot of that kind of good. He listens to you, and you…” Rhodes broke off, tilting his head to the side and studying Steve. “He’s always wanted to fix the world. Make it better. I think he can. I know he can. It’s one of the reasons I pledged my sword to him as soon as I earned my spurs. But you—you want him to be better. You want us to be better. Maybe we need that just as much as we need him making the world better.”

“I just wanted to help. To do what was right. Zola, Stane, people like that…I’ve known them before. Their kind. They hide in plain sight, and only show their true selves to people they think don’t have the power to do anything about it,” Steve replied. “Anyone else would have done the same.”

“Bullshit,” Rhodes said. “I know that, because they didn’t. How many people had to know, or at least have some inkling? No one talked. Fear, reward, whatever their reason, they held their tongues, but not you. You? You see something wrong, and you call it by its name, and I’ll be damned if we don’t need some of that around here. I’ll not lie to you,” he continued, voice going lower and carrying a note of warning in it. “That a concubine holds such sway over a King is a dangerous thing. For a king, there are always vultures circling, hoping to find a weakness. He knows this, and I think you are smart enough to see this, as well. But, behind his doors? You could do good here, Steve. Real good. The kind that matters. Makes a difference. You’ve no reason to, I know, and probably a hundred good reasons not to, but, I don’t think I’m wrong about the kind of man you are,” Rhodes said, clapping Steve’s shoulder and tugging a bit at him.

“I would like that. To be able to…make it better here, if I can. Even a little,” Steve said as they started to walk again. If he could truly make an impact, Steve thought, maybe all this had some purpose he couldn’t see. Maybe it would matter, after all.

“Then do so,” Rhodes urged. “As his concubine, you have all the time with him he wants. You can travel with him, accompany him on inspections or journey on state visits, whatever he wants, and no one will question it. Steve Rogers, soldier of the Unified Free States, could never be next to him. The Court would never countenance such a thing, particularly after what happened with Stone, the utter horse’s ass. You have to realize that. This is a chance to—to do something we soldiers don’t get to do. You have the ear of the King. Use it.”

Steve looked askance at Rhodes, brow furrowing. “Would you? If you were in my position. What would you do?” Steve asked.

“I’d—” Rhody broke off, swallowing his words with a swipe of his hand over his mouth. He dropped his head and sucked in a long breath, then looked over at Steve. His eyes held an apology that Steve supposed Rhodes couldn’t really give. “I have no idea.”

“Thank you,” Steve said after a long moment of silence, broken only by the footfalls of the guards behind them. “I think you give me too much credit. I’m not sure I can convince Tony of much of
“He can be stubborn, I’ll grant you that,” Rhodes smiled ruefully. “But, from what he tells me, I think you just might be able to out-do him on that. He could use someone else to trust. It doesn’t come easily to him. Trusting people. You can probably see why. Everyone has an agenda. Everyone is out for something from him. Always have been. But, if you can gain it, it is well worth the effort to have it.”

“I imagine it would be,” Steve agreed.

“Then think on what I’ve said, if you will,” Rhodes replied. “But, Steve…I know where you come from, it’s very different than here. I’d ask that you…consider that Tony, he—he cares very much what you think of him. But, it’s all on his shoulders. Everything. This realm, its people, peace, prosperity, all of it. It’s a heavy burden for anyone. Fail, and it means God knows how many lives pay the price. And he has the Court, the Council, the Guilds, the military, not to mention treaty obligations, trade pacts…just—just remember that he would like to do, and what he can do—who he must do, like it or no--those are often very different things.”

“We do it,” Steve said quietly, but firmly. “It isn’t impossible. The Free States. We manage to do it, General.”

“Do you?” Rhodes asked sharply. “Really? Your Free States are how old? Not yet a full generation behind you, and how well did you fare when Schmidt’s armies attacked, and all you had was a bunch of farmers? No standing army, no navy, no stores, nothing. How did that work? How many lives were lost while you struggled to find what you needed? I am not sure I would call that managing. Here, the Lords and Ladies send me soldiers to fill our ranks, taxes to pay for our defenses and foodstuffs for our soldier’s bellies. They could not do that were they struggling to tend to their own lands. We have known peace for centuries, and none of that would be possible if things were different. The realm would split apart, and our enemies would leap at the opportunity, as you know far too well. You have seen that for yourself, I believe. Your Free States barely survived a single generation. When we lived across the desert, on the shores of the Salt Sea, it was one of Tony’s ancestors who roused us when the earth would have opened up and swallowed us or spewed her fire on us. She brought us here, and for more than a thousand years, a Stark has sat the throne. War, famine, floods, a storm they still speak of centuries later, disease…and, we are still here. We survived. We prospered. It isn’t perfect, I know that. The world is full of terrible things. Some of them I imagine you know even better than I do,” Rhodes said, brown eyes deepening into a frown. “As I said, we can be better. You can help with that. But, have a care who you lecture about what can be done, when you’ve not done much doing. That kind of arrogance is dangerous.”

“You’re right,” Steve said. For a moment, he felt heavy. Weighted down, like he was wearing his armor again. He could feel his gait change slightly with the sensation, and his hand tightened in the air around a phantom shield. “We weren’t always as we are. We did only barely survive. Maybe we won’t next time. Or the time after that. Maybe you will last until the stars fall again. Freedom is dangerous, I’ll grant you that. But, an unjust society knows no true peace. What you call safety, peace…it’s nothing more than an illusion.”

Tony’s words this morning echoed in his head. Power was about belief. An illusion, Steve thought, all of it. But, he knew it was all but impossible to see from their vantage point. It was like asking the mountaintop to concern itself with the rocks that pushed it out of the belly of the world.

“Perhaps,” Rhodey acknowledged, albeit grudgingly. “But it is an illusion that has stood against the wheel of time without faltering, my friend, and this,” he stopped, shook his head and let out a
huff of air through his nose, “this world you seek, this ideal you want to believe in…what I’m trying to say is that it is good for Tony to have that, too, and not just the whispers of what must be. All kings must be realists, if they are to last. But, you’re good for him. I’ve seen it. In the Council chambers, in Court, talking through things with him since you’ve been here. You give him something I don’t think any of us can give.”

“What’s that?” Steve asked, curious.

“Hope. Hope that we can be better. That all of this, everything he does, every sacrifice he makes that chips away at him, that it can all be worth it one day. That he can better. Sometimes, he’ll hate you for it. He loves and loathes your faith in him. I think I probably do, too, to tell you the truth,” Rhodes paused, looking over at Steve as they walked down a set of steep steps where the corridor branched off to both sides at the bottom. Rhodes reached into his tunic and pulled out a small bag, then dumped the contents into his hand, nothing more than a few spare coins. He plucked one from his palm and held it up. “See this? The Royal Crest and Creed. Means it is official coin of the Crown, backed up by the Treasury. It holds its value anywhere in the world.”

Steve nodded. He’d seen the coins before. Tony’s image was stamped onto the other side.

“Now this,” Rhodes said, taking another coin from his hand, “This one is different. See? Far, far older. Made of iron, back when we were nothing more than iron mongers. My father gave it to me when I went off to join the Army. See that?” Rhodes asked, pointing at something punched into the flat back of the coin. It was smoothed over by time now, and someone had made it into a pendant at some point, but Steve could make out some kind of pattern. Two concentric circles, one sitting inside the other, inside a ring of shapes that looked like squares with wide, flaring tops.

“What is it?” Steve asked.

“Back then, we mined the area around the mountain for its iron. That was very nearly the only resource we had, not being on fertile land, and the Salt Sea had been dead since before our people found its shores. Each house had its own sigil, and stamped it into the goods they made,” Rhodey explained. “It was one of Tony’s ancestors—not even a Stark, then, that name would come later—who said the mountain was on fire. Few believed her. Why would they? The mountain had stood silent longer than anyone could remember, so long that the stories seemed more legend than anything. But, she insisted. Said she had read the signs, and something was going to happen. She, her family, and a few other families, they left. Their homes, the parts of their families that wouldn’t follow, the only life they knew, they left all of that. Everyone said they were mad, of course.”

“I take it her prediction came true,” Steve guessed.

“On the third day, the moon covered the sun and the world grew dark,” Rhodey said, voice going low. “That’s this,” he said, pointing at the two concentric circles, one inside of the other. Steve could see it now. Stylized, but he could see the smaller moon, sitting in front of the sun. “The mountain exploded, sending huge chunks of it into the air, so high, it is said that they seemed to be spewing from the sun itself. That’s this,” he continued, tapping at the edges of the coin where the flattened squares now seemed to Steve to be spraying out of the circles. It reminded him, strangely, of the circles that emanated from the star at the center of his shield. Symbols can bind power sometimes, Steve knew, remembering the holy man chanting over his shield and the circles that emanated from the star at the middle. There was power there, in this image that Rhodes was showing him, Steve thought, a slight shiver running through him.

“The group that made it, this was their sigil. A reminder of where they came from and what they lost. That their lives were spared, and going on…it was a terrible privilege. That it had to mean something,” Rhodes was saying, drawing Steve’s attention back to the coin. “But this…this,” he
said, turning the coin over in his hand so that Steve could see the other side. “This was the other side. That night, this was in the sky. A portent. An omen. A guide. Whatever it was, they took it as a sign, and followed it. Some say for years, I don’t know, but they kept on, until they came to the desert and the wastes beyond. The land was inhospitable, empty and desolate. Stark land, they said, and so it became. Their land. And they kept on, until they found this place.”

Steve had stopped at the landing on the bottom of the steps, mouth agape as he stared at the coin Rhodes was holding. On the other side, opposite the ancient sigil, was a star. A star that had streaked across the night sky after the near-destruction of Tony’s people all those generations ago, and one they had followed, until it led them here. It seemed impossible, and yet, he knew in his bones that it was the star that had brought the metal that made his shield. The star shield. Another tremor ran through him, this time, colder and more pronounced. For a moment, he could almost see something, some truth, as if out of the corner of his eye, though he was sure if he looked, it would terrify him. He looked up at Rhodes instead, though said nothing. What could he say?

“I’m asking…Tony, he’s a good man. I told you that,” Rhodes reminded him. “But, you make him want to be a better man, and that’s a dangerous thing for a king. For all of us. All I ask is that you have a care what you ask him to give. Righteousness is a bloody sword, my friend. I think you know that. But,” he sighed, a grimness settling over his features, “the coin must have two sides. It was knowledge and truth and an acceptance of what was coming that saved us…but it was hope that we followed. Maybe we still need both,” Rhodes told him, giving Steve a long, considering look. “He does, anyway, and I suppose that’s the only thing that matters. Through here,” Rhodes said with a nod at a tall wooden door with a large, metal ring dangling from it that was framed into the far wall of the corridor.

Steve followed Rhodes on leaden legs, his mind swirling. He had the sudden sense of not being present, as if he had gone so thin and flat as to be transparent. The need for his shield welled up inside him, stronger and more insistent than almost ever before, though to shield himself against what, he wasn’t sure. I just wanted to fight, like everyone else, he thought, his mind scattered and the thought carrying a trace of hysteria with it.

Each of you is both.

The memory was so viscerally real, Steve could smell the bitter, pungent aroma of whatever was in the holy man’s concoction. The world wobbled and twisted in front of him, then righted itself, and he was present again. Solid. The first of many, Er’Skeen had said, before tipping the cup to Steve’s lips. Steve had thought he meant more soldiers for Fury to parade in front of the lines as chosen, and maybe the holy man had thought that, too. Blessed. Whatever story it was Fury wanted to use him to tell. The army, the country, everyone had needed a rallying point, and if the star shield, with its storied history was to be it, why not a ritual to bind him to it? The people needed to believe, Steve thought, and again remembered Tony’s words. Power is about belief. Not so very different, after all, Steve realized.

Rhodes was waiting expectantly in front of him, holding the door open. He cleared his throat, drawing Steve’s eyes to him. Behind him, the two guards shifted feet with an air of disquiet.

“You ready?” Rhodes asked.

Steve nodded and walked through the door, looking once over his shoulder, as if he could catch a glimpse of the thoughts that swirled in his mind that he almost felt he was leaving behind. Once inside the door, Steve’s mind went from fragmented memories and almost-thoughts to amazement in one, quick swoop of his stomach. The room was huge, airy and bright, with a high, vaulted ceiling from which a series of knotted ropes dangled from beams. Metal poles mounted between
sturdy posts of various heights were stationed along one side of the room. Low, flat beams jutted up from the floor where soldiers could practice balance. Another wall was covered with metal outcroppings, almost like rocks, a large woven net, and more knotted ropes. Large sand-filled canvas bags, some as tall as a man, others as small as his head, were strung on chains between the rafters and the floor. Weights were stacked by padded benches, and a variety of weapons, some clearly for training and others far deadlier, covered the far wall. Steve tried to take it all in, his mind immediately classifying each apparatus and seeing the benefit of it for training, though he would freely admit that everything here was made far better and finer than anything he remembered training on under Phillips.

Tony sat atop a small dais, on a large, red-cushioned chair, elaborately carved with winged eagles for arms and the Stark crest hovering over his head. He was dressed much like Steve, though his garment was dyed jet black and trimmed in a brilliant blue, and flanked by the two guards Steve knew by name.

"Ah, good, you're here," Tony called out, standing up and stepping down from the dais when they entered. "What say you of my training room? As good a place as any to have your pride sorely wounded, is it not?" Tony asked with a grin as he approached.

"This is…wow, Tony," Steve said, letting the wonderment bubble through him for a moment as he looked around again. "Amazing. Truly. Though," he said with a small laugh of acknowledgement, "I have to admit, of all the things I’ve seen here, this is, by far, the most familiar."

"I am glad you approve," Tony replied. "You are free to use it, as you will. I would have offered it earlier, had I thought of it. There’s a bailey outside for bow and spear practice, a joust and arena for horsemanship. Those areas are oft used by the Court or their officers, but this is private, save for myself and Rhodey, here, when he manages to rouse himself from his General’s chair and do some actual training."

"I am standing right here, Your Highness," Rhodes reminded Tony with a teasing glare.

"As you are," Tony acknowledged, then smiled and clucked his tongue. "You two, see that we are not disturbed," Tony ordered the guards who had followed Rhodes and Steve to the training room. They bowed and left through the two large doors at the end of the room, which they closed behind them, leaving Steve, Tony, Rhodes and the two guards Steve recognized.

"Well. Shall we—" Tony started, then turned as the far doors opened again. "Ah, you made it—ooph!" A small blur of tan robes and dark hair had sprinted across the room and launched himself at Tony, wrapping the King in a too-tight hug. The guards started forward, only to be waved off by Tony.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Cam spluttered, letting go of Tony and dropping to his knees. His eyes were welling with tears and his face was blotchy with redness, and he was looking at Tony with nothing short of adoration. "You will not regret this, you will see. Mother is the best seamstress in the whole kingdom, and she will make the most beautiful clothes for the Raj’Inama! More beautiful than you have ever seen!" Cam promised.

"I’ve no doubt of that," Tony said gently, placing a hand on the boy’s head. "She is well settled, then? Her room is to her liking?"

"It is wonderful, Your Highness, the best room! With a view of the ocean and everything, and she says she can smell the sea air and this is all she ever wanted, to be here with me and see the Dark Sea again, and that she is very proud of me, because I must be the best attendant that the King himself would send for her," Cam babbled on excitedly, "and I said, well, the King is the most
generous, kind, good and noble king that there is in the whole world, and she must serve him well, and make his Raj’Inama beautiful for him, and she said—"

“I am glad to hear it,” Tony said around a laugh. He looked over at Steve and caught Steve’s eye, smiling at him, eyes going soft before he looked back down at Cam. “I owe you a great debt, Cameron. Not only do you care for someone very precious to me, but you suffered in a way you never should have, and that is, as all things are, on my shoulders. I cannot take that away from you, much as I would like to, but I can see that the wrongs done to you in my name are remedied as best as I can. You and your mother have a place here for as long as you require, and should you desire to earn your freedom, I will place that path before you. A scribe, perhaps? You’ve a fine mind and steady hand, and if you can put up with that one,” he jerked his head at Steve, “then you’ve the patience for it, I think.”

“Th—thank you, Your Highness,” Cam stammered, gazing up at Tony with what amounted to awe on his young face.

A pang of understanding hit Steve. This was what Rhodes meant. Tony was a good man, and capable of great things, but he was driven by his burdens, his fears, his guilt at what he counted as his failures, to make things better, to fix the world because he could, so he had to, and somewhere, somehow, he had lost the faith that his heart could lead them to a far better place than his hands could build. It was a dangerous thing, though, a man such as this to be led by his heart, and how many times had Tony told him that it was a path he could not follow?

Steve shook the thoughts that plagued him from his mind and stepped onto the leather-hide covered mat filled with what felt like sand under his feet. He looked over at Tony with a challenge in his eye, undid his robe and tossed it to one side.

“Up with you,” Tony said to Cam, taking the boy’s hand and pulling him to his feet. “My Raj’Inama wishes to learn a lesson in humility, and I think we all agree that is past due, do we not?”

Cam grinned and took his place on a cushioned ottoman by the dais. “You are brave and strong, Your Highness. You have been trained by the finest knights since you were a boy. You will show him.”

“He thinks I’m going to get my ass handed to me,” Tony observed wryly, glancing at Rhodes while he undid his robe and threw it atop Steve’s.

“Yep,” Rhodes agreed gamely, turning to Cam. “Alright, I’ve got a gold piece on the King. If Steve wins, it is yours. If the King wins, you will immediately drop all else you are doing and run and tell me the moment when next he blows something up in his face in that workshop of his. Deal?” he asked Cam.

“It is an agreement, General Rhodes,” Cam replied delightedly, eying the gold piece. Rhodes smiled, shook his head and raised his eyebrows in Tony’s direction.

“Your loyalty to your King is truly humbling,” Tony deadpanned, eyes narrowed on Rhodes. “But, your audience should know that you have been wrong many times before. Many times. Remember when we were enjoying a respite from university, and you spent all your coin trying to catch the eye of the famous Lady of a Thousand Pleasures? What was his name? Ivan? Evan? You never told me if his tongue was truly a gift of the gods. It said so, right on that sign above the door, but—”

“Don’t do that. They’ll believe you,” Rhodes protested, though he was covering his mouth to hide
a laugh. Tony winked conspiratorially at Cam, who whooped with laughter and grabbed his stomach, doubling over in obvious glee. “How about we get this started?”

Tony turned to Steve, eyes assessing. He walked out onto the mat opposite of Steve, just out of arm’s reach, and settled into a stance, arms up, one leg braced for balance.

“We spar by rules of training. Head and groin are off limits. Open hand only, no punches or grabbing by the clothes. The fight is won when one yields or is pinned for three beats,” Tony said. He studied Steve for a moment, tilting his head to one side. “Let’s see what you can do,” Tony urged, eyes sparkling with excitement. “Ready?” Steve nodded and brought his hands up, sinking into a crouch. “Then let’s begin. Go—ah—*uumphph*—fucking hell?!? How did…” Tony blinked up at Steve from the mat.

“That didn’t count. I wasn’t ready,” Tony said after he sucked in a long breath.

“You said go,” Steve reminded him, then shrugged, grinned and reached out a hand to pull Tony to his feet. Tony looked around him in seeming confusion, like he was trying to figure out how he’d ended up flat on his back so fast.

“You did say go,” Cam piped up.

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Fine. Again?” Tony said, facing Steve. Steve nodded once, holding himself still and waited, this time letting Tony come at him. He’d almost forgotten what this felt like, but his body remembered. It was written into his muscles and bones. Tony rushed at him, sweeping his leg at one of Steve’s while he raised a hand to block the anticipated assault. It felt, to Steve, that everything had slowed down. His breathing, his heartrate, the whoosh of air as Tony came at him, it all moved with infinitesimal focus. And then, it didn’t. It thrummed through him all at once, lighting him up, and he moved. Tony was good, he hadn’t lied. Steve could see the years of training honing Tony’s moves. There was skill there, and more determination than Steve would have ordinarily credited someone as privileged as Tony with, but this was where Steve lived. This was who he was. Fists and fight and this dance, this was what he was born to, and even just this fleeting memory of it was enough. He heard Tony’s breath catch, and Cam’s shout of triumph echoed in his chest, and then it was done. Tony was pinned under him, gasping for air, his forehead against the mat, one of his arms trapped underneath him and the other held fast in Steve’s grasp. Tony bucked a few times, testing Steve’s grip to no avail, but it was done.

“Yield,” Tony choked out, then slapped his hand against the mat, rolled over and smiled up at Steve. “Again,” he said, pushing himself up and brushing his hands against his pants.

“Are you sure?” Steve challenged. Tony grinned, bit his lip, eyes gleaming and breath coming in pants. Steve felt himself returning the smile, something like pride bursting in his chest at Tony’s unwillingness to give up so easily.

“It would be no shame to admit when you are bested,” Steve said after pinning Tony for what he thought was the fifth time.

“My soldier seems rather impressed with himself,” Tony replied, then stood and straightened himself. “What say you, General?”

“He’s good, Tony,” Rhodes said lowly, one hand cupping his chin. A frown marred his face, though to Steve it looked more like confusion than concern for Tony. “Real good.”
“If you would be agreeable to a second?” Tony asked Steve, who nodded, then looked over at Rhodes. “You’re up, Sourpatch.”

“Can you not call me that? Why am I even in this?” Rhodes asked, but he was already taking off his sword and bracers.

“My amusement,” Tony said, taking the cup of water and wet towel that Cam rushed to bring him. “Is that not sufficient?” Tony asked with a teasing grin, but there was something calculating behind the smile, Steve thought, as Tony sat down on the chair on the dais. “Come now, Rhodes, you are my finest General. Let us see what you can do.”

Rhodes gave Tony a wry, disapproving look, but strode onto the mat with nothing of Tony’s brashness, just a steely calm that Steve recognized. Steve watched Rhodes approach with a new wariness. He had a good bit of muscle on the smaller man, true enough, but Rhodes was a knight, and not one for show, but one who had seen true battle. Rhodes was fresh, and Steve had just spent the better part of the hour grappling with Tony. There was sweat dripping in his eyes, and his breathing was shallow from the exertion, but he could feel the familiar steadiness come over him as Rhodes walked towards him.

They both looked to Tony, who canted his head to the side to regard them. “Begin,” he said, taking a sip of his water and watching the two of them over the rim of his cup with a careful, practiced sort of nonchalance.

Rhodes didn’t rush him the way Tony had, perhaps having learned from watching, but instead, kept his feet moving, and arms up in a defensive posture, one slightly elevated, so it was harder to get a good grip on him, and Steve’s longer reach was less of a factor.

Steve moved in time with Rhodes, both making a few half-hearted passes at the other before Rhodes threw his forearm as a block, twisted towards Steve’s midsection and went for an elbow blow, while aiming a hard kick to Steve’s knee. It was a good move. Likely, Rhodes had used it before, gaining the upper hand relatively easily using his size and speed in such an unorthodox way. On anyone else, Steve thought it might have worked. Rhodes was good.

Steve was better.

He used Rhodes’ momentum, rolled into it instead of with it, and threw the smaller man off-balance, blocking the intended blow, then striking fast. Rhodes grunted and went down, looking up at Steve from a crouch in surprise. Steve backed off, waiting for Rhodes to stand again. He did, this time with his jaw set and eyes blazing. This time, there was no sluggishness easing into the attack. Rhodes came fast and hard, managing to land a hard blow to Steve’s hip, but that was the only one he got. Steve moved, fast, trusting his body to remember, and then Rhodes was on the ground, wheezing and holding a hand up.


“Shut up,” Rhodes said, shaking his head and smiling. “You shut up, too,” he added, pointing a finger at Tony, who was watching them with a deep intensity that made Steve’s stomach twist. I am a soldier, he wanted to shout, though he didn’t, just clamped his jaw together and returned Tony’s gaze. “Are all the soldiers in the Free States like you?” Rhodes asked as he got shakily to his feet.
“Yes, all of them,” Steve said after a moment, then bit his cheek to keep from smiling and glanced away, trying to cover his grin by wiping the sweat from his face. Behind him, Rhodes huffed out a laugh.

“Oh, I like him,” Rhodes said to Tony, amusement lacing his voice.

“As do I,” Tony replied, voice low and heated, the same intense look on his face as he regarded Steve. “General. Your best men, if you please.”

“Tony, you can’t—he’s…” Rhodes started.

“I know what he is,” Tony replied, rising and making his way off the dais and onto the training mat. “Your best men. Now, General.”

“What are you doing?” Steve asked, watching Rhodes face flatten into a grimace before he stalked off and out the gymnasium’s doors.

“Call it an experiment,” Tony replied. “I want to see what you can do. Really do.”

“Did we not just do that?” Steve asked.

“Hardly,” Tony scoffed, then his voice turned silky, curious, but underpinned with challenge. “You are barely winded. That, just now, you hardly had to try. I actually do know that I am not exactly the best at hand-to-hand combat, but Rhodey…” he shook his head. “You made him look like a green recruit. Now, let’s see what you can really do.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed on Tony’s face, trying to figure out what the other man was about, but all he saw was the same burning intensity that was there before. Tony wanted to see what he could do. Who he was.

Steve wanted to show him. Wanted it more than he had realized until this moment. It had been so long. So God-damned long since he’d felt this way.

Powerful.

He could do this. This was his place, right here, on the cusp of battle. This was what he was meant to do. For so long, that part of him had been shackled and constrained, but here was Tony, asking him to set it free. All the anger, all the hate, all the fear, he could feel it boiling inside him, threatening to spill over. His hands curled into fists at his sides. In his ears, he could hear the blood pounding in his veins. He swallowed. Tasted blood. He wasn’t sure if it was real or in his head, but it was good. Dark, coppery and familiar, that taste. He could almost feel his body quickening with it, muscles tensing, heartbeat slowing, head clearing to that eerie sense of calm, still focus.

“Cam,” Tony said, calling the boy to his side. “That helm, if you please.” Cam rushed over to the wall and plucked the helmet Tony had indicated, then brought it back, placing it in Tony’s hands. “For you,” Tony said, holding it up. Steve bent his neck, and let Tony slide the helm into place. It covered his cheeks and nose well enough, he thought, at least well enough to conceal much of his face. It was bronze, he thought, and had wings affixed to each side for no reason Steve could figure, though leather neckguard that wrapped under his chin and across his neck, designed to protect the skin under armor, covered his collar, which he assumed was why Tony chose it. “Suits you,” Tony said after a moment, then walked back over and stepped up to his chair. “You are a visiting soldier, seeking to test your skills against our finest. Would that you could wield a sword or spear. I imagine that would be quite the sight. As it is—”
“May I have a shield?” Steve asked, cutting him off.

“A shield?” Tony repeated with a slight frown.

“A shield is not a weapon,” Cam added, shooting Steve a knowing look.

Tony frowned, considering the request, then wobbled his head back and forth. “True enough,” he agreed. “Why not? It is only a shield. Probably a good idea, at any rate. So long as your opponent has one as well.”

“Fine by me,” Steve replied.

Tony jerked his head at the wall of weapons and armor. Steve walked over and picked the one he wanted off the hook that held it. Round and gleaming, just longer than his forearm, it wasn’t his shield, not even close. Too bulky, not the perfectly weighted disc he was used to, and the grip was all wrong.

But, it would do.

He glanced over his shoulder where Tony and Cam were watching him, then walked back to the center of the mat. It wasn’t long before Rhodes returned, this time with a line of men filing in behind him. Strong, young, eager soldiers, all of them, Steve thought. Clearly looking forward to the chance to display their skills before their King. He gripped the straps of the shield, felt the familiar rub of leather against his hand and arm.

“My best soldiers, Your Highness,” Rhodes said, bowing. The soldiers went to one knee and bowed their heads, waiting. “Expert with sword, spear, pike, axe, and hand combat.”

“We’ve the honor of a visiting soldier,” Tony told them from his seat on the dais. He looked only mildly interested, as if this was all some rote performance he had to sit through. Only Steve could hear the thread of tension in his voice and see the slight stiffness to the set of his shoulders, telling him that Tony was anything other than disinterested. “He seeks to try his hand against the realm’s best. Who will stand for his King first?”

A chorus of “I will” followed as the men stood up.

“Then, it appears the choice is yours,” Tony dipped his head at Steve. “Training rules apply. I would be…most distressed were our visitor to be harmed in any way,” he warned, giving Steve just the slightest quirk of his lips.

Steve advanced towards the line of men, the shield held in front of him, and studied the men. Some larger than him, some smaller. One a near behemoth, he noticed. He turned towards Tony.

“Well,” Tony questioned. “Who will it be?”

“All of them,” Steve replied.

“So say you now, but which first?” Tony asked.

“No. I mean I’ll face all of them, together,” Steve replied.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tony said, mouth flattening and brow drawing together into a frown. “Pick one, and get on with the demonstration.”

“All of them,” Steve insisted.
“You cannot fight all of them with a—a shield for God’s sake,” Tony protested. “Pick. One. I’ll pick, fine, you there.”

“All of them,” Steve repeated. “Or, none of them.”

There was a moment of heavy silence at Steve’s words. Tony stared hard at him, slowly shaking his head.

“Your Highness,” Rhodes said from his place by Tony’s side. “Perhaps we should just—”

“So be it. Soldier,” Tony cut him off. He was leaning forward in his chair, gaze directed at Steve with the same bright-eyed intensity he’d had before, but it was tight now, his jaw working around the words like they came served on a bed of sand. “Let us see what you can do.” Tony nodded his acquiescence and regarded the men as they advanced towards Steve, all at once. Steve lifted his shield and regarded the men as they formed something of a circle around him.

“Before we get started,” Steve began, voice hard and strong, and dear God, it sounded like him in a way that he hadn’t heard for far too long, “does anyone want to yield?”

They didn’t, but it wasn’t long before Steve thought they regretted the choice. When it was over, he stood among them, breathing heavily, the shield at his feet where the men were in strewn various states of discomfort and looked up at Tony, who was staring at him, mouth agape, like he had just sucked in a breath, eyes wide and darkened, though they gleamed with a fierce sort of avarice Steve had rarely seen cross Tony’s face. A tremor ran through Steve’s body. He looked down at the shield, lifted his foot and slammed it down on the edge, catching it with one hand as it leapt into the air, then looked up at Tony again.

“Your Highness,” Steve said, bowing his head. Cam jumped up and pumped his fist in the air with a loud, exhilarated whoop, then started clapping enthusiastically, though he slowed and looked around, somewhat awkwardly, when he realized the rest of the room had gone silent.

“Did I not tell you? He is the best soldier in the whole world, you will see, this is what I said,” Cam announced, looking over at Tony for approval, though Tony’s gaze was fixed on Steve.

“You did tell me,” Tony replied, voice slow and thick. Steve felt a thrum of energy vibrate through him, even as the fight left him. He could almost feel it radiating off Tony, this energy, the attention, the focus that seemed to capture Steve and hold him there, it warmed his skin like the sun. He was suddenly conscious of his body in a different way, all heavy-limbed and present now, as the thrill of battle waned. A frisson of heat curled low in Steve’s belly, expanding up through his chest, making his breath go short.

“Tony,” Rhodes said, a note of warning in his voice. “We should ta—”

“All of you. Leave us,” Tony ordered. It wasn’t a suggestion. Steve recognized the tone of command, couldn’t help but respond to it, especially with the feel of movement, speed, muscle, bone, blood, all of that still pumping hard through his veins. “I wish to speak with our visitor.”

Slowly, some with the aid of the others, the red-faced men around him struggled to their feet and made their way off the training mat, shooting sharp, questioning looks at Steve, and apologetic looks towards Rhodes, but saying nothing and studiously avoiding their King’s eye. Not that Tony was paying them any mind, Steve noticed. His eyes were locked on Steve, as if everyone else in the room had simply vanished.

Cam waved once, looked between Steve and Tony, grinned, and darted out of the room behind the
line of soldiers, nipping at their heels the way a small dog chases the pack with something that sounded a lot like a thinly veiled jibe directed at the men’s lack of success. Rhodes nodded his head in Tony’s direction and gave Steve a quick, hard look, mouth flattened into a thin line. He, too, left, though. What else was there for him to do?

Tony slowly stepped down from the dais and crossed the mat to where Steve stood, still holding the shield in his hands. He reached up and lifted the helm from Steve’s head, tossing it aside without seeming to care. It made a soft thud where it landed on the mat, though neither of them turned. The rush of cool air against sweat-slicked skin felt good, though Steve could feel beads of it trickle down his brow now that his head was free. He wanted to swipe at it, but didn’t, though he didn’t know why. He couldn’t seem to move, or couldn’t seem to want to move, he wasn’t sure, held by the force of Tony’s gaze.

“Kneel,” Tony ordered. The word was harsh, rough, like it was torn from his throat. Steve had time to think, yes, please, and then was on his knees, looking up at Tony. Tony’s hand found Steve’s jaw, cupping his cheek with a firm pressure. Steve leaned into the feeling, the warmth and presence, the firmness of it bringing him back from whatever precipice he’d been on after the fight. He imagined it was what a soft landing felt like, gently finding his feet on solid ground again. He swayed a bit, seeking more, and felt Tony’s thumb graze over his cheek where a rivulet of blood from just above his eyebrow marred his face. He shuddered at the motion, but even more, there was something about Tony’s hand pushing aside the blood on his face, marking him like that, seemingly enthralled by it, something deep and primal that Steve was always a little afraid to touch. He was supposed to be clean and perfect, a symbol for Fury, for the soldiers, for the people, and here Tony was, smearing proof of something Steve wanted to deny across his face like a brand. You bathe in blood, boy, that’s who you are, Steve remembered Phillips saying one time when Steve could have most easily denied it, wearing his uniform and hoisting the star shield over his shoulder.

“God, you have no idea how magnificent you are, do you?” Tony asked, then hummed lowly, not expecting an answer. “It is as if you defy all the laws of God and man and manage to take up more space in the world than you rightfully should. I don’t know, I look at you sometimes and I forget to breathe. I forget to think. I forget that anything else exists, save for you.”

It was strange, Steve thought hazily, because the words seemed plucked from his own mind and echoed back to him. It was Tony who was more than any man had a right to be. It was Tony who occupied so much of the world, who pushed everything away and held it at bay for Steve, Tony who took all the air out of the room until Steve was lightheaded with it, dizzy and thin-minded, and floating.

He thought he should tell Tony that, though the words seemed distant now, fleeting, as if they had run ahead and he was far behind. He turned his head enough to brush a kiss into Tony’s palm instead, basking for a moment in the rush of pleasure as he felt a shudder wrack Tony’s body at the gesture.

“You’re going to suck my cock,” Tony said. Steve’s mouth watered. He heard a small whimpering, pleading sound, and realized it came from him. God, yes, that was what he wanted. Needed. Tony always knew, somehow, even when Steve didn’t.

“Please,” Steve groaned. He started to set the shield aside to reach for the ties on Tony’s breeches. “Please, Tony.”

“No,” Tony said sharply. Steve paused, mid-motion, and looked up. “Hold it. Like that. Just like that.”
Steve re-adjusted his grip on the shield, flexing his fingers around the straps once more, looking up at Tony from under his lashes. Tony’s eyes were bright, gleaming in the afternoon sun that streamed through the tall windows, and his mouth was open, his breathing hard and fast. The hand on Steve’s jaw spasmed, clutching hard for a moment, hard enough to bruise, maybe, Steve thought, and felt a rush of pressure that traced a path of fire down his cock.

“Open,” Tony told him. Obediently, Steve opened his mouth, feeling the slight pressure from Tony’s hand encouraging him to open wider. He could feel the saliva gathering there, just behind his tongue, waiting for Tony’s cock. “God, you’re so perfect for me, Steve.”

Tony’s other hand shoved his pants down with a rough, hurried push, freeing his cock, already hard and straining, leaking a line of clear fluid from his waistband to the tip of his cock. Slowly, almost painfully slowly, Tony fed the head of his cock into Steve’s mouth. As soon as the weight hit his tongue, Steve felt his own cock jolt and a spurt of liquid stain his own pants, though he kept his hands where they were, one at his side, one holding the shield.

“Good,” Tony said, winding his hand through the spikey mess that was Steve’s sweat-soaked hair. Steve wrapped his lips around the round head of Tony’s cock, letting his tongue slide around it. He loved the feel of the smooth, soft skin pulled taut with Tony’s need. Carefully guarding his teeth, he sucked, lightly at first, then in earnest, lapping at the head with his tongue and finding the slit, worrying at it with the tip of his tongue until a gush of precum filled his mouth. Above him, Tony groaned and twisted his hand in Steve’s hair, pulling just enough for Steve to feel the rough pressure of it. It felt like being lifted, though he knew that wasn’t possible. Still, his body felt buoyant, lighter, and he closed his eyes, falling into the sensation.

He sucked harder, drawing Tony’s cock deeper into his mouth, wanting more. He flicked and teased with his tongue, then let his teeth scrape ever-so-gently along the path of the vein that throbbed on the underside. Tony let out a muttered curse, and the hand on Steve’s jaw clenched, then tugged, urging him to open wider.

“Need your mouth,” Tony panted, the tightness of his voice making Steve open his eyes and look up, even as he wound his tongue around Tony’s cockhead. “Going to fuck your mouth now. God. Fuck,” Tony hissed. “Like that. Shit, Steve, that’s—” he broke off with a garbled mouth of words that ended up in a long, low moan as Steve took him deeper, letting Tony’s cock glide over his tongue and down into the well of his throat.

Saliva dripped from the edges of Steve’s mouth, down his chin, though he didn’t try to wipe it away, just kept his hands as they were and let Tony do what he would. He tried to remember to breathe through his nose, but his body kept wanting to take a gulp of air, and the chest-tight, throat-closing feeling of near panic of not enough air left him reeling and shaky, his whole body feeling like it was held up by a single string that Tony held, keeping him from falling over. He swallowed, the motion making Tony’s cock bob against the back of his throat, and Tony’s hips jerked, making the tip hit the wall of Steve’s throat, then slide further, blocking Steve’s throat completely.

Then the feeling was gone, and Tony was sliding back out, catching just the bulbous head of his cock on Steve’s lips, and blessed air flowed into Steve’s lungs, lifting him, inflating him, and he was falling, floating, he didn’t know, and then Tony pushed his cock past Steve’s lips again and all the way down his throat with a single thrust. Steve couldn’t suck, couldn’t swallow, couldn’t do anything, except let Tony have this, and God, it felt so good, so amazingly wonderful, to just be. In and out, short, shallow thrusts that rammed into his mouth and made his body shake, punctuated by the long, slow glide of Tony’s cock over his tongue and down, down, the tip scraping along the back of Steve’s throat almost torturous in the care and gentleness for such an act. The air would...
come and go, and Steve would forget to breathe, forget that he needed to, and his body would go tight, his mind lost to everything except that next, sweet bit of air, so cold, it burned a path down the rawness of his throat.

Tony was saying things to him, both hands holding fast to Steve’s hair now, cupping the sides of his head as Tony pounded into his mouth, over and over. Steve wasn’t sure of the words, but they were good, and Tony was beautiful like this, so far gone that he was barely able to make sense. Tony’s legs were trembling. His hands were shaking, grasping, reaching to hold on and slipping through Steve’s hair and down his face. Steve could feel the rhythm of Tony’s thrusts lose its steadiness, all finesse gone. He heard Tony let out a shout, and Steve’s mouth filled with Tony’s warm, salty seed as ribbons of it pulsed down his throat. He felt himself coughing and sputtering, though Tony didn’t let go, just held his head there against Tony’s stomach, burying Steve’s nose into the wiry hairs at the base of Tony’s cock while he chased the last of his orgasm. Finally, Tony pulled out, just as the last spurts of come shot out, marking Steve’s face from cheek to chin. Steve swallowed, opened his mouth to gasp in air and caught some of it on his tongue and teeth, the mess mixing with the saliva that had leaked from the edges of his lips while Tony fucked his mouth.

Tony staggered back, panting, eyes bright and face high with color. He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it wild and unkempt looking, then over his mouth, keeping his eyes on Steve. Steve watched him, feeling the sticky mess start to drip down his face, over his lips and off his chin. His own cock was straining against his pants, all but forgotten, though now, the insistent pulse of need that seemed to have faded while Tony used his mouth raged to the forefront of Steve’s mind. He wanted to touch himself, wanted Tony to touch him, wanted to rut against the mat, anything that meant friction, but he did none of this. Just waited, holding the shield and clenching his other hand into a fist at his side.

Tony stepped towards Steve, lifting a shaking hand to Steve’s face, letting his fingers hover there for a moment before they settled on Steve’s head, threading gently through his hair. “God, Steve. You’re so fucking beautiful. Look at you. So good for me, my treasure,” Tony murmured. “All that power…my God, what you did, and then…” he stopped, blinking, seeming to have run out of words. The thought made Steve a little giddy, and he felt his whole body go languid and loose, all the tension ebbing from him as if Tony’s words opened a release valve.

More soft fingers grazed through Steve’s hair. He liked that. Leaned in, swaying a bit, seeking more. He was hard and aching, but the dueling sensation was strangely comforting, like one was too much, but both together, it somehow made it easier to just let his mind split apart and handle both.

“How do you want to come?” Tony asked after a while.

“Mmmmm,” Steve hummed. He thought the answer was yes. Was supposed to be yes. Yes seemed far away, though, out of reach somehow. He could see it, right there in his mind, but his arms were too heavy to reach for it.

“How do you want me to decide?” Tony asked, voice soft and gentle. That was good. Easier. He could reach.

“Yes, Tony,” Steve replied, his voice slurry and rough from the rawness of his throat. More hands. More words. Good words, Steve thought, which meant he was good, and he liked that. Being good. He was supposed to be good all the time, but he couldn’t, and sometimes, sometimes he was too slow, and sometimes, he thought he might be terrible. Being good for Tony, though, that was so, so much easier. So easy to just let go and be good for him.

Finally, Tony’s hands left him, and Steve jolted forward, like breaking the surface of the water and
coming up for air. He was still floating, but on the surface now, which was good, because Tony was watching him with a keen focus, the way Tony did when he was good. He liked that, too. Tony’s attention on him. He’d liked showing off a bit for Tony, showing what he could do, though in his head, he wasn’t sure if he meant the sparring demonstration or this.

Tony tucked his spent cock back into his pants and walked over to the dais, taking each step at a time, until he slowly turned and sat down, eyes on Steve.

“You can put that down now,” Tony told him, nodding at the shield in Steve’s hand. Steve looked dumbly down at it, having momentarily forgotten he was holding it. He forced his fingers to peel off their grip on the leather straps and let it fall to the side, then dragged his eyes back to Tony. “Good. That’s good, Steve. Now, you’re a mess, my soldier. We can’t have that, can we? Clean yourself up,” Tony said. For a moment, Steve just blinked up at him in confusion. He looked around for a cloth or something to use, then, seeing nothing, started to reach up to wipe his face with his hand. “Not like that,” Tony said, sounding mildly amused, though his eyes darkened then. “My seed belongs in you. Now. Clean yourself up.”

Steve stared at Tony for a long moment, Tony’s words from so many nights ago sounding drumbeat-loud in his head, matching the pounding of the blood in his veins, all seeming to rush right to his cock. Slowly, he darted his tongue out to catch a droplet that clung to his lips, bringing it into his mouth as Tony watched, his breath heaving a bit as Steve’s tongue disappeared between his lips. It tasted familiar, of course, the salty, bitter, musky taste of Tony. Not bad, exactly, and certainly far from the worst thing he’d tasted, but there was something about cleaning himself up like this, about being told to clean himself up like this, something deeply visceral about Tony watching him do it, that should be wrong and degrading and terrible, but somehow wasn’t.

Instead, he felt a surge of lust and need, a building, hot pressure curling low in his stomach and tightening its grip on his balls and cock, and then shame burned through him at that, and he felt his cock harden all the more, tenting his pants in a desperate search for release. He reached up and trailed his thumb through the drying, sticky mess on his face, then brought his fingers to his mouth. “Stop,” Tony ordered sharply, eyes dark and hard, roaming possessively over Steve, making his skin tingle and warm. “Use that on your cock,” Tony said, voice going low and hard. “Make yourself come for me with my seed.”

Steve groaned and let his eyes fall shut. His hips juddered, cock spurting, dampening the front of his pants and thighs. Just the words alone were enough to nearly send him over the edge. His mind conjured the image of him doing that, taking his cock in his hand and using Tony’s come to rub himself, and fuck. Fuck. He wanted that, exactly that, more than he thought he’d wanted just about anything.

Slowly, Steve undid the ties at the waist of his pants and opened the front, letting his cock spring free. He was hard and dripping, deep red as his cock pulsed with need. Keeping his eyes on Tony, Steve trailed his fingers, still wet with Tony’s seed, up and down his cock, then took himself in hand, circling his fingers around the thick head. Tony’s eyes dipped shut for a brief moment, then opened, half-lidded and dazed, his mouth falling open into a silent ‘Oh’ as Steve started to stroke himself.
After a few strokes, there wasn’t quite enough wetness, and the burn of each pass of his hand against the sensitive skin only worsened, though he didn’t stop. It was terrible and wonderful, and it was for Tony, so it was good. *He* was good. Being so good for Tony, even his mind spiraled through trying to catch the thread of pain or pleasure and finally grabbing on the end of both.

“God, fuck, look at you, you’re so fucking gorgeous, Steve,” Tony ground out, shifting in his seat and rubbing his palm hard against the juncture of his thighs. “My beautiful one, my treasure, come for me. Come for me. Come for me, Steve.”

“Tony,” Steve groaned, drawing out his name into a long, thin echo of need.

“That’s good, Steve. You’re so close. You’re doing so good for me. You’re almost there. Come for me, now, Steve,” Tony urged, his voice like a chant in Steve’s head. “Come for me, beloved.”

Steve did. His vision whited out, bright as the sun, then shuttered and darkened as his hips jerked into the circle of his hand. He cried out and doubled over, managing to get his other hand out in front of him to brace himself against the mat as he thrust, spending the last of himself as Tony watched.

Long, shuddering breaths slowly filled Steve’s lungs. He knelt there, panting, one hand still holding his cock, dripping with come, and the other quivering as it bore the brunt of his weight. He was going to fall, he thought, somewhat dazedly, and then Tony’s arms were around him, rolling him to his side, where his head was gently laid in Tony’s lap.

“I’ve got you, Steve. I’ve got you, you’re alright. So good, Steve, you did so good,” Tony crooned. His hands were running up and down Steve’s arms, almost as if he was trying to ward away some chill. Steve wasn’t cold, though. He was warm and spread apart, like pieces were slowly separating and floating away. It made him think of paint mixed in water, the color slowly seeping away, then coming together again. The more Tony talked, his tone hushed and soft, his hands roving over Steve’s body, the more the pieces started to come back, not snapping back into place, but just sort of drifting until Steve felt solid again. A cup of water was held to his lips. He drank. It was, in his opinion, the best water ever. His throat was parched, and it almost hurt at first to drink, but then he wanted nothing but to drink forever.

“It is fine water,” Tony said with more than a little fondness in his voice, making Steve realize he must have spoken his thoughts out loud. “Slowly now. Not so fast. There you go.”

“Tony,” Steve rasped out. A wet cloth was wiping whatever lingering mess there was from his face, chest and hands. It, too, felt glorious. Everything felt better. Sharper. Clearer. Yet it managed to have a hazy depth to it as well, as if Steve could see a little more of everything. Tony was beautiful like this. The sun flecked his hair with golden streaks. His arms and chest were a warm tan against Steve’s paler skin, defining wiry muscles and a thin trial of dark hair that disappeared beneath his breeches. His eyes were brighter now, catching the light, and framed by long, dark lashes. Tony’s mouth was curled into a doting smile, lips red and puffy, probably from where he had bitten at them while Steve sucked his cock, a thought that made Steve’s own cheeks heat. He dropped his eyes and looked away, landing on the shield where it sat like an upended turtle. You should see me with mine, he thought, and then the image of it, kneeling in front of Tony, choking on his cock while holding his shield, the real one, burned bright at the forefront of his mind, and he wanted that. Craved it. He shouldn’t, of course, he knew that. But, the more he thought it, the more he couldn’t think of anything else. How good it would feel to leave a battlefield, a real one, and come home to this. Let Tony take him apart and put him back together, the real him, not this pale shade of who he was.

“Yes?” Tony pressed when Steve didn’t continue, drawing Steve’s mind back to where he was.
Steve looked up at him. He was curled against Tony’s thighs, while Tony stroked his skin, leaning over him and letting his sweat-damp hair fall over his forehead, curling a little there and at the nape, the way Steve liked. His eyes were soft and full of a gentle yearning, like he was looking at something fragile and precious, and Steve thought he should tell Tony that it was just him, just Steve Rogers, and he didn’t need to be looked at like that, but he held his tongue. Even if he wanted to say the words, he didn’t think he could.

“Tony,” Steve said again, this time a little more firmly, as if that settled something. He watched one side of Tony’s mouth quirk up into a soft smile, and he shook his head, smoothing Steve’s hair off of his forehead.

“I don’t deserve you. But,” Tony sighed, “I am a selfish bastard,” he finished after a moment, almost as if he were speaking to himself. He sounded sad, and Steve didn’t like that, nor the words themselves. They weren’t true. Whatever…whatever this was between them, Steve knew they weren’t true.

“You’re not selfish, Tony,” Steve frowned. “And you deserve…” he stopped, a slight furrow forming on his brow. What did Tony deserve? Everything, Steve’s mind supplied. He wanted to give Tony everything. “To be happy. We all do.”

Tony looked down at him, an expression of such tender yearning crossing his features that Steve reached up to touch Tony’s cheek, as if he could brush it away. “Tell me that you are happy, my treasure,” Tony said, his voice flat, almost emotionless, but his face was tight and his eyes heavy with a desolate sort of longing.

_I think your happiness would be breathtaking to behold._

There is a path through the mountains, Steve thought to himself. His stomach turned over, and his throat closed up. He couldn’t swallow past the sudden lump that lodged itself there. He hated this. He hated himself. He hated this world and this choice. He thought he might hate Tony a little, too, for making it so hard.

But.

There is a path through the mountains.

Home, Steve thought, looking up at Tony and finding that the word was brittle and tasted like ash on his tongue.

“I am happy,” Steve replied.

“Good. That is…all that matters,” Tony said. “You should rest tonight. Enjoy an evening to yourself. There will be food and a bath waiting for you when you return to your rooms. And a…a token. Of my affection.”

“I don’t need gifts,” Steve frowned.

“All the more reason you should receive them,” Tony countered. He smiled. Sadness clung to it like cobwebs, dulling it. “It pleases me to give you things.”

“When?” Steve asked, genuinely curious.

Tony laughed. It didn’t sound like a laugh, not really, Steve thought. “So that you will like me more, Raj’Inama, and overlook that I have so little to give, by comparison.”
That made no sense to Steve, so he just frowned and slowly shook his head. “I told you. Last night, what I said…” he began, then faltered, the rejection still singing.

“You give me the finest gift in all the world, my dearest one,” Tony said in low, husky voice. “Would that I could match it with what you want of me. Perhaps one day,” he said tightly, looking away. “Perhaps it will be different.”

There is a path through the mountains.

It wouldn’t be different. It would never be different.

*There are no secrets. Only lies.*

None of this felt like a lie, not anymore, and Steve couldn’t help but wonder who he was truly lying to.

“The guards will escort you back to your rooms. I’m sure Cam will be delighted. Rest. Relax. On the morrow, I thought we might go riding, if you wish it. You’ve yet to meet my stablemaster, Happy. One of the few men who lives up to their name,” Tony added with a quick smile.

“I’d like that,” Steve replied.

They stayed that way for some untold amount of time, just Tony carding his fingers through Steve’s hair, a feeling of contentment warming him. Finally, he slowly untangled his limbs from Tony, and let the other man help him to his feet, feeling a bit like an ungainly hatchling trying to walk a straight path on legs that didn’t feel quite his own. Tony brought him his robe and helped him fit his arms into it, then placed a short, almost chaste, kiss to his lips, then groaned as he tasted himself on Steve’s mouth.

“Leave now, or I’ll never let you go,” Tony told him, then his expression shuttered, and he gave Steve a strange look that felt almost like an apology. Steve nodded, adjusted his robe and turned to follow the guards back to his rooms.

They took him back the way he and Rhodes had come earlier, through the maze that was the King’s Walk, back to Tony’s suite of rooms, where he could take the usual route to his rooms in the compound. No one spoke, and Steve had to admit to being glad of the silence. He did wonder what the guards thought of him, of their King, of all of this. From the other night, it was clear they had their opinions, even if they usually chose to keep their thoughts to themselves.

He bid them goodnight once they delivered him to his rooms, opened the door and stepped inside. He half expected Cam to try to tackle him or have some sort of celebration set up, such was the boy’s usual enthusiasm.

He was not expecting Obadiah Stane to be sitting in one of the chairs in the small living area, sipping a goblet of wine and leafing through one of the old ledgers Tony had provided for Steve’s amusement.

Steve’s eyes immediately searched the room for Cam, panic pumping through his veins.

“He’s gone to visit his mother,” Stane said without looking up. “I thought it better that you and I should talk alone. Away from prying eyes.”

Steve said nothing, just stood there, ramrod straight. He wasn’t afraid of Stane, but he wasn’t stupid enough not to be wary. The man had nursed his depravity under Tony’s nose for decades and built quite the handsome empire for himself in the process, and Tony was too smart for Steve
to dismiss that kind of subterfuge as a fluke.

“What do you want?” Steve asked.

“Sit,” Stane said. Steve stayed where he was. Stane’s mouth curled into something that might have been a smile on someone else. All Steve saw was teeth. “I see why he likes you. Tony always did like beautiful things, but never easy things. Not Tony.”

Steve felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle, but said nothing. Stane set the goblet down and tossed the ledger aside, standing up. He was of a height with Steve, but given now to softness with his age, but he still new how to use his size, Steve noted, watching him move around the room, showing little interest in what he found, but looking, nonetheless. Probably because he could. Some show of power he thought he still held.

“You’ve managed to cause me a fair bit of problems in a short amount of time,” Stane observed, looking at Steve over his shoulder while his finger traced over the spines of various books that were ordered in a row on the low credenza. Once, the books had held images and texts that made Steve’s ears go red just thinking about. Now, they were treatises on art, history, military and philosophy, tomes that Tony had provided because he thought Steve might like them.

“Can’t say I’m sorry to hear that,” Steve replied.

“No,” Stane said, almost amiably. “I suppose you can’t.” Stane picked up a small package, which had a white lily on top of it, which Steve knew was the gift Tony meant for him. He wanted to stalk across the room and knock it out of Stane’s hand, but held himself back out of sheer determination. Stane set it down without opening it and went on to the next bauble, disinterested in the actual items, but seeming to enjoy Steve’s reaction.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Steve told him, schooling his features.

“Hmm,” Stane replied noncommitally. “See, I think that it is you who shouldn’t be here.”

“These are my rooms,” Steve reminded him. “And you were not invited here. What do you think Tony will say when he finds out you have abandoned your confinement and come here?”

“I imagine he would be most displeased. If you told him,” Stane said with a slight shrug.

“Will you?” Stane said. “He does listen to you, though, I’ll give you that. Quite a bit, I’m told. Many say more than he should. That your…influence…over him is…well. Improper. Raises a bit of a concern, let’s say.”

“Tony’s his own man, and he knows his own mind. If you think he could be so easily led by—by someone like me, you’d have found someone to whisper in his ear years ago,” Steve pointed out, noting by the way Stane’s eyes narrowed that he’d struck well.

“Clever,” Stane nodded. “Of course, you would be. You wouldn’t have held his interest this long if you weren’t. You were supposed to be a distraction, you know?” Stane reminded him, almost with a note of begrudging respect. “A few nights, to get him out of his head, and then he could go back to doing what he does best, but you…you’re different. I underestimated you. I’ll grant you that,” he admitted, wagging a finger in Steve’s direction.

“I won’t make the same mistake with you,” Steve replied. Stane just let out a low huff of a laugh and crossed his arms over his chest, regarding Steve with an assessing look that somehow managed
to fill Steve’s stomach with dread. This man was evil, maybe not in the wild, terrible way Schmidt had been, but his soul was just as black, only he could hide it far better. Steve thought that might be the more terrifying side of evil, the one that didn’t hold you at swordpoint, but instead, held out its hand as a friend.

“Are you sure you already haven’t?” Stane asked, then waved his hand in the air, as if to wave away the words. “He’ll tire of you, you know. Eventually. He always does. Tell yourself you’re special until you believe it, but I’ve known him his whole life. You are the shiny, new plaything he’s found. He’s poured all his nonsense ideals into you, so he can use you the way he uses everything else, to make himself feel better, but he isn’t going to change. When you stop being enough, you’ll be gone, too. He won’t be able to stomach looking at you. Just like Stone. Just like Lady Bain. Just like all the others. Except you don’t get some pile of rocks and a title to go with it, you get some other Master, and then another Master, and then another, because that’s what you are to him. A beautiful thing, to enjoy until he’s done. And then? You are nothing to him.”

“That’s not who he is,” Steve said, keeping his voice even though his thoughts, terrible thoughts, roiled through his head. What Stane said, though laced with hate and venom, was far too like his own inner voice, like Stane could see into his mind and pluck out his worst fears. “If you think that of him, you don’t know him at all.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps you are right,” Stane said, backing away and holding up his hands placatingly in front of him. “I’m just an old man who has known him his whole life.”

“Who has lied to him and used him his whole life,” Steve spat.

“Who isn’t afraid to do what must be done to keep order and balance in this realm,” Stane replied. “Even when his King will not.”

“You don’t know him. You don’t know a damned thing about him,” Steve ground out. “This is all your twisted way of justifying what you do, but no more. You’re done here. Whatever happens, Tony won’t allow it. He’ll never allow it.”

“Never is a very long time in my experience,” Stane told him, looking at Steve from under his brow, an oily smile glossing his lips. “You and I, we have something in common, you know?”

“I doubt that,” Steve said.

“Really? We both want you gone,” Stane replied, voice going hard. He walked over to where Steve stood, just inside the vestibule, one of the intricate oil lamps hanging overhead and casting shadows across the man’s bald head that made it look like he wore a mask. Maybe he does, Steve thought, with a fissure of cold wrapping itself down his spine. “Don’t we?” he asked, all oiled smoothness now.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve shot back. There was danger here. A warning bell seemed to be sounding distantly in the back of Steve’s mind. He could taste copper in his mouth, flooding his senses, his body ramping up for a fight that he wasn’t sure he could win as easily as he had on the sparring mat. This was a different kind of fight, one played with words and lies, and Steve wasn’t sure he even knew the rules.

“Gone. Back. Home. Isn’t that what you want?” Stane asked, his expression careful, guarded, but far too knowing. “I could make that happen. A ship to take you back, a chest of gold to see you well into the future, and no one the wiser. You, the boy, his mother, too, if you wanted. Say the word, and you could be halfway across the Dark Sea before he even realizes you are gone. You could have your life back. No more of this,” he said, reaching out and tracing a finger along
Steve’s collar, making Steve jerk away, his skin crawling with Stane’s touch. Stane smiled, a terrible rictus of a smile. This man’s gifts are poisoned, Steve thought, resisting the urge to reach up and rub at the spot on his collar where Stane had touched him. “Think on it, King’s Prize. There is no place for you here that doesn’t involve a yoke, and eventually, you’ll find out just what that means, one way or the other. I think you know that,” Stane finished, giving him a long look.

Steve watched him go, waited until the door closed with a soft snick, then let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. His heart was pounding in his chest. Tony. Stane was still trying to undermine him, and clearly not especially concerned about his supposed confinement. He needed to tell Tony, Steve thought, reaching for the door, then stilling, his hand still outstretched.

Stane was offering him a way home. Him, Cam, and Cam’s mother. The impossible thing he wanted. It hardly seemed real.

It couldn’t be real. Steve knew that. It was the bait on a hook. Perhaps Stane thought with Steve gone, Tony could be convinced that Steve had lied. Manipulated him. Used him. Played on Tony’s fears and used Cam, his willing accomplice, to do it. That…didn’t seem so farfetched, Steve had to admit.

Would that happen after he left anyway? Was that Stane’s plan, wait it out? Never is a very long time in my experience, Steve thought, remembering Stane’s words.

He didn’t know what to do with this. Politics and intrigue were like an upside-down chessboard to him. Absently, he walked over to the credenza and picked up the package, setting the white lily to the side. A jewel-crusted wooden box was below. Steve opened it. Sitting in a swath of blue velvet was a simple ring, made of iron, Steve noticed, holding it up to the light. The same insignias Rhodes had shown him on the coin were stamped around the band, meeting at the center where an uncut stone of pale blue sat. It was far from the most expensive gift Tony had given him, but Steve’s hand shook as he held it. It meant something, something Steve wasn’t privy to, not now, not yet. Something Tony didn’t want him to know. But, there was meaning there, deep and true, and for some reason, he thought of the flat rune stones the soldiers had taken to wearing pinned to their mail, if they had it, or on simple chains around their necks, if they didn’t.

What had Phillips said? Your first impulse is usually the right one. Trust your gut, boy.

He had to tell Tony.

Weaving his way through the compound and tunnel to Tony’s chambers was easy by now, though the hurry hadn’t given him much time to think about what he would say. He was still trying to think it through in his head when one of the guards outside Tony’s door held up his hand to stop Steve.

“I know, I’m not to be here—” Steve started.

“It is not that, Raj’Inama. The King is not here. He is in his office with General Rhodes,” the guard, Peran, Steve remembered, said, pointing down the hallway.

“You can wait inside,” the other guard, Josiah, suggested.

“No, no—I need to see him. Now. It’s important,” Steve told them. “Please,” he said, when the older one opened his mouth, probably to voice an objection, “I wouldn’t disturb him and General Rhodes if it weren’t vital, you know that.”

The guards exchanged a look, and the younger of them glanced over at Steve with a sort of
conspiratorial look. “It is likely he and General Rhodes are merely rehashing the day,” he said, mouth pursing as he clearly tried to contain a smile. “I imagine the King has a few, uh. Words. For his General. To remind him of the day’s events, should his memory have faltered.”

The older guard snorted. “Damnedest display of fighting skills I’ve ever seen, I’ll tell you that right now,” he admitted, giving Steve a long look. “He did not say he was not to be disturbed…”

“I will not keep him, if he doesn’t wish it, but this is truly important. You trusted me before. I ask that you do it again,” Steve said.

“Fine. Go. It’ll be on my head if I’m wrong, so I’m going to trust you to see that the King welcomes the interruption, hmmm?” Peran said, face pulling into what Steve thought was a chuckle. Steve nodded, feeling a blush creep across his cheeks, but he couldn’t exactly deny it, and strangely, the teasing from the guards felt like one of the few familiar parts of this whole place.

He forced himself not to sprint down the hall to Tony’s private office. He needed to think. Figure out what he would say. That Stane was plotting against Tony, still? That he offered to arrange Steve’s transport home? What kinds of questions would that admission hasten? He was so caught up in his thoughts, he rounded the hallway corner and almost walked right into the open door in front of him before Rhodes’ voice halted him in his tracks.

“You can’t just ignore this, Tony!” Rhodes said in a loud, frustrated voice. “He’s not some foot soldier, for God’s sake!”

They were…talking about him, Steve realized, stepping to the side where the shadows darkened a corner.

“You don’t know that,” Tony’s voice, flat and devoid of emotion, sounded from somewhere behind Rhodes.

“You saw how he fought, Tony. That’s not—that’s not some crofter’s son who marched off to do his duty and is going back home to plow fields. The map table, the weaponry, this new idea for the walls you said—you said—came from him. Come on, Tony,” Rhodes ground out through what Steve imagined was teeth gritted hard enough to crack an acorn kernel. “Look, prisoners of war have always been made slaves, yes, that’s war, but not the officers. They’re ransomed back, and you know why? I know you know why. Because someone important, someone powerful, wants them back badly enough to do something stupid.”

“Even if you are right, they think him dead, James,” Tony snapped back at Rhodes, prying Steve’s focus back to the voices spilling out of the room. “There is half a world between us and them. They were nearly decimated by Schmidt, have no standing Army and a Navy that is mostly a repurposed fishing fleet. I think you overstate the risk.”

“Really? And if someone took him from you?” Rhodes asked with a derisive snort.

“That’s different,” Tony responded stiffly. “Need I remind you that you were the one who counseled your concern about his knowledge of our defenses. Is that not even more true, if you are right?”

“Oh, of course, he can’t go back, Tony, I’m not—I’m,” Rhodes broke off. “Hell, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“He’s happy here, Rhody. Safe. These people you fear will cross an ocean for him, they left him with scars and nightmares he won’t speak about,” Tony husked out. “That life is behind him now,
and here...here he can have...anything he wants. Tell me how this is wrong! This is the only God-damned thing in my life that has ever felt right!” There was a loud thud accompanying the last, followed by a high scraping sound, and Steve imagined a fist hitting a table or desk, maybe, and Tony standing abruptly. “I can make him happy. Here. With me. I can--”

“Tony,” Rhodes cut in. He, too, sounded tired, though his voice was laced with something that sounded to Steve like sympathy. “Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t. I know you, and I see what you’re...it’s...it’s not ever going to be what you want. There’s no ending here that can be even close to—to what’s in your head, okay? You know that. I know you do. You’ve got to be smart about this. Look, I don’t know what’s going to happen. Maybe nothing. Maybe I’m wrong. You know that I want you to be happy, Tony, not just as my King, but as my friend. And he’s good for you. I can see that plainly enough. But, so can others, Tony. Others—Obie, for one-- see how much power a concubine has, and—alright, fine, you don’t want to hear it?” Rhodes demanded.

Another scrape of a chair, and Steve started backing away, though where he was going, he didn’t know. “All I’m saying is that I have years of having to be right when it mattered telling me that this is dangerous. Something is...moving the wheel, something that I can’t see, and I’ll not lie, Tony, it scares me. Someone is going to come looking for him, Tony. One day. Someone is going to come. You know I’m right.”

Steve jolted at Rhodes’ words, heart hammering against his ribs. Dawning horror awakened in his mind, a dark, cold wave that seemed to wash everything else away. They wouldn’t come, he wanted to say. They can’t. They can’t, not when I’m—he cut off the thought before it could finish.

There’s a path through the mountains.

Panic clawed its way up Steve’s throat. It tasted like seawater, he thought, though that thought was quickly pushed to the side. Washed away, he thought with a tide of hysteria behind it. They couldn’t come here, they couldn’t find him like this, he had to leave, he had to leave, escape, it had to be him, he had to be the one to leave, not them, not them coming here and seeing him like this and, knowing, knowing what he was, knowing what he wanted, knowing—

“Then let them come,” Tony’s voice cut in sharply, a bright line through the darkness that clouded Steve’s mind. “Let them come and try. He is mine. God or fate or whatever force you feel pressing on the wheel has decreed it. Perhaps I cannot have what I would want. That is not entirely new to me, you know? But, I can give him what I have, if he will have it of me. I am...I am told that those things may be just as good. If they are truly meant.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for sticking with this fic! I truly, truly appreciate your comments and kudos more than you can possibly imagine. I know the subject matter is a little iffy and when I started this, I really wasn't sure if people would respond or if I'd be run out of fandom with a bunch of pitchforks, so thank you for indulging my love of trashy romance. I really appreciate the support.

Many thanks, as always, to my beta, tastes-like-coconut for her input and help with this chapter. She is also an amazing artist, so check her stuff out on tumblr.
I'm sabrecme on tumblr and twitter. Come say hi.
Warm, crystal-blue water sluiced through Steve’s fingers as he trailed his hand through the gentle waves. The afternoon sun beat down on his shoulders, heating the skin. The waters were so different here than back home, where they were brackish with silt and grass, ending in long, spindly fingers of water that reached for the sea. Here, the waters were so clear, Steve could see his feet below him as he picked his way between the rocks, and the water’s warm nearly the whole year, or so Tony said.

This was the King’s beach, or the Strand, as the locals called it. Tony claimed this was a mottled version of Stark’s sand, which was how it was originally claimed when his ancestors arrived and decided to build the first fortress on the cliff above. Whatever the origin, there was no doubt why kings would claim the Strand as their own. Buttressed by steep, red cliffs to the back and a swath of rocks larger than most homes forming a natural berm to the front, the lagoon was nearly inaccessible and the waters calm.

Our beach, Tony called it, because he knew Steve liked it here, where the only noises were the waves and the seabirds. Steve stared at the line in the distance where the waters met the sky. Here, there was nothing between him and home. No walls. No guards. No Tony. Freedom tasted like salt air and felt like water rushing through his hands, he thought, though that was what death had tasted like, too, and he wasn’t even surprised by the thought anymore. He wondered if Tony understood what drew Steve here, and thought perhaps he did. Not that Tony would say as much, not directly, anyway.

Let’s go to our beach today. That was how Tony had greeted Steve this morning, rolling over in their bed and grinning as he kissed Steve to wakefulness. Don’t you have a thousand things to do, Steve had asked. At least, Tony said, laughing as he said it. Let’s go to our beach today.

So, they had trudged down the path where steep steps formed out of stone like the spine of some great, skeletal beast. Centuries ago, the king had them carved into the cliffs that led directly to the Castle, and some time after that, the entrance had been connected to the King’s Walk, so rulers could come and go at their leisure. General Rhodes said this was to give the King an escape route in time of attack. Tony claimed, with an impish gleam in his eye, that it had truly been done so that
his great-great-grandfather could bring in dozens of young concubines under the nose of his much older husband, a devoutly religious man who served the stone gods and did not approve of the young king’s appetites.

Steve suspected Tony’s tale was likely the more accurate, but no matter the reason for it, he couldn’t deny that he loved the way the warm waters made him feel, like he was floating and being held at the same time. He thought Tony probably understood that, too. He thought Tony probably understood that every time he came here, it pushed that feeling of being so cold that he burned with it just a little further away.

He thought Tony probably understood a lot about him.

A familiar frisson of worry snaked down Steve’s spine at the thought, though he resolutely pushed it away. Those thoughts were not for today, he told himself firmly. They would leave the city tomorrow to begin their journey to the desert wastes that fanned out from the Red Mountains, where Tony’s Jerak’ho would be demonstrated for the intractable General Ross, who led the realm’s southern defenses.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, Steve would no longer be able to ignore the reality of what was to come. Tomorrow, he would have to begin to put his plan into motion or give up on it, curl himself around Tony and let this be who he was for the rest of his days. Tomorrow, he would decide. Whatever the outcome, the inertia that had sunk into his bones the past few months would have to cease. Since the night he’d told Tony what Lord Stane offered and watched as the full force of Tony’s wrath was turned on the man who had been as close to family as anyone for Tony, Steve had let himself be carried along by whatever it was between him and Tony, swept through the days like a leaf floating down a river as it thundered over rocks and gullies.

It was so easy to just be Tony’s. So simple. Deceptively so. Each day flowed into the next. No demands. No decisions where a bloody bundle of lifelines were clutched in Steve’s hands. It was idyllic in many ways, if he only looked at the moments. He had the finest of everything at his fingertips. His sleep was rarely disturbed with dreams that echoed the screams of the dead or went silent and cold, and when it was, Tony was there, soothing him through the tremors.

Tony was as good as his word, Steve had to admit. In the privacy of their chambers, he listened to Steve, more than Steve had ever dared to hope. Treated him as an equal. Tony was almost zealous in his interest in improving the lot of the Realm’s slaves, making Steve wonder if each new proclamation or charitable gesture was meant as an appeasement as much for Steve as for anyone else wearing a collar, as if Tony sought to use good deeds to grind down his conscious like a millstone. He will change, Steve told himself. In time, Tony would be able to see.

He wasn’t sure that was how it worked.

Steve sank into the water, floating, letting the waves lift him. He looked up at the sun. Blinded for a moment, he blinked and closed his eyes. Bright circles danced behind his eyelids. I cannot see, he thought for a wild moment, then righted himself and blinked, rubbing a hand across his eyes while he waited for his vision to clear. When it did, all that was in front of him was the sea.

Steve could not deny that he was happy here. That he could be happy here for the rest of his life. The pang of shame that came with that realization was a pinprick against the same spot over and over. It lessened with each thought, and all of the changes just being here had already wrought, all of the possibilities for their future, they were a salve on the wound.
Most of all, there was Tony. Kind, smart, beautiful, funny Tony, who loved Steve with a depth that sometimes took Steve’s breath away. He knew it, even if Tony didn’t speak the words aloud. It was in every action, every cadence of Tony’s voice, every stroke of his hand, every look that lingered and softened. Tony’s attention and devotion was a warm, glowing beacon that Steve gravitated towards, the same as everyone else did, demanding so little in return. Loving Tony was the simplest and most wondrous thing Steve had ever done. It came like breathing. Done without thought, but an absolute, a necessity, and something he couldn’t stop, even if he tried.

He didn’t want to try.

Steve ducked his head under the water, hung there and opened his eyes to the hazy, blue blur where his hands reached out as white as bone against the water, then rose up out of the water and shook his head, sending a spray of droplets across the waves.

He didn’t want to try. That scared him more than almost anything. Here, he would be loved. Happy and safe and loved beyond measure. Tony’s promises were welded around him like chains, sometimes, true and terrible. The drumbeat of certainty that sometimes filled his head that said this was not the life he was meant to have grew discordant with each passing day. The man who had once held a shield against the brutal hands of power and told the world to move felt like a dream sometimes, distant and blurred, the last vestiges barely holding on with the light of day.

Behind him, Steve heard a frustrated shout from the beach, drawing him from his thoughts. He turned and held up a hand over his brow to hide his eyes from the sun.

“You’ll not catch them that way,” Steve called out, squinting at the scene. A flag bearing Tony’s crest fluttered in the breeze atop a shaded pavilion swathed in bright blue stripes. Cam hovered just at the water’s edge, too fearful to let it cover more than his ankles, but he liked to watch the small crabs carrying their homes on their backs that dotted the rocks along the shore and engage in a never-ending game of trying to catch the silvery fish who darted in and out of the crevices, far too fast for even small hands to capture. Not that this stopped Cam from trying.

“I almost had him!” Cam replied, kicking at where the waves gently lapped at the shore. “They are very fast, but I shall be faster. You will see!” Steve just shook his head and turned back to face the waves, letting them lift him up and down in the water. He had to give the boy credit for his persistence, if not his success.

He smiled, soft and wistful, remembering a time when he and Bucky would scoop up the fat, black tadpoles that hugged the grassy shore of the river back home. They built homes for them in the muddy bank with the finest furniture made of rocks, reeds and acorns that they could find, but, of course, the creatures couldn’t live like that, as they had found out when they returned the next day and found their charges floating belly up in the beautiful prison he and Bucky had created for them. He still remembered the terrible guilt that came with harm caused by good intentions.

He did not need to be a Seer to figure out why such memories rose so clearly now, though even that memory was distant and faded, like he was looking at it through the gray haze of evening. He wondered when the last time he’d thought of home had been and couldn’t find the occasion in his memory. The night he told Tony about Lord Stane’s offer, perhaps, or closely thereafter. Stane was gone now. Stripped of his title and most of his lands, banished to brood quietly in his ancestral home built on the craggy shore of the Headlands. Far away and left with barely enough to eek out a subsistence, Tony insisted Stane was no threat to them, not anymore.

Steve wasn’t so sure Lord Stane hadn’t gotten exactly what he wanted, though Steve couldn’t figure out how.
Shutting off the memory, Steve lay back in the water again, though this time, he closed his eyes against the brightness of the sun. Underneath him, the waves undulated in a steady rhythm, lifting him up and down and filling his ears with a low susurrating drone that muted the rest of the world.

To Steve’s left, Tony was drowning.

Well, not drowning, Steve knew. Not really. It just looked too close to it for Steve to watch, despite Tony’s assurances that the method was sound.

Not that Steve had quite believed him the first time he’d watched Tony don the leather suit and metal helmet with its two bulbous glass eyes and descend to the bottom of the lagoon in a bubble of precious air. Steve was somewhat used to the sight now, though it still both baffled and amazed him that Tony would ever even think to do such a thing, let alone actually come up with a way to do it. Yet, who but Tony would be so bold as shape the nature of things to suit himself?

Tony was using one of his machines, of course, those incredible impossibilities that seemed to Steve to be born fully formed from Tony’s mind. This one was alternately terrible and fascinating, at least in Steve’s mind, making Tony look like some kind of creature of nightmares who rose up from the depths of the sea. As Tony had explained to Steve at length the evening after the first time Steve watched him use it, when Steve spent the long moments of Tony’s dive pacing back and forth and peering down at the place where the leather hose carrying precious air disappeared beneath the waves, this particular machine was capable of sending air through a bellows and down the hose to Tony, where he breathed out another hose that was connected to the suit’s mouthpiece.

Two slaves pumped the air through the bellows. Steve didn’t know their names, he realized. He righted himself in the water and let his gaze flicker over to them then away, letting them fade into the background. He thought one was called Ott, though he wasn’t sure. They wore simple loincloths in the heat and sweated as they went about their work, though both appeared well fed and in good health. Steve wondered when that had started to be a testament to anything. There was a creeping blindness that came with waiting for Tony to change. Bright, round circles that blotted his vision where clarity used to be.

It was so much easier not to see.

He let his gaze drift back over to the slaves where they worked the bellows. It was easy, after a time, to barely notice they were there. To just let his gaze move right past them as they disappeared into the background. Once, he would have sworn that was impossible, but now, he could all too clearly see how easy it was to look right past the things you didn’t want to see. Those quiet, awful things that hid behind a careful veneer of comfort and security. A beautiful flower in bloom while dark, twisted roots dug deeper and deeper into fertile ground. How simple it must have been for Tony, born into this life of incredible privilege, to learn to see only that part of his world and not the part that was so easily buried.

He should ask their names. Were they tired? Did they need a drink or a rest? He could at least mention to Tony that they needed an awning over the platform where the bellows stood.

These were his victories now. Changes, General Rhodes said. Small, incremental changes. Making things better from the inside. It mattered. It was good. He was making a difference.

Steve snorted. He wasn’t good at lying, least of all to himself.

Steve reached down and fingered a strand of the pearls and opals that dripped from the chain that circled his waist, then up to the golden collar at his throat with the large ruby that proclaimed him Tony’s. He forgot, sometimes, that it was there. The weight of it, the discomfort of something
around his neck, the awareness of it, all that had faded at some point. He wondered what it would be like to take a breath without it. He wondered if he could.

“He is coming up!” Cam called from the shore, pointing excitedly over at where the bubbles that wandered to the surface of the lagoon had grown fiercer.

For all that Tony’s penchant for pushing himself and his ideas to the extreme worried Steve, Cam seemed to have only complete confidence and an almost worshipful fascination. For Cam, Tony could do anything, build anything, make anything work, and if Tony said it would be fine, that was enough to assuage any fears the boy had. Tony, almost seemingly against his own will, basked in the adoration, even as he seemed baffled by it. He spoiled the boy in much the same way he doted on Steve, returning any affection tenfold using some kind of exchange system that Steve figured out Tony had long ago brokered in his own mind.

“Coming,” Steve replied. He swiped a hand over his face to flush off the tang of the sea, then started for the shore as the waves pushed at his back, almost as if in encouragement.

He was nude, save for a skirt of pearls and opals that glittered as they caught the sun, and his collar, though he took little note of it now, here, when it was just them. Tony liked it, and Steve liked being beautiful for him. It felt like something he could do for Tony, and Steve suspected that, as much as anything else, was why Tony enjoyed it so much. This part of Steve was Tony’s in some way that Steve didn’t quite understand, but knew it to be true, nonetheless, and Tony reveled in it, like the more he gave, the larger this part of Steve would become.

As Steve stepped out of the water, Cam rushed over with a cool, wet towel that had been dipped in fresh rosewater, which Steve used to wipe the sticky sheen of salt off his skin, and a small parasol, which Cam held aloft to shade Steve’s face from the heat of the sun. Easy to get used to, Steve thought again, then made an attempt to smile his thanks at the boy that seemed to fall flat, by Cam’s expression.

“Did you manage to catch any this time?” Steve asked with forced joviality.

“No. But I was much closer this time! The King says I must be patient and still and they will swim right up to my hand. Do you think this is so?” Cam asked.

“I think Tony wants you to be patient and still,” Steve said with a grin.

“I tried!” Cam said with the air of exasperation only the young could manage. “But, they did not come to me at all. And I waited for forever. I think I will be fast instead. I have been practicing,” he added, darting a hand out. “I will get one, you will see. I will practice on our trip, and when we return, I will catch one. Here,” Cam said, holding up a soft cotton robe. “To protect your skin, so you do not shed it like a serpent again,” Cam said, wrinkling his nose at the memory of the first time they had spent the day at the beach.

That particular day ended with all three of them building the sand into a miniature of the castle and city, complete with a driftwood drawbridge, much to Cam’s astonished delight, Steve recalled with a fond smile. He had been distraught at the idea of leaving their work to the sea to reclaim, so Tony commissioned a model of the whole castle complex, complete with knights and horses, nobles, and all manner of commoners engaged in various tasks. Cam adored it, of course. He spent hours at the model, having vivid imaginary battles with the tiny working catapults and trebuchets and glorious celebratory feasts in their wake.

Steve sighed and shrugged on the robe, then glanced over to where Tony was climbing up a ladder that extended down into the water from the platform that held the bellows. One of the slaves
hurried forward to assist with removing the helmet, revealing Tony’s grinning face. He waved at Steve and Cam, then held up a netted bag full of shells and rocks and whatever struck his fancy while he plodded across the seafloor. It wasn’t really about those things, of course, just being able to do the impossible. To look at some wall everyone else accepted as the way of things and find a path around it. Or, through it, Steve mentally corrected. That was Tony. Always looking to what could be done and ignoring the notion that anything could not. Steve watched him undo the buckles that held the leather suit in place, then shimmy out of it, abandoning it to be dried out for the next time he decided to thumb his nose at the way things were meant to be.

Tony took a goblet of water from the other, drinking his fill before handing it back. He took a robe one of the slaves held out and donned it as he walked over to where Steve and Cam waited. Cam’s mother said her people used long, hooked spears to fish the river for monstrous fish twice the size of a man. They told a story of a young boy who spent so much time in the water, he fell in love with a copper-scaled fish and grew gills and fins so as to be with her, and that is why the first fish of the season was given back to the river, so that the people may be blessed with their children to feed them through the long winters. Cam told Tony that his mother thought Tony had this boy’s spirit, which Tony scoffed at, but Steve knew that he not-so-secretly cherished the thought behind the idea. She made Tony a robe with one red and one gold-colored fish circling each other, which he wore each time he rose from the waters. Steve wasn’t sure who the gesture pleased more, Tony or Cam.

“Did you find many treasures this time?” Cam asked, wide-eyed, as he always was when Tony emerged from so long under the water.

“Indeed,” Tony replied, flashing a smile. “Come and see for yourself.” He tossed the bag to Cam, who forgot he was supposed to be holding the parasol for Steve, and nearly dropped both, much to Tony’s amusement.

“Sorry,” Cam muttered, looking down at the bag of wonders he clutched to his chest.

“I think I can manage,” Steve told Cam, relieving him of the parasol as they walked towards the tent as a group.

“Did you catch any this time?” Tony asked, clapping a hand on Cam’s shoulder.

“I was still and patient as you said,” Cam replied, shaking his head, “but, they are too quick.”

“You will get them eventually, just keep at it. At Mita, they had a pond with fish who would eat out of your hand and let you pet them,” Tony said. “They lived to be older than most men, these fish.”

“Did they really?” Cam breathed out in awe. “I should like to see them. Grandfather and Grandmother fish, I should call them. Do you think they would let me pet them and feed them?”

“I suspect they would like that very much, indeed,” Tony replied, casting a quick look over the boy’s head to Steve. “Keep at your studies and perhaps you will meet them one day. Your tutor says you are his brightest student.”

“He says this to you because you are the King and wish it to be so,” Cam countered with his usual equanimity, making Tony chuckle.

“No idea what you mean,” Tony replied smoothly, then grinned. “I simply have good taste as to my companions. Why, Steve’s instructor tells me he has incredible talent, and that Steve’s sculptures are the finest he has seen from one so new to the discipline. I have seen them with my
Tony asked, nudging the boy with his elbow as they trudged through the sand.

“My sculptures barely resemble anything at all, unless you prefer broken pieces of rock,” Steve protested with a rueful twist of his mouth.

Steve had only just recently started to try his hand at sculpting, though he’d found the process something he took to in a way that he wouldn’t have expected. Seeing the image in the stone and finding the right angle and force to slowly bring it to life, piece by piece, was a satisfaction Steve could never have imagined. He had whittled a bird from a piece of wood for Cam one day while Tony was in meetings, mostly out of boredom, and the next thing he knew, a master sculptor arrived from the university, along with chunks of marble as white as snow with ribbons of pale pinks and greys slashing through it. From the moment he ran his hands over the smooth, cool surface of the rock, Steve had been enthralled.

“What nonsense is this? Beautiful abstractions. I love them all, and I am surely the best judge of these things. Ask anyone, and they shall tell you this is true,” Tony said with an exaggeratedly confused frown and a twinkle in his eye. “Besides, I’ve heard not a single word of criticism of them. Only that I have discovered who will surely become the finest sculptor in the land if only I continue to employ Master Len indefinitely so as to groom such talent,” Tony added, mouth lifting into a wickedly pleased grin that he tossed Steve’s way. His gaze softened then and his smile went loose, eyes crinkling at their corners. He stopped and took Steve’s hand, bringing it up to brush his lips across the backs of Steve’s knuckles, his warm breath prickling the skin up and down Steve’s arm. “You really are talented, my treasure. I would love anything made from your hands and mind, that is true, but my newly installed Lady Chamberlain insists I play patron for enough artists and Enclaves that I can’t help but know a little of it. You are learning, yes, but there is talent there. I can see it as plainly as Master Len can. His enthusiasm is not entirely self-serving, you know.”

“I—thank you,” Steve said, feeling his cheeks heat at the compliment. He ducked his head, but squeezed Tony’s hand for a moment before releasing it. “Master Len, he is a good teacher.”

“They look like broken pieces of rock to me, but Lady Devon has not taught me about art as of yet,” Cam said with a low shrug. “I am sure I will appreciate them as my King does when I am as learned and wise as he,” Cam added so amiably that Steve knew the boy was well ahead of the both of them. Tony laughed, bright and clear, warming Steve’s chest more so than the sun could ever hope to do.

“Do you hear this cheek? Where could he have picked up such a worrisome habit?” Tony asked Steve with a wide grin. “You will be as ‘learned and wise’ as your King when you learn to be patient and sit still for your lessons, something I am given to understand gives you trouble upon occasion,” Tony admonished lightly.

“Lady Devon says you were far worse,” Cam said, looking up at Tony with a quizzical expression as they entered the pavilion. A long table, laden with food atop a block of ice that was covered in a light cloth and surrounded by low, cushioned chairs that curved into half-moons, awaited them.

“Does she now? That seems unlikely, as I was a model student, the finest she had ever taught. I am most sure of that, for I heard her tell my father the same many times,” Tony hummed, biting at his lip to keep from smiling.

“You would stare out the window and daydream when you were supposed to be paying attention, and then draw all manner of strange things all over your work. And you went off on all kinds of adventures, you and General Rhodes, when you were supposed to be studying,” Cam replied,
clearly having stored up that knowledge in some gleeful well in his head until he could no longer contain it. “What kinds of things did you do?” Cam asked eagerly.

“Oh-ho, like I am going to tell you? Nice try, Small Hands. Subtle. Steve, do you hear this? Shocking behavior, is it not?” Tony asked, grinning as he sat down at the head of the table. Steve took his place in the seat at Tony’s right. “I’m shocked. Steve’s shocked. Look at him. Shocked.”

“No, he’s not,” Cam interrupted, looking back and forth between them with a frown.

“Well, he’s very polite, have you not noticed? Keep to your lessons like a good boy, how about?” Tony said. “We’ll make a scribe of you yet.”

“Lady Devon says I’ve not the personality for it,” Cam admitted with a slight frown.

“What does she say you are suited to, then?” Tony asked.

“A life of leisure,” Cam replied in an arch imitation of the matronly Lady Devon, then dropped to the divan in a swoon, grinning up at Steve and Tony while he dug through the bag of finds Tony had given him.

“God punishes me by sending me my own reflection to look upon,” Tony mused, as he lifted the cloth and reached for the sliced meat and fruits underneath. “Eat,” he encouraged Steve. “And you, too, if you can rouse yourself,” he added, tossing a look over his shoulder at Cam.

“I already ate while you were swimming,” Cam replied, turning a large, brown-striped shell over in his hand. “May I go back to the beach and look for more shells to go with this one?”

“Of course, just do not venture too far. Take Ott with you, in case the tide starts to come in,” Tony said. Cam nodded and hopped up off the divan with his bag of flotsam.

“I’m trying to imagine you at that age,” Steve said as he watched Cam disappear beneath one of the pavilion’s fluttering flaps. “You would have been miserable. With nothing to do except listen to a tutor, I mean,” Steve pointed out. “And…bored. Miserable and bored, which I suspect is not a good combination.”

“True. Though, to be fair, I was a handful. Some would say still am. Oh, now you do the shocked face?” Tony agreed with a deprecating laugh. “Lady Devon would certainly attest, I am sure. She was only one of many tutors, but lasted the longest. A testament to her patience, which is why I asked her to take on Cam. He’s far too easily distracted. Smart, though. I think even she is surprised by his progress,” Tony said with a note of pride in his voice.

“Keep him busy to keep him out of trouble?” Steve asked.

“Let us agree that experience has taught me that this is a viable solution to such a problem,” Tony agreed with a laugh bubbling under his words. “Speaking of keeping busy, have I not filled your hours with enough to occupy you that you must worry about the boy like a mother duck whose wayward duckling has left her wing?” Tony teased, though there was something more behind the words, a darker question shadowing them, and Steve supposed they both knew it. Was it enough? Was he enough? What more could he do that Steve might be happy?

Don’t ask it of me. Please. Don’t ask it.

Steve was suddenly conscious of the weight of the collar against his throat, the way it felt as he swallowed, tighter than he knew it was, some phantom vice that held back a scream.
“I am well occupied, Tony,” Steve replied. That much was true. Between lessons with Master Len and Master Doran, his painting tutor, sparring with Tony and General Rhodes, the massive library at his disposal and the myriad kinds of amusements that Tony arranged for them—dancing troupes, acrobats, jugglers, even a joust and pitted matches that ended with hours-long discussions of where the losing side made their misstep—his days were often so busy, he had little time to think. He was fairly sure that was deliberate.

“I am glad to hear it,” Tony said. “Master Doran painted my official portrait, you know? The one of me on a charging horse, holding a sword aloft, all mighty and powerful looking, of course, and not at all like some rooster cocking about,” Tony let out a snort of annoyance, then waved his hand in the air. “Should be you in something like that, if we must have it.”

“You should let me paint you,” Steve offered suddenly.

“And how would you paint me?” Tony asked, voice tinged with curiosity. “I can think of many ways I would enjoy such a pursuit,” he added, tone going low and smooth. In his mind’s eye, Steve could see it all. Tony lounging on the bed in a pile of silken pillows, all smooth, golden skin, looking at Steve with half-hooded eyes. Hands behind his head, cock hard, a small, challenging smile on his face. Steve could feel his face warming under Tony’s gaze and was sure the man knew where his thoughts lay.

Tony grinned, wide and leering, clearly enjoying whatever it was he saw on Steve’s face. Oh, he definitely knew, Steve thought.

“Asleep at your worktable on a bed of notes and designs, with a smudge of soot on your cheek and your hair askew,” Steve replied, smiling a half-smile back at Tony.

“Ha! A far more accurate depiction, no doubt, but we can’t very well show them the truth of things. You should know enough of all of this to know that by now,” Tony said with a grimace.

“I would show people...how hard you work for them. How much you try. That it keeps you up nights, worrying you have not done enough,” Steve told him, wincing at the words. “This gnawing fear that you missed something, and people will suffer for your lack of omniscience, which eats at you. I would show them that you care more deeply than you know how to show, except by pushing yourself harder and harder because you know your failure carries a sentence for more than just yourself. That is the truth I would paint of you.”

Tony stared at him for a long moment, then blinked rapidly and looked away, thumb tapping at his bottom lip. “When we return, you will do this for me, then. Paint me as you see fit. I think it would—it would please me to look upon this.”

A beat of silence passed, then Tony turned back to him. His eyes were bright, and color haunted his cheeks. “I think I would like that very much.”

“‘I would like that, too,” Steve replied finally, looking down. If his plan worked, or, in truth, even if it didn’t, he would never get the chance to paint Tony like that. His hands clenched into fists in his lap, and to give himself something to do, he reached for a few pieces of food, though his appetite had deserted him.

Tony was watching Steve load up his plate with food with a certain satisfaction, enough to make Steve pause long enough to realize that the foods were all his favorites. Tony smiled at his notice, then shrugged. “The fare will be somewhat more limited on our journey, particularly once we pass the Red Mountains. I thought you should enjoy a few things while you can.”
“We will go to Lord Ellis’ keep first?” Steve asked, recalling the complicated travel plans that were the subject of much debate and forethought when one traveled with the King. The palace’s protocol demanded he stop when visiting a region, the length of the stay, who traveled with him and what activities he would take part in were all heavily negotiated beforehand, Steve had learned.

Tony nodded. “Then Lady Van Dyne’s. You’ll like her, and she you. Then Lord Murdock at the Devil’s Table, since we must pass that way, anyway. Wait until you see it. This huge, red mountain, flat on top, where nothing lives, and Matthew’s keep carved right into the belly of it. The people there are...closer to the earth than we city folk,” Tony added with a low laugh. “They’ve manned Hell’s Gate for centuries, and it has never been breached. They’ve held off raiders from the East and the Chitauri from the South. A rough, hard people. Demanding. Difficult at times, to be sure, but good.”

“You like it there,” Steve observed with only mild surprise.

“I’ve only been a handful of times. But, yes. Yes, I do. It’s...simpler. Out there. Beautiful, in its way. This place...my Realm, my people...this is your home now. Your people,” Tony reminded him. The words didn’t sting, as they once had, settling over Steve’s skin with a prickling coldness when they had been spoken in frustration. Now, Steve heard the warmth in them, bound by happiness and joy. No images of tree-covered hills and dark seas rose in his mind to protest. The shade with Bucky’s voice who had followed him for so long held its tongue.

“You should see this land. Meet its people, and not just the ones behind city walls,” Tony continued, then leaned back in his chair and dropped his gaze for a moment before raising it to Steve. “But, to answer your question, I do like it there. You will, too, I think. Far less formal. Out there, the rules of Court aren’t particularly important, which means I can have you by my side and none will question it. I must admit, I look forward to that. It will please me to show you off, something the proprieties of Court have not let me do as much as I would like,” Tony added, face softening with the words. “They care not for such things out there. What manner of king I am is less important to them than what manner of man, and they will not judge you the way people here would. They choose their leader by lot not birthright, did I tell you?”

“And this Lord Murdock, he is the one who is blind?” Steve recalled. “Yet they still chose him.”

“Matt is one of their own. A fighter, born and raised, whose father stood the Gate for years. They trust him, and despite his limitation, he sees the needs of his people and the realm quite clearly,” Tony replied. “There is much to admire there. The journey is long, arduous in some ways, at least compared to life here, but I think you will enjoy it. The way that you arrived here...” he broke off, shaking his head, a frown creasing his brow. “You know I would change that if I could.”

“I know,” Steve replied quietly, bristling a bit at the memory. Rumlow was long dead. Zola fled to parts unknown. Hammer humiliated and banished. Sitwell found hanged by his own hand, or so they said. Stane stripped to his most meager form. All were gone now, but Steve wondered if much had truly changed or if he just no longer saw it. No longer wanted to see it. Blindness, he thought again, looking at Tony and wondering which of them truly failed to see.

“It is a beautiful land, truly,” Tony said after a moment, watching Steve with an intense look that Steve could feel sink into his skin, the way it always did when he had Tony’s attention. “The Dark Sea at its back, down the Ridge with its mines and quarries, to the Greenway, where Lord Ellis’ keep sits in a crescent of fertile valleys. Lady Van Dyne’s Great Harbor at Koltun is nothing short of a marvel. The Red Mountains are like nothing else in the world. Even the wastes beyond the Gate have their own kind of beauty. The land is...it is truly remarkable, as is its people,” Tony
said. Steve could hear the pride in Tony’s voice, alongside the pleading. “I would have you care for it and its people, as I do. I would not have your thoughts of this place be colored by the ones from when you first saw it,” Tony finished with a somewhat grim set to his face. “It would…mean a great deal were you to come to care for this place and the people, as if they were your own.”

“I am sure it is very beautiful,” Steve agreed. Tony cocked his head to the side and regarded him, tapping lightly on the table as he did.

“You clearly seek to overwhelm me with your enthusiasm for this,” Tony replied, raising an eyebrow. “Is it that you worry how you will be greeted? Is that what gives you pause? I know they are all new to you, but you have seen how the common folk love you, my treasure. It will be no different out there. As I said, the absence of the usual Court politics will make things even easier in many ways. You will be welcomed, and treated as befits you, I assure you.”

“That’s not—no. I’m not—no,” Steve said.

“Think you that I don’t see how you have been the past few weeks? Do you think I don’t notice your melancholy?” Tony asked at Steve’s startled look. “Of course I notice. Do you not wish to go? Is that it?” Tony pressed, frowning. “You know that I would have you with me, but not if—Steve,” he sighed, stopping. “It will only be a couple of months. If you truly do not wish to go…” he trailed off, looking down at his empty plate where his hands fist at the tabletop.

Leave me here, Steve thought. Leave me, and take this choice from my hands. It would be so easy. The words died in his throat, though.

“I want to go,” Steve said, drawing Tony’s gaze to his. He could see Tony visibly relax, face going soft, nodding and tapping at the table, the way he did when he didn’t want to speak whatever was in his head, but couldn’t quite contain the—-the energy of the thought.

“Good,” Tony nodded. “Then, it is settled.” Steve glanced away, a cold weight falling into the pit of his stomach.

“Lady Van Dyne…” Steve began, letting the name trail off. “You know her well, then?”

“An old family,” Tony nodded. “Followed my ancestor from the Salt Sea and settled the harbor at the mouth of the Dyne River. The inner harbor and docking slips there are astounding.”

“I mean—but—you and she, you—” Steve stammered.

“You are jealous,” Tony broke in, a wide, pleased smile breaking across his face.

“I am not,” Steve insisted, frowning and reaching for some of the candied figs and cuts of cheese to hide his discomfort. He glanced at Tony, then sucked in a deep breath. “Just asking. So I’ll know what to expect,” Steve said, tasting the lie on his tongue. “Cam said you two were betrothed.”

“When we were babes in the cradle,” Tony replied, still grinning like a mad man. “It has been a long time since she and I decided we were not a good match, and she is happily wed to Sir Pym. But, please, tell me more about how this troubles you.”

“I am not troubled, only curious,” Steve insisted. He bit back a rueful smile, then frowned down at his plate. “I am glad you are not betrothed to Lady Van Dyne. Or to anyone else. Still, you will wed one day, Tony,” Steve said, lifting his eyes to Tony.

“A political arrangement, I told you,” Tony said with blithe wave of his hand. “You’ve no need to
be concerned. You must know that by now,” he added, voice going low and soft. “Is this what has
had you twisted into knots these past few weeks?” Tony demanded with a surprised frown.
“Steve…I--” Tony broke off with a grimace. “What do I need do to assure you that it will not
affect what we have? Why should it? Besides, I…” he stopped, wiping a hand over his mouth as
he let the words trail off.

“Why should your marriage affect us? Tony, you can’t be serious,” Steve protested.

“It is of no consequence to us, I tell you,” Tony said with a quick laugh that he immediately tried to
cover up at Steve’s expression. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t make light of it. You have been burdened
with this, and I--I do not like that this has caused you to worry. There is no cause for it. My
feelings for you—surely you know?” he asked, tilting his head to the side. “Would you have me
say them aloud? Show you? That can be loud, too, if I do it right,” he wagged his eyebrows,
making Steve’s lips curl into a smile almost involuntarily. Tony caught it and smiled in return.
“There. That’s better.”

“It is not that I worry. I’m just—I’m…I don’t know. Cam mentioned your betrothal, and it—it
made me think of…” Steve stammered to a halt, then shook his head. “I guess I wonder what the
future holds. I know what you’ve said, but--”

“But you are not sure I will not change my mind?” Tony finished for him, tone gentling. “You still
believe I am so capricious? These past months with you…they have been the happiest of my life. I
—the idea that this could be my life…I never expected this. Never dared hope for it. It pains me
to hear you worry about a future that I cannot wait to behold. How can you think I would ever let
this go? Steve…you are my greatest joy. Now. Always. How many ways need I promise you
forever?”

“No, no—I—I know you mean what you say, Tony, I do. I just…you make everything sound so
easy, Tony, but people change. Things happen that you can’t predict, and what then? What about
what your future consort thinks of all this? Your children? You’ve told me how you watched your
mother and father live separate lives, how confused you were by their indifference to one another…
is that truly what you want?” Steve pressed.

“What I want is impossible,” Tony snapped, then ran his hands through his wet hair and dropped
his shoulders with a sigh. “What assurances would you have of me, then? Tell me, and they are
yours. What would be good enough for you?”

“You told me not to ask it of you,” Steve reminded him. A stricken look flashed across Tony’s
face, then was gone, his face hardening into a mask.

“Indeed, I did,” Tony said after a long moment. He fixed a level, narrow-eyed gaze on Steve. “I’ve
Court this evening, as you know. We are overflowing with people wanting something before I
leave, it seems. And on top of that, Pepper has arranged a farewell party. Says it would be rude
not to entertain our guests who have traveled so far. Stay in our chambers tonight. Too much drink
and too many strangers to the Castle are not a good combination.” He stood abruptly and brushed
past Steve, stopping mid-stride at Steve’s shoulder and heaving a sigh. Steve felt the weight of
Tony’s hand descend to his shoulder, squeezing lightly, then settling there. “You know I wish
that…I wish that I could give you everything you want. You just—God, you ask so much of me,
Steve, and I can’t help but fail, every fucking time, and I—damn it!” Tony broke off, dropping his
hand from Steve’s shoulder and raising it to rub at his forehead. “I told myself I would not have
this debate with you again.”

“I know,” Steve said, the words dragged out from some deep well in the pit of his stomach. He
kept his gaze down at the table where his favorite foods melted in the afternoon sun. He couldn’t
bring himself to look at Tony. It hurt far too much, this stabbing, insistent pain where his heart was said to be. “I’m sorry, Tony. I don’t mean to—to make you feel that way.”

There are no secrets. Only lies.

“Yes, you do. At least give me that honesty,” Tony retorted, snapping out a sharp breath. He dropped his hands to his sides and looked down at Steve, his expression going unreadable for a long moment before something that looked like regret settled there. “Not even I can change the way the world works. Not even for you,” Tony said, voice low, as if he was cradling the words, lest they break. Lest he break. Steve wasn’t sure which or if it mattered.

“I know,” Steve said. He swallowed thickly, then looked up and returned Tony’s gaze. “It’s alright, Tony. Go. I know you have all kinds of things to do, and Miss Potts will worry if you are late.”

Tony reached out and lightly traced a finger down Steve’s check and under his jaw, tipping Steve’s chin up and holding him there, eyes locked on Steve’s face.

“Say it. Tell me again,” Tony said softly. His voice was thick, wavering with emotion, making it almost a plea.

“I love you,” Steve told him. It was easy to say. Even now. The words warmed him, made him feel lighter. He reached up and touched his collar where the ruby sat, heavy and solid, like it was keeping him from falling apart.

Tony stared at him for long heartbeats, then dropped his finger from Steve’s chin, and stepped back, tightening the belt on his robe. His hands were shaking, Steve noticed.

“Enjoy the rest of the afternoon at your leisure, and try to get some rest tonight,” Tony said in a clipped tone. “Tomorrow will be a long day, though we won’t actually make it terribly far past the city gates. I want to stop and show you the beginnings of our starfort, anyway. The first of the stone just arrived from the quarries, so now, the real work can begin,” Tony told him. “It will be like nothing else in the world, and I’ve you to thank for it.”

“The idea was yours, as well,” Steve pointed out.

“So, you are sure you want to come, then?” Tony asked, in careful, plodding words.

“I think Cam would smother me in my sleep if we did not go. It is all he has talked about for weeks,” Steve said, trying for a smile as he craned his neck up at Tony, though he couldn’t quite muster it. It wasn’t quite a yes, but it was as close as Steve could give.

“True,” Tony grinned. He patted Steve’s shoulder, then ran his hand up Steve’s neck, carding through his damp hair where it clung to his head. “I am glad. I do not know if I could bear to be without you for so long.”

Steve swallowed, then dropped his gaze to his hands where they balled into fists, clutching his robe. “I would miss you, too, Tony,” he said, blinking quickly against the tide of emotion that roiled within him. The food curdled in his belly as a tremor ran through him. He breathed out, low and long, spending the last breath he seemed to be able to catch.

The wheel of fate seemed to be set in motion already, pushing him along, almost against his will.

“Finish your meal. Enjoy the beach. Rest. Relax,” Tony instructed, heading for the tent’s opening. “Oh, and tell Ott and Reza to take the rest of the food, would you? Chef always does try go to
“You should put an awning over the platform. Where the bellows is,” Steve said in a flat voice. “The sun,” he added, keeping his gaze fixed on his clenched hands.

“That’s a good idea,” Tony said. “I’ll tell Pepper to see it done,” he continued, gripping one of the posts as he exited the tent. He pounded the post once, nodded at Steve, then left.

By the time Steve and Cam made it back to the Castle later that afternoon, Steve could tell that the preparations for the evening’s festivities were in full swing. The windows in Tony’s chambers were thrown open, allowing in a breeze that carried the sound of bustling activity with it. Tony was nowhere to be seen, not that Steve had expected him to be there, what with all the guests clamoring for his attention before he departed the city.

“Shall I prepare your bath?” Cam asked as he followed Steve into the room.

“Go on and finish with your packing,” Steve told him, shaking his head. “Then try to get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“Do not worry. I will have all in readiness for tomorrow,” Cam assured him with a formal, practiced certainty, then broke into an excited grin. “Did you see our carriage? It is down in the courtyard waiting for us. You will see. The King said it must be fit for the Raj’Inama, and it is! Never has there been a more splendid carriage in all the world, I am sure of it. All of the people will come out to see us off. Already, those who can have their servants and slaves saving their spots to watch. There are all kinds of painted banners hanging from all the homes and shops wishing us a safe journey and the like. The King says half of them are for you. Do you think this is true? I think maybe I will be able to read them now, so I will count and see. Oh, and the King gave me coins to toss again. Did I tell you? Special ones minted to mark the occasion, he said. Do you truly not want me to draw your bath before I go?”

Steve laughed, shaking his head again at the boy’s excited ramble of thoughts. “I am fine for the evening, Cam. Go on, now. Say goodbye to your mother. She will miss you terribly, you know.”

“I shall miss her, too,” Cam sighed. “I wish she would come, but she says the journey will be too difficult on her. I am to bring her back some fine cloth and thread, if I find any. She will make you even more beautiful things, and the King will be most pleased.”

Steve turned and walked over to one of the open windows. Below him, the garden spread out in blotches of color. A peacock shook its tail into a brilliant fan and called out hopefully. Swans glided along the small pond, dipping their necks to feed off the tiny plants that grew at the edge. Beyond the garden walls, past the bailey and courtyard where his carriage sat, though he couldn’t see it from here, the city sprawled out from the Castle gates where the High Road drew a line between the wealthy and the less so, all the way down to the Low Road that ran along the harbor where the merchant ships came in with their cargoes of spices, meats, cloth, wine, metals and all kinds of goods. And slaves, Steve reminded himself. The blocks were down there, where slaves could be bought individually or by lot, alongside barrels of mead, butchered meats and skeins of fish.

“Steve?” Cam called out somewhat hesitantly from behind him. “Is anything the matter? It is not my place to ask, I know, but…” he trailed off, shrugging his shoulders a little.

“When has that ever stopped you?” Steve asked with a gruff half-smile.

“It is just…you do not seem to look forward to the journey,” Cam said. “Everything was so good
and happy after Lord Stane left, and now, I don’t know. It is different,” he continued, face twisting up into a frown. “The King worries. He does not say, but I know he does. He does not like to see you sad. He thinks, maybe you do not want to go with him and leave all of this, because maybe—maybe this is what you like most about him. All of this,” Cam said, spreading his arms wide as he twisted around. “Maybe you would be happier here than with him.”

“Did he say that?” Steve asked quietly. He leaned forward and gripped his hand on the edge of the window, then dropped his chin to his chest, sucking in a deep breath.

“No, he does not say these things. Not to me. General Rhodes, perhaps,” Cam said. “Everyone, they want something from him, you know? Even now, they are all crawling around the Castle like ants, hoping for a crumb before he leaves. He gives you things so that you do not ask. I think, he does not want you to ask. Not you. Me, this is okay,” Cam finished, wobbling his head a bit as he considered it.

“I’m going on the trip, Cam,” Steve said flatly. He still didn’t know what that would bring, but that was a question for tomorrow.

“That is good. But…maybe you could want to go a little bit more, yes?” Cam suggested. Steve turned around and gave him a long look, then nodded and watched the boy smile with relief, eyes brightening again.

“I will try,” Steve promised. “On with you, now,” Steve urged, watching the boy practically run out the door, likely to try to get another glimpse of the carriage or to find a perch from where he could watch the comings and goings from the night’s extravagance rather than a rush to an early bed.

The room was quiet without Cam’s boisterousness or the telltale clangs of Tony working in his shop. It was too early for a fire in the hearth, and the guards were stationed outside since Tony was not there, leaving Steve to a rare moment of total privacy. He took off the robe and undid the chain around his waist, dropping both onto a nearby chair. Cam or one of the servants would pick them up tomorrow. He wondered when he had gotten so used to that.

Naked, he walked to the bathroom and drew a bath in the magnificent tub, soaking until all the salt was off of his skin. When he returned to the bedchamber, he saw that someone had stoked a small fire and closed the windows. He donned a soft, cotton robe and walked over to where a tray of food and bottle of wine waited on the table. Steve poured himself a glass of wine, but he had no appetite. Picking up a book, he settled in the chair by the fire and tried to read. It purported to be a history of the science of metallurgy, though Tony had proclaimed the tome interesting, if woefully behind on its presentation of various alloys. It was dry reading, all in all, and Steve soon found his mind wandering to the questions that had been keeping him up nights and setting his mind on edge during the days.

Leave or stay. Happiness or being able to look at himself without loathing what he would see. Tony or freedom. That was where his mind stopped. All the other questions were hard. This one was impossible.

He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. Giving up on the book, he closed it and set it aside. If he returned here, it would be waiting for him. If he returned here, so much would be waiting for him. And what waited back home, even if he could make it there? The war was over. Bucky was dead. Clint would have returned to his farm and family. Sam to his home, if it still stood, and his falcons in their mews. Scott missed his daughter fiercely enough to eschew his life of crime, even if those skills had proven useful in the war. Steve supposed he, too, would have returned home by now. Would Natasha have stayed with Fury?
That seemed likely. Wanda and Pietro had each other.

What was he trying so hard to get back to? A world that had moved on without him. Where he was no longer needed. The star shield would pass to another shield-bearer one day, when it was needed again, though Steve fervently hoped that was many lifetimes from now.

Here, he had Tony and Cam, and they were making changes. Slowly, yes, but Steve could see the betterment. It was there, incremental as it may be. And were he not here, those changes, however small, may never have happened. It wasn’t what Steve wanted, but it was something. It mattered.

I got him to put up an awning for the slaves doing his bidding today, Steve thought, leaning back in the chair and staring at the fire. He let out a long breath and closed his eyes. It was a pitiable measure of success, and Steve knew it. He was justifying a wrong that could not be fixed in increments.

I once held a shield and said this is worth dying for, Steve reminded himself. And yet, here I sit, he thought, feeling the weight of the inaction sink into his bones.

It was the same, never-ending circle of thoughts in his mind as it had been all these past weeks. What he wanted, Tony would not give him, not yet. Maybe not ever. And even if he did, Rhodes was right about what the consequences of freedom would be here. Steve would be no one, own nothing. A man with a common name and not an ounce of noble blood. Certainly not someone fit to be in the company of the King. As his concubine, all of that was overlooked, and his presence in Tony’s life accepted by Court and commoners alike. No matter which way Steve’s mind turned, it always came back to the same choice. This life or one without Tony.

He downed the rest of the wine from the goblet, then walked over to the bed and sank down on the edge. Even through the closed windows, he could hear the sounds of a lavish party echoed, which meant Tony would not return to their chambers for some time. Steve tossed the robe aside, then lay back and closed his eyes, trying to find rest. His mind was still too full, though, swirling with thoughts as dark as the sea.

Home was…he remembered fields of blood and smoke. He remembered stepping over dying men who pleaded for some relief. He remembered the way his mother’s body looked when she died, so thin and pale, like he could see her bones through her skin, her mouth red from coughing up blood. He remembered Bucky’s scream as he fell. What was it that he wanted there so badly that it was worth giving up this? Giving up Tony?

No answer came to him now any more than it had any other night. Finally, he drifted off, only to awaken with a jolt, drenched in sweat. His heart was pounding. He reached over, only to find the other side of the bed still empty. Breathing in deeply, he tried to calm himself, but his whole body was quaking with the effort. He rolled over and curled his legs up to his chest, stuffing his fist into his mouth to hold back a sob. A dream, he told himself. Just a dream. The dream was already leaving him, but the terror of it held on. Smoke searing his lungs. His ears ringing with an explosion. Tony looking up at him from a rocky ground, mouth red with blood. Say it, Tony said, dots of red flecking his lips. Tell me again.

Steve pushed himself off the bed and walked on unsteady legs over to the pitcher of water that stood on the dresser. He poured some into the bowl, then cupped his hands in it and splashed it on his face. Bracing his hands on either side of the bowl, he stood there, letting the water drip off, trying to stop the shaking.

He could send the guards for Tony, Steve thought. Tony would come, if he thought Steve needed him. But, this was the last night at the Castle, and Steve knew Tony was busy entertaining his
guests and trying to finalize everything with the Council before he left. This…this would pass. In a moment, this would pass, Steve told himself.

He picked up a nearby towel and wiped the excess water from his face, then blotted the sweat off his chest and neck. It was stifling in the room, he realized, though he wasn’t sure if that was actually true or if it was still some vestige of the dream clinging to him. He walked over and opened the window, gasping for air. The night was blessedly cool, and Steve sucked in a long, sweet breath. The thumping in his ears slowly lessened. A low din of noise replaced it, the remainder of whatever party was still going on into the wee hours, Steve supposed. He stared out into the garden for a long moment, then stepped back and started back to the bed. He stopped, halfway there, and reached again for the cloth, dabbing it at his forehead where beads of sweat clung to his skin. He tried to breathe, but his throat refused to cooperate, and he stumbled back to the open window again, leaning his forehead against the cool stone edge and closing his eyes. Breathe. Just breathe, he told himself. It was just a dream. It wasn’t real.

It isn’t real, he thought. None of this is real. It was such a sharp, visceral thought, cold and solid as it cut through everything else, that his eyes snapped open and for a moment, the world seemed to tilt. The disorienting sensation that he wasn’t real crept over him. He was still in a dream or floating in a frozen sea, or curled in on himself inside a box with thirst clawing at him while Rumlow shouted curses at him. He shook his head, trying to clear it and gripped the window’s edge so hard, he thought he could feel the stone cracking underneath his hands. In his mind, he could see the crack racing from the stone up his arms, splitting him apart and letting him crumble to pieces of himself.

It isn’t real.

I love him. That’s real, he told himself. I know it is.

Is it?

Maybe that’s the only thing that is.

Maybe I’m blind, he thought, closing his eyes and seeing bright circles dance against the darkness.

Steve reached up and touched his collar, tracing a finger along the golden edge. You will never love the man who asks you to call him Master.

Suddenly, the walls seemed closer, the room smaller and the collar so tight, it cut off his air. It isn’t real, he thought again, trying to breathe, but the thought just settled in his mind, throbbing against his temples. He needed air. He needed out. He grabbed his robe from the end of the bed and tossed it on, though he was barely able to tie the belt with his hands shaking so badly.

Crossing the room, he heaved the door open. He didn’t know who was the more startled, himself or the guards standing outside. It isn’t real. It isn’t safe. It’s a prison, he thought with a desperation that buzzed under his skin, seeming to animate his whole body with a thrumming energy. They were not the usual guards, and both stared at him blankly for a moment. Steve drew himself up, nodded once to them, and swept past them with the arrogant confidence that usually only Cam could muster.

“Ah, Sir, ah, Your—Your—” one of the guards stammered. He reached out, then stopped, hand suspended midair as Steve brushed past him.

“Er, ah, are you, are you…” the other questioned, though Steve didn’t reply. He couldn’t seem to get any words out, just kept walking, half expecting to feel the weight of an armor-clad hand on his
shoulder, but nothing happened. No one tried to waylay him. He didn’t know what he would do if they did, but had no cause to want to find out. They won’t touch me, he told himself. They won’t touch me because I belong to him. It isn’t real, his mind screamed.

He hurried through the hallway and down the steps, following the winding path to the wrought iron fence that led into the garden. Leaning back against it as he shut it behind him, Steve finally drew a breath into his burning chest. He swiped his face with a hand and slowly peeled his fingers off the bars of the gate.

The garden was quiet, though lamps still glowed from the corridors and walkways around it, probably because of the party, Steve assumed. Miss Potts would not waste the oil otherwise. He walked towards the fountain where it bubbled near the center and sank down on the narrow stone wall that encircled it. His heartbeat and breathing slowly returned to normal.

Steve looked down at the gurgling water. Pinpoints of light shimmered on its surface where it caught the stars’ reflections. His hand flexed by his side, fingers clenching around a phantom weight.

Natasha’s terrible humor, her faith in him, their shared grief. Sam’s trust, his loyalty to what was right, no matter the risk, his questionable cooking skills. Clint’s belief in the ability of people to change, the way he watched over everyone, his willingness to give up everything he loved if it meant protecting them. The way the sun broke over the snow capped mountains. The smell of pine boughs his mother used to use over the dirt floor of their cabin. The farmers and fishermen, teachers and doctors, all of whom came to be called soldiers. White stars drawn in chalk on trees and stone in the dead of night. A scrap of cloth cut into a star and sewn onto a shirtfront as the only kind of armor they had. It was a country in its birthing pains, that much was true, but it gave its sons and daughters a defiant determination that freedom not perish from this world.

Home was those things, too, Steve thought.

Freedom demanded the highest measure of devotion, and it did not promise happiness in its wake. Only the possibility. But, it was the only place where that possibility truly existed.

Somewhere to his right, a bird cawed loudly and another responded in kind, probably hoping for a handout, since Steve often brought seeds with him when he visited. He sighed and stood up, walking slowly back down the path towards the gate. His mind was so full of disquiet, he nearly ran into the woman before drawing himself up short. It was so unexpected that it took him a span of heartbeats to let his mind catch up to what his eyes were seeing.

“Oh!” she said with a startled, tinkering laugh, bringing her hand to her throat. She blinked at him, mouth agape. Her companion, a short, round man dressed in an orange robe, reached out and placed a hand on her arm, though she tossed it off and stepped forward. Her head tilted to the side, regarding Steve with a long look that trailed from his bare feet all the way up, stopping briefly on the collar that peeked out from beneath his robe.

“You’re him,” the woman said. “The Raj’Inama. The one they’re all talking about. Look, Almec, it’s Tony’s special little pet, do you see? Isn’t he divine? Of course, he would be. Tony always had good taste.”

“Youre him,” the man said. “The Raj’Inama. The one they’re all talking about. Look, Almec, it’s Tony’s special little pet, do you see? Isn’t he divine? Of course, he would be. Tony always had good taste.”

“Your pardon. You must forgive the Lady Bain,” the man said, giving Steve a low bow. “Come now, we should go. You know what they say,” he added, hissing out the last under his breath. “The King will not like—”
“Tony? Oh, please, you don’t believe all that nonsense, do you? Just because he has some fancy collar? Honestly, Almec, you can be so dull sometimes. Tony and I have known each other forever. Come here. Let me have a look at you,” the woman, Lady Bain, apparently, ordered sharply. Steve didn’t move, just stared at her. “I said come here,” she repeated, voice going low and hard.

“I must return to the King’s chambers,” Steve told her. It was true, he realized. Tony had said to stay in tonight, hadn’t he? Something about all the strangers about. In his panic and turmoil, Steve had forgotten the order. Or not cared. He cleared his throat and tried to brush past her, as he had with the guards, but she reached out and wrapped her hand around his wrist as he passed. She wore long, metal coverings on the ends of her fingers like small spikes, and he felt them dig into his skin where she held him.

“I didn’t give you leave to go,” Lady Bain said, tightening her grip. “Tony always was far too soft with his slaves,” she added in a voice that made Steve’s stomach curdle. “You see what happens, Almec? I’ve told him many times that he needs to have a firmer hand,” she said, then smiled, wolflike. “Tony always did enjoy a firmer hand, you’d think he would have learned how to handle himself by now.”

She let go of Steve’s wrist, tracing her metal nails up his arm to his collar, where she tapped at it, giving him a long, knowing look. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. She dropped her hand and clasped them together, clacking her fingertips in a careful motion that made Steve think of watching a spider as it readied to wrap its prey.

“Sunset. Are you done now? Can we go? We are not even supposed to be in here, I told you,” Almec said in a hushed, urgent tone. “That Potts woman said—”

“Tony liked trying to please me, not that he ever really could. Oh, he did try, though, I will give him that. You, though…” Lady Bain said, watching Steve with narrowed eyes. “I wonder if I asked it of him, if Tony would want to watch while I fuck you? He was always such a good boy about watching, you know? So patient, waiting his turn. I’ll bet he would, hmmm,” she continued, splaying her hand across Steve’s chest. Steve watched her, almost transfixed by the implications of her words and the images they conjured up in his mind. “If he was very, very good for me, I might even let him use that pretty mouth of yours while I fuck you.”

Steve jerked away and pushed between the two of them, her laughter ringing in his ears as he stumbled past.

“Run away, King’s Whore,” she called out with a savage snarl curling around her words. He looked over his shoulder and saw her waving, bright, sharp fingers glinting in the lamplight. He wanted to run. This woman, whoever she was, she was poison. The idea of Tony being with someone like that cut a jagged line across his heart, sending a sharp, bitter pain through his chest. Why would he want her? What could someone like this possibly have offered him? A surge of hatred welled up inside him. He slowed, and turned, staring at her. A seething, roiling rancor that tasted sour on his tongue sparked deep inside him. She wasn’t worthy of being anywhere near Tony. Who was she to treat someone like Tony that way?

“Have you had your fun? Can we go now?” the man demanded.

“Yes. Run away,” Steve suggested evenly. His eyes narrowed, looking around at the garden with its walls and gates. “But, you were already doing that, weren’t you? Cutting across the garden to get to the courtyard without notice.”

Her face tightened and reddened with anger, her eyes bulging wide, telling Steve he had guessed
“Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?” she spat out, then tossed her head back, sneering at Steve. “I’ll enjoying watching you beg, I think. You’ll almost be as pretty at it as Tony,” she replied, arching her brow.

“Sunset,” Tony’s voice cut knifelike in the darkness. “Charming as ever, I see.”

“Your—Your Highness,” Almec stuttered, dropping to a low bow as Tony stepped out of the shadows. He was dressed for the occasion in a deep red doublet embroidered with a golden bird to signify the upcoming trip over ivory breeches. His crown, thick with gold and studded with diamonds and other precious gems, sat on his head. He looked every bit the King, in a way that Steve rarely saw. He worries that I love the King and not the man, Steve thought, but it is the other way around, he realized, watching mutely as Tony slowly advanced on the duo. Lady Bain stared, wide-eyed, then slowly dipped into a curtsy, bowing her head.

“My Majesty,” she croaked out.

Tony walked towards them, circling around the man and woman until he was between them and Steve. He shot Steve a questioning look, which Steve took to ask whether he was alright or not. He nodded, and Tony turned back to Lady Bain and her companion.

“Do you know what happens to people who touch what is mine?” Tony asked in a deceptively casual voice.

“I—I meant no harm, Tony, you know that I—” Lady Bain started.

“If I hear my familiar name on your tongue again, I’ll have it cut out,” Tony interrupted. “I asked you a question,” he reminded her in a low voice.

“I—” she stopped, swallowing visibly, eyes darting up to Tony before dropping her gaze back down. “Forgive me, Your Majesty,” she pleaded, sinking to her knees. “Please, I beg of you.” The man quickly knelt, too. Steve could hear him blubbering even over the fountain.

Tony’s gaze flicked over to Steve, then back down to where the two knelt on the flagstone path.

“Get out of my sight, Sunset. Get out, and do not stop until you are gone from my lands. I’ll grant you your life this one time, because I cannot blame my own stupidity on you, though God knows, you used it to your advantage, but if I see you again, that will be the last time,” Tony warned.

“Yes—yes, I swear it,” Lady Bain managed while the man kneeling next to her choked off a sob. “Thank you. You are most merciful.”

Steve watched them stagger to their feet, grasping at each other for purchase, and scurry away as fast as they could until they had disappeared into shadows flashing through one of the far corridors. He turned back to Tony, who was watching him with a hard, steady gaze. For some reason, it made Steve bite back the amused retort that had sprung to his lips. His throat went dry instead.

“Tony—” Steve began.

“You will go back to our chambers,” Tony snapped. His jaw worked around the words. “You will take off your clothes and kneel on the bed until I return, and then we will deal with this.”

Steve stared at him, then opened his mouth, but no sound came out. His chest went cold and tight,
and he realized he had forgotten to breathe.

“I told you to stay in our chambers. For this very reason, dammit! What if—” Tony broke off, turning away and wiping a hand over his mouth. “If you choose to behave like a child, you will be punished like one. Go back to our chambers and wait for me. Now. I’ll deal with you as soon as my duties to my guests are done.” He turned and stalked off, angry strides carrying him across the garden as Steve watched.

Steve felt the air leave him, like it had been punched out. A lump formed in his throat. His stomach heaved and twisted into a knot and a low, burning pressure filled low in his belly. Tony was angry. He’d been afraid, and that fear had turned to anger when he realized Steve wasn’t safely ensconced in their room, and then this whole thing with Lady Bain…but, he wouldn’t…surely, he didn’t mean to…Steve’s mind went blank, though his body had no such compunction. His cock twitched under his robe, hardening and thickening against his thigh. Shame prickled over him, making his face heat and his eyes sting, but still, he turned and walked towards the garden gate on leaden feet.

Everything from the garden to their chambers was a blur. Just the roiling heat in his belly, the thumping of his heart, the embarrassment coloring his cheeks, the way his breathing evened out as he found himself concentrated on it with each step closer to the bedroom. His skin felt like it was pulled too tightly across his bones. He could feel the brush of fabric over every inch as he moved, almost like one more scrape of the robe across his skin would be too much. If the guards thought he looked odd, they said nothing, just held the door open for him and closed it after he entered.

Steve walked over to the bed and stared at it for a moment. He could refuse to do this. He gripped one of the bedposts and held on, swaying a little. The image of Tony in the garden came unbidden to Steve’s mind. Tony, looking every bit the King he was. Formidable. That was the word for it, Steve thought with a slight shiver. Powerful and full of vengeful anger on Steve’s behalf, standing like an impervious wall between Steve and those people.

His mind flashed to the night Tony had come to his room in the compound, not so long after Steve had arrived. Dressed in his finery and tasting of wine, silently undoing the ties that held Steve’s robe together, then urging him over, onto his belly. Spreading him apart and working him open while Steve gripped the bed covering and buried his face into the pillow. He remembered the feel of Tony’s crown, heavy and hard against his shoulder as Tony thrust in. Steve had cried out then, the only sound in the darkness, and Tony had slowed, pressed a kiss to Steve’s neck, then put two fingers to Steve’s lips until he opened his mouth and sucked them down while Tony pounded into him, hard and fast in that eerie quiet. He remembered how it had felt, forbidden and wrong and so good to just have to take it and not think about it. Not think about anything except how Tony made him feel. He looked at his hand where it wrapped around the bedpost and remembered the night Tony had put him in chains. How he couldn’t move, even if he had wanted to, and how all the other thoughts seemed to be kept at bay as long as he was held there with the pain and pleasure mixing into some kind of magical binding that pushed all of that aside. How long had it been since he had felt that way?

Tomorrow, he would have to think the words.

Tonight, he wanted not to think at all. Not anymore. All he had done was think these past few weeks, turning the issue over and over in his head until he wasn’t sure he hadn’t been consumed by it.

Slowly, Steve undid the belt at his waist, then let the robe drop to the floor. He crawled onto the bed and knelt in the center, like Tony had instructed, with his back to the door. Closing his eyes,
Steve let his chin dip down to his chest and drew in a long, slow breath, held it, then let it out. He repeated the act until his heart stopped pounding in his chest, then opened his eyes. Waited. He had no idea how long Tony would need to remain at the party or even what time it was now, though the moon was full out in the night sky, so it had to be past midnight.

His legs started to ache after a while, and he shifted slightly, though he didn’t come out of the kneel. Tony told him to kneel, so he would kneel. He had already disobeyed once, even though Tony had explained his reason for telling Steve to stay in their chambers. True, he hadn’t been thinking of it at the time, not really, but he wondered, as he waited, if it hadn’t been there in the back of his mind when he left the room. He remembered needing to get out, thinking the guards may stop him and not caring. Maybe wanting it a little. Wanting to see what would happen, spoiling for a fight he could win and not what battle was raging between his mind and heart.

The fire crackled in the hearth, though it burned low, little more than embers now. His legs hurt, but he didn’t move again, just concentrated on the feeling until it was all his mind could focus on. That was strangely better, though he didn’t know why, since all he could think of was the discomfort. The longer he thought of it and the more he concentrated on it, the less it bothered him, though. There was just the strain of muscle and the need to move, and the more he thought of it, the less he thought of anything else, until it had banished all other thoughts.

Finally, Steve heard the door creak open behind him. He didn’t turn, just kept his eyes forward on the headboard. Light started to slowly fill the room. Tony must be lighting candles. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tony hold a flame to the candles in the holder on his desk, then place it in its own spot by the bed. He gave Steve a once-over, almost perfunctorily, but seemingly satisfied with what he found, then turned and walked out of Steve’s sight. He heard the rustle of fabric, and the opening and closing of a cabinet, then a drawer. Footsteps across the stone, and then softer on the rug, stopping just behind him at the end of the bed. He felt the heavy weight of Tony’s eyes on him.

“You understand why you are being punished?” Tony asked. His voice was calm, matter-of-fact, but there was a clipped hardness underneath it.

Steve nodded.

“And why do you think you are being punished?” Tony demanded in a low voice.

“I disobeyed you,” Steve said, nearly choking on the words. They seemed to form a lump in his throat, just below his collar, and refused to be spoken until he forced them out. Humiliation burned through him. It had been such a simple thing. Just to stay in their room. Tony rarely gave him any kind of direct order when they weren’t in bed, and the one time he did, Steve had failed.

“We leave tomorrow on a journey that will be both arduous and full of new people and new experiences, Steve. Experiences and people that I hope you enjoy, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that there are no dangers out there because you wear that collar,” Tony said. “You’ve no idea the precarious balance that exists between the ruled and their ruler. I would like not to start a war because some Lord or Lady who I cannot so easily order away decides to put their hands on you because you are not where you are supposed to be. Hell, half of them already think you hold too much sway over me. They would love nothing more than an excuse to prove it. You have to listen to me, even when you do not like what you hear. It is not to punish you, but to protect you. Protect us. What we have.”

“I know,” Steve said. “I’m sorry, Tony. I didn’t—I didn’t think about it like that.”

“No, you didn’t. You don’t—” Tony started, then broke off. “I need to know that you will obey
me. Even if you don’t understand the reasons for it. You have to trust me.”

“I do. I will, Tony, I promise,” Steve gutted out, stomach twisting with heat and shame.

“Good,” Tony said, walking around to the side of the bed. He was bare to the waist and wore just his breeches and boots. “I daresay that this will serve for some time as a good reminder to see that you do,” Tony added, then laid a long, thick leather strap down on the bed. It was looped around, forming an oval, and half as wide as Steve’s hand. The leather was well-oiled and gleaming. New and not cracked. Steve looked down at it for a long moment. His mouth was dry, parched even. He couldn’t seem to manage to swallow. He was conscious of his breath quickening, the muscles of his ass clenching, and his cock twitching against his leg, which should have embarrassed him, but all he could think about was the strap.

“Uh-uh,” Tony said with a low, admonishing cluck of his tongue. “None of that.” Tony grasped Steve’s cock in his hand and was sliding the gilded cage on before Steve’s eyes finally tore away from the strap long enough to notice.

Steve blinked and looked down in momentary shock. The cage fit around the length of his cock, though just barely, and only after Tony shoved it on with enough force to make Steve hiss out a surprised gasp. The extra weight of it pulled at his cock. He clicked the golden band around Steve’s balls into place in the lock and stood back to admire his work. Steve’s cock was already straining against the metal bars, red and bulging. A large pearl on a golden chain dripped from the end of the cage in what was an obvious reference, and a heavy weight that Steve thought must be solid gold by the feel of it hung from the band that circled his balls, tugging them down until the skin at their base stretched thin and smoothly pink.

“Now, bend over until your chest touches the bed. Head to the side, there you go,” Tony said as Steve lowered his chest down.

The weight on his balls swung underneath him, and he bit his lip and closed his eyes to hold back a groan. His ass was in the air, bare and spread. His hands gripped the bedcovers in clenched fists. When he opened his eyes, all he could see was the brown leather strap looming right there in front of him on the bed. He blinked, then stared at it until his eyes watered. His throat worked, trying to swallow, but he couldn’t get any saliva in his mouth. He couldn’t see Tony anymore. That bothered him, though he couldn’t say why. Tony was still there, obviously he was. Steve knew that. He just—he couldn’t see him, and there was just the strap, and it—he had failed, and now, now that was all there was, and he deserved this, he did.

He disobeyed. Not just tonight, but all the nights, all the thoughts, all the plans. Each time he looked at the map, he disobeyed, he lied, he defied. He didn’t deserve Tony’s trust, not really, and he knew it. Leaving would hurt Tony so much. Indescribably so, Steve knew that, and he would still do it, and for what? He still wasn’t sure he knew. Who knew what kind of fodder Steve’s escape might give those who would use it against Tony?

He can claim I’m dead, Steve thought. He can tell everyone some terrible mishap befell me on the trip. He can tell them he grew tired of me and sold me. He can tell them anything but the truth, that I loved him and he loved me, and I left him anyway. A dry, shuddering sob escaped him, wracking through his body.

“Shhhh,” Tony soothed, and Steve felt the warmth of Tony’s hand on his back, rubbing a slow circle. “Steve…you remember what I said before about punishment?”

Steve nodded, feeling his cheek scrape along the bed covering. He couldn’t stop looking at the strap. It held some kind of pull for him, a deep fascination and horror that he couldn’t or wouldn’t
name.

“These past few weeks, you—you’ve not been yourself. Your mind is full of distress, I can see it as if you wore a mask,” Tony said. His voice was warm and soft, not accusing, but troubled. Steve could hear the pain of worry underneath Tony’s words as clearly as Tony claimed to be able to see Steve’s own unease. “Something troubles you, and you won’t let it go. It eats away at you. I’ve watched it happening before my eyes, and each day closer to our trip, it consumes more and more of you. The truth is, you are so wound up with whatever preys on your mind, something was bound to happen, I only wondered what form it would finally take.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve husked out, the words wet-sounding to his ears. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. Tonight, I—I didn’t mean to—to disobey…I just, I needed to get out of here. I—” he stopped, then squeezed his eyes shut. “That’s not true. I did mean to, I think. I didn’t know it, but I did. I—I just, I needed to—to do something. I don’t, I don’t know why, I—"

“I know,” Tony said. “Shhhh, hush now. That’s good, Steve. Thank you for telling me.”

Steve drew in another breath, this one steadier. He felt lighter, like some burden he hadn’t realized he was carrying had been lifted.

“Do you trust me?” Tony asked softly. Steve nodded again. He did. Tony knew what he needed, even when Steve did not. There was comfort in placing himself in Tony’s hands that way, taking the choice from himself. Punishment is just another side of pleasure, Steve repeated to himself. Tony would know what to do, how to push all of this from Steve’s mind.

“Yes, Tony,” Steve added after a moment. He licked his lips and looked at the strap again. It filled his vision, crystal clear, while everything else went hazy at the edges.

“Good,” Tony replied. “That’s good, Steve. Look at how well you’ve already done for me. Waiting here like you were supposed to. All I could think about at that waste of a party was you, back here, waiting for me like that.”

The praise washed over Steve like a warm wave, making his body feel buoyant and loose. He looked at the strap. Tomorrow, he would have to think the words aloud. Tomorrow, he would betray the words that Tony so often asked of him. Tomorrow, he would pick up something he’d left behind all those months ago as he sank into the cold grip of the Dark Sea. Tonight, though… tonight, he would be good for Tony.

In his peripheral vision, Steve watched Tony walk over to the bedside table and dip his fingers in the warm oil. Confusion fogged Steve’s brain for a moment, then he saw Tony slip something out of his pocket. He must have made some kind of noise because Tony turned and cast an amused look over his shoulder.

“Yes, this is for you,” Tony said, holding up a long, thick metal phallus that curved slightly upward and had a strand of perfectly cut pearls, each as big as a large berry, on the end that swung down against Tony’s arm. It was exquisitely crafted, with a rounded head and small slit, and even veins running up and down the side of the shaft. He knew, of course, whose cock it was modeled after, and that thought, that Tony had ordered this made, knowing what he would use it for, wanting to use it, that was enough to make Steve’s cock swell against the cage around it. Steve made a garbled sound in the back of his throat. Tony hummed in response, coating the plug in oil until it dripped with it, then walked back over and stood at the foot of the bed again where Steve’s ass hung in the air. Without preamble, Tony pushed an oil-slickened finger inside Steve’s hole, making him jolt with the sudden intrusion.
“Ngh,” Steve managed, eyes widening, then closing tightly shut. He sank back against the pressure as Tony nudged his finger deeper, hooking it upwards and pressing hard, before drawing back and out. He repeated the motion again and again, working his finger in and out in hard little thrusts, while Steve’s body rocked with it.

“Good,” Tony said, adding a second finger, pushing in and out, curling them up and stretching them wide as he pulled them out. The added pressure and stretch drew a sharp gasp from Steve, but before he could settle into the feeling, a third was added. He let out a sharp, hitching cry that fell into a moan as Tony pushed all three fingers in deep, then pulled them out, leaving Steve suddenly empty. Steve felt a warm, wet finger trace around his rim, then a second, hooking each side and tugging. Another moan rattled around in Steve’s chest, then worked its way up and out of his throat in a long, low keen. Tony’s hands cupped Steve’s ass, kneading the flesh and spreading him wide, until Steve felt cool air across his hole as Tony surveyed his progress.

“That’s good enough, I think. You’ll feel it, as you should,” Tony observed mildly.

That was the only warning Steve had before the blunt, cool metal of the phallus’ head pressed against the tight ring of his hole. It’s too much, Steve thought hazily, turning his face against the bed and squeezing his eyes shut as his face contorted into a tight grimace. He bit at his lip, tasted blood, and shook his head back and forth against the bed, hands twisting into the coverlet. The thing pushed inexorably forward, stretching him wide. It was no bigger than Tony, obviously, but this was—it was different. Intractably hard and invasive in a way that Tony’s cock wasn’t, this foreign thing that someone had made just for this. His vision blurred as wetness seeped out of the corners of his eyes, and he made another deep bellow of a sound.

“Relax, Steve,” Tony urged. “You can take it. That’s it,” Tony said, easing the thing slowly past Steve’s hole. Steve choked out a half-sob, then pressed back a little, trying to get his muscles to unclench. The bulbous head of it slipped in, almost startling him, and then Tony was pushing it deeper, all the way in until it filled him. He nearly cried out with relief, but it couldn’t get past the sudden tightness in the back of his throat, and all that came out was a broken moan.

“Beautiful,” Tony said, arranging the chain of pearls so that it hung from the end of the metal cock and dangled down between Steve’s cheeks. Steve could feel each one of them, cool and strangely soft against the sensitive skin. He could see the image in his mind, small ivory pearls dripping from the golden cock that filled him. Tony made this, Steve thought, the idea spreading like a fog through his head. Tony made this for him. Wanted to see him like this. It was a wondrously powerful thought. Tony wanted this, and Steve had given it to him.

He heard Tony sigh, and then saw his thighs appear at the side of the bed. Steve turned his head again, blinking up at Tony. He was sure he looked awful. Red-faced and wet-eyed, lip swollen from biting it, and God knew what else. Tony reached out and stroked his hand over Steve’s cheek, holding it there for a moment. He used his thumb to catch some of Steve’s tears as they dried, wiping the wetness away.

“Perfect,” Tony murmured, drawing back his hand. Steve’s body thrummed with warmth at the word. A single word, and that was all it took. It should bother him, he thought, but the thought, like so many others these days, was distant. Tony picked up the strap and held it across his open palm where Steve could see it. “Thirty strokes, unless you move, and then I’ll add to it. You can be as loud as you need. There is no one in this part of the Castle, and the guards have been warned not to disturb us, no matter what they hear.”

Steve felt his face heat at the words and the way the words made his cock push and strain inside the cage until the pressure was painful enough to make him want to grab at it, tug it, give it just a
little more of the relief it was denied. His mind kept skipping between his tight cock and the
hardness filling his ass like it couldn’t settle on which one to feel and finally just wound the two
sensations together into a heady mix of pain and pleasure. He looked up at Tony. He wanted to
tell him it was too much and not enough, and he didn’t know how to feel, but it was right there. So
close, he could almost see it, like the glimpse of something over a hill. If he took a few more steps,
he could see the whole. He nodded, once, keeping his eyes locked on Tony.

Tony started to step away, then stopped and stood back, leaning over and placing a hand on Steve’s
shoulder. “If it is too much…if you need me to stop, you will tell me,” Tony said. “That night
with the chains, I worried I pushed you too far and you weren’t ready, but you did so well. But this
—you must promise to tell me if it is too much.”

Steve wanted to ask what he meant by too much, because with Tony, he just needed more. It was
never enough. He didn’t think that was what Tony wanted to hear, though, so he nodded again.

“You will tell me to stop?” Tony asked again. “You are sure?”

“Yes, Tony,” Steve mumbled. His mouth didn’t seem to want to say the words.

“No, you will not. You’ve probably never asked anyone to stop in your life,” Tony muttered,
chewing at the corner of his mouth. “Very well. If it becomes too much, you will say…Vestigus.
God knows, you think his theories are unsound enough that you will not accidentally use that
word, I am sure. Agreed?”

“Yes,” Steve managed.

“Good,” Tony told him, face softening for a moment. “You’ve no idea how amazing you are, do
you?”

“You,” Steve shook his head and turned his face into the bed again, sucking in a breath. That was
call the argument he could manage, but he heard Tony huff out a low, pleased breath of air as he
walked to the end of the bed again. Steve could feel him standing there, feel the weight and heat
of his appraisal.

“Count them off,” Tony said finally. Steve turned his head to the side. He could see their blurry,
flickering reflections in the windowpanes. Tony behind him, Steve’s body pale and curved against
the dark colors of the bed. It was beautiful in its own way, the tableau, Steve thought with a deep
sort of pleasurable hum warming the notion. He watched Tony’s body twist, his arm raise, and
then swing down in a whoosh of air that filled Steve’s ears.

The strap cracked a wide stripe across the soft flesh of his ass, wrapping around just at the top of
his hip. Pain flared bright and hot, blooming across his skin in a wave of searing agony. The way
the blow landed, the seam of his ass took the brunt of it, just where the metal cock was embedded,
ramming it in hard and sending sparks of pleasure bursting deep within him. His own cock jolted,
making the cage seem like it was a heavy vice. The weight on his balls swung with the force of
the blow, pulling at them until an aching, stretching burn settled in.

He cried out without meaning to, surprised by the mix of pain spilling over into pleasure. His mind
went blank for a moment, then filled with a tumbling roil of need and ache. He tried to grab onto
it, but it was swept away, pulled out by some implacable tide. Oh, God, he thought, burying his
head against the bed, teeth forming a rictus of pain, blindly groping for some kind of purchase. He
understood, now, the purpose of the metal cock in his ass and the cage on his cock. Tony had
thought about this. Planned this. Wanted this. This bright, beautiful, glorious thing that Steve
could give him.
“Count it off,” Tony commanded, breathing hard. “If you lose the count, I’ll start over,” he warned. Steve could hear a slight tremor in his voice. For a heartbeat, Steve had no idea what he meant, and then he remembered, relief washing over him.

“One,” Steve gasped. Almost as soon as he said it, the strap cracked across his ass again, the sound followed by a fresh wave of pain. The blow landed slightly lower this time, sending a bright, hot, stinging arch across the bottom of his ass. There was no concordant burst of pleasure this time, just a blistering ache warming his skin. “Two,” Steve shuddered. Another rush of air and slap of sound, leather on skin, this one cleaving a nearly vertical stripe down the middle of his ass, driving the metal cock deep again where it slammed into him at just the right angle to make his vision white-out as a spike of pleasure blurred out everything else. “Three,” Steve finally choked out, barely more than a high-pitched wheeze.

Another blow, and then another, the strikes coming faster. The silence was punctuated only by the clap of the strap meeting his skin and his count. Eight, nine, he thought he sobbed out ten as Tony laid them atop each other, right across his hole, sending the metal cock thrusting hard, pinging that spot deep inside him. Pain and pleasure threatened to overwhelm him. His cock throbbed, all but forgotten, and his ass ached with indescribable agony, but it was good, too, all of it, like everything with Tony, this mix of everything Steve wanted and horror at wanting it.

I’ll start leaving him tomorrow, Steve thought with a jolt that felt like being dunked in ice water. He wasn’t ready for the next blow, which hit low, finding the place where his ass and thighs joined, so hard it made him jerk forward with the force of it.

“What’s the count, Steve?” Tony asked, the words coming in harsh pants. The count. He was supposed to be keeping count. Oh, God, he didn’t know. Thirteen, he thought. No. Wait. Fourteen. He wasn’t sure. It was just…gone. If he lost the count, Tony would start over, he remembered suddenly, choking on the thought until he was coughing into the bed, a sob tearing out of him.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” Steve admitted in nearly a wail. Please, God, he couldn’t take that. Not the blows, the failure. Disappointing Tony with the one thing Tony had told him to do. He couldn’t. He couldn’t. He—he could say it. Say his word. End this. He didn’t want it to end. Tomorrow, he thought with a strange sense of clarity. I have to say the words tomorrow. Tonight, I just have to remember the count.

“Steve,” Tony said. “You do. You can do this. Now, tell me the count.”


“Good,” Tony said, warmth filling his voice. The word floated around Steve, seeming to settle over his skin and melt into him. In the windowpane’s reflection, Steve saw Tony move to the other side of the bed, then raise his hand again. Steve sucked in a shaky breath.

“Fif—fifteen,” Steve nearly shouted as soon as the blow struck. The strap flicked across the meat of his ass and clung to the side of his thigh for a moment, making the metal cock shift, though not enough for it to do anything but make Steve feel it, feel how close it was, how deep and cold and unforgiving it was, just sitting there inside him. Sixteen and seventeen did the same. His mind was hazy, but he clung to the numbers that filled his head each time.

The rest of the blows rained down in quick succession. Before he could quite get his mind around the feeling of one, the next landed. He could hear his voice slur over nineteen and twenty, each one landing a hard, vertical strip down the opposite cheek. There was a buzz in the back of his
mind that filled his ears and seemed to drown out everything else until the sound of the strap cutting through the air, the whip crack of it against his skin, his numbers, all dulled to the background. He hovered. He counted. He thought of nothing but the numbers. There was no choice there, just the next number. It was easy. Why had it been hard? He couldn’t remember, but the desire to waned quickly.

“Twenty-two,” Steve husked out. His throat was raw, he noticed, trying to swallow, but the effort seemed too much, so he pushed it aside. Each blow seemed to push more and more of him away, driving him up and up, higher and higher. His mind rolled over some kind of precipice and fell, blank, into nothingness. It was all just gone. Quiet. It felt like he was hovering, the way Redwing sometimes did when he caught a breeze, floating there effortlessly in space.

“Good, Steve. That’s good. You’re doing so well for me,” Tony told him, voice warm and almost unspeakably tender. It was like a balm, warm and soothing atop everything else. He was good. He was good for Tony. He was doing well. Nothing else mattered. There had been something, but it was behind him now, and he hovered. Everything below was small. Insignificant.

Steve counted. He wasn’t sure where the pain stopped and the pleasure began, but it had ceased to matter. His whole body throbbed. His chest was heaving with dry, wracking sobs. His cock pulsed and strained. His balls were sore and full. His ass was on fire. None of it mattered.

He counted.

“Twenty-seven,” Steve mumbled into the bed.

“Good. Almost done, my love. A few more, and it will all be over,” Tony promised soothingly. “Now, spread yourself apart for me. Let me see you,” Tony said. “There you go,” he urged when Steve finally started to move.

His limbs felt like they were filled with lead, his motions sluggish, but he reached behind himself and spread his stinging ass apart. He felt the metal cock move a little as his hole fluttered and stretched, and he craned his neck enough to look behind him where Tony stood. Tony’s chest was covered with a glistening sheen of sweat. He was breathing hard through his nose, chest rising and falling with each breath. His hair was plastered to his scalp. Steve could see the bulge of his cock hard against his breeches. His lips were bright red, as if he had been biting them, and his eyes were wild and gleaming with a greedy possessiveness that made Steve tremble. I’m the only one he looks at like that, Steve realized with a burst of insight. I’m the only one he will ever look at like that. He was the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen. He looked strangely…awed, Steve thought. As if he was on the verge of being overcome, but that made no sense. It was Steve who was coming apart, held together by numbers that filled his head.

“Three more. Hold still now,” Tony said. He sounded winded. He wiped at the sweat on his brow with the hand that still clutched the strap, then nodded, as if to himself, and raised his arm. The rounded part of the strap landed directly on Steve’s hole, licking a long, hot stripe of pain down the crease of his ass. The metal cock slammed into him. Pain and pleasure exploded deep within him. He howled with it. His cock felt like it was going to burst with the need to come. He could feel the bars of the cage digging in to the sensitive flesh, but that was almost an afterthought to everything else.

“Count,” Tony barked sharply.

“Twenty-eight!” Steve shouted as yet another blow fell atop that one. It was worse the second time, and he wouldn’t have thought that possible. His body screamed out a protest, but the pain and pleasure just kept rolling over and over each other, picking up steam, as if hurtling down a hill,
then slamming into him, breaking apart and sending jagged lines of sensation all over his body. He thought he would break apart with it, and clung to the number in his head like a lifeline. “Twenty-nine!” he yelled, then curled his face into the bed as he waited for the last.

Instead of a blow, he felt the metal cock being slowly pulled out of him until it dropped onto the bed with a solid thunk. His hole was wide and gaping in the cool air, stretched and swollen with ache.

“Ungh,” Steve managed. “Tony,” he gasped, drawing out the word into a long, low moan.

“Beautiful,” Tony said quietly, almost as if to himself. He raised his arm and brought the strap down again across Steve’s exposed hole, sharp and stinging. Steve could only choke out a dry sob that was a half moan.

“Thirty,” Steve panted into the bed. He dropped his hands and clutched at the covers, dry, heaving cries echoing in his ears that he realized were coming from him. He felt Tony’s hands on his ass, pushing him apart, holding him open, and for a moment, thought he had done something wrong, it wasn’t over, he’d lost the count. The bed dipped behind him as Tony sat down on the edge. Bitter shame coiled low in his belly. He’d screwed up. He wasn’t sure how, but he must have. Then everything was driven away and his mind stuttered to a halt as he felt Tony’s hot breath against his hole and then the warmth of Tony’s tongue tracing his rim.

Round and round, Tony’s tongue licked at the fiery circle of swollen, abused flesh. The bristle of his beard scratched across the sensitive skin, but that wasn’t enough to detract from what Tony’s mouth was doing. He drew back, then leaned down again and licked a wide stripe across Steve’s hole with the flat of his tongue, then dipped his tongue inside, crooking it around the edge and thrusting deep. Over and over, in and out, he licked and sucked. It was so gentle, like he was making some kind of apology for everything that had come before. He took his time, delving deep, then flicking over the puffy rim in slow, unhurried movements. Steve whined and tossed his head back, pushing his ass against the soft wetness of Tony’s tongue as he fucked Steve’s hole with it.

He heard Tony groan, the warm sound reverberating against his puckered skin. Steve’s cock throbbed painfully in its cage, but he didn’t care. Tony’s mouth felt so good. Everything felt good. Even though his ass ached and stung where Tony held him spread apart, that just served as some kind of contrast with what his mouth was doing, heightening everything by comparison.

Finally, Tony drew back and moved off his crouch. Steve heard the familiar rustle of fabric as Tony shoved his breeches down and freed his cock. Steve glanced over his shoulder long enough to see it rising up towards Tony’s belly, thick and red and dripping small, clear droplets of fluid. Tony grabbed the metal cock and ran his hand up and down over it, pooling the remainder of the oil, then slathered it onto his own cock. He put a knee on the bed, spread Steve apart again, and rammed in, seating himself fully with a grunt.

Tony gripped Steve’s hips, making Steve let out a cry, then drew back until his cockhead caught on Steve’s rim and thrust all the way in again. He set a hard, pounding rhythm, fingers digging into Steve’s ass as he held him in place. Steve could hear the slap of flesh on flesh, the only sound other than the occasional guttural grunt from Tony. It would be over fairly quickly, Steve thought, though he didn’t really care. It didn’t seem to matter. The count was done. He could just be now. He didn’t need to do anything. He didn’t need to think. Tony would take him, use him, fill him up, and that was good, and he could just hover here.

Tony’s pace sped up, battering at Steve’s hole, and then his thrusts faltered, and his body seized, slamming into Steve once more as he spilled his seed. He chased the feeling with a few more shallow thrusts, emptying himself inside Steve, then pulled out and dropped back onto the edge of
the bed, breathing hard. Steve watched him scrape a hand through his damp hair, leaving it in a
mess of curls pasted to his head, then looked up at Steve. His mouth opened, then closed, and he
drew in a long breath, face going soft.

“Steve. My beautiful treasure. You did so good for me. Look at you. My God, you are
magnificent.” Tony murmured. He pushed himself off the bed and quickly strode over to the
dresser, pouring water from the pitcher into a cup. He sat on the bed next to Steve and held it to
his lips while Steve craned his neck up to take a long drink.

“Howdy,” Tony cautioned when Steve started to cough. He slowed his sips and drank until the cup
was nearly empty. When he was done, Tony set it aside. “There you go. I’m going to clean you
up now, alright? Be still for me.” Steve nodded. “Good, Steve. Perfect.” He got up and returned
with a soft cloth that was wet with warm water. He dabbed it carefully over Steve’s ass and thighs,
then pressed it gently between the seam of and over Steve’s hole. Steve hissed with the sting, but it
wasn’t actually that bad, all in all. Everything hurt. This was just a different kind of hurt, but it
was gently offered, and that made it different somehow. Soothing in a way that pain maybe
shouldn’t be, but it was, nevertheless.

Tony tossed the cloth away, but kept a hand on Steve’s lower back where it curved. The weight
was nice. Like being held, Steve thought.

“Roll this way,” Tony said softly. Steve hummed noncommittally in response, then followed the
pressure of Tony’s hand until he was on his side. “There you go. Good, Steve.” Steve heard the
sound of something opening, and then felt Tony’s fingers carefully rub a cold, moist paste of some
kind onto his ass. “A salve,” Tony explained. “It will help a bit with the pain and healing.”

Steve grunted agreeably. That was nice. His ass ached. His cock hurt. His balls were sore. The
pain formed some kind of warm, soft cocoon around him, keeping everything else at bay. He
wasn’t even sure what else there was. It was just him and Tony, and that was good. A fur blanket
was pulled over him. He hadn’t realized he was cold, but then he was warm and knew he must
have been. Tony’s hands rubbed at his back, massaging the tight muscles until they relaxed. He
ran his hands through Steve’s hair, scraping his fingers across Steve’s scalp. That felt amazing.
Steve hummed with pleasure, hovering higher. Everything was so far away. He pushed it further
away. There was something he didn’t want to think about, couldn’t think about, not here. He
would remember tomorrow, perhaps.

The bed lifted as Tony got up. The candles went dark. A moment later, Steve heard him pad
around the bed and felt it dip again as Tony crawled in on the other side. He sighed and scooted
over, cupping the back of Steve’s head and pulling him close. Steve burrowed his nose into Tony’s
chest, reveling in the heat and musky scent of him. Tony’s arms wrapped around him, holding him
close. Steve felt a tremor shake through Tony’s body and heard him draw in a shaky, hiccoughing
breath.

“Sleep,” Tony whispered after a long moment, leaning down and placing a soft kiss to Steve’s
temple. “Sleep, my beloved.”

Steve slept. When he woke, it was tomorrow.
So, if Sunset Bain is not at all like she is in the comics, in my defense, I only know her from fic. So blame other people!

Comments and kudos are always hugely appreciated. *hugs you all*

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Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony leave the city and begin a journey that will change everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“And so, then, I said, ‘Do you not think I know what the Raj’Inama needs? The King himself chose me—me!—to serve him,’ and then she said, well, but you have never made a great journey before, how do you—you are not even listening!” Cam accused sharply, giving Steve a disgruntled look from his seat across the carriage.

Steve didn’t answer. Cam was right. Steve could barely focus on anything the boy was saying. He wanted to apologize, but he wasn’t sure if he could. If he opened his mouth, he thought he might scream in frustration. Instead, he tightened his grip on the edge of the padded carriage seat and let out a hiss of breath, trying to focus on nothing else save breathing in and out. Each movement of the carriage--any movement, really--carried a fresh wave of agony with it. He was sure, if he looked down, his knuckles would be white where he held onto the seat, lest he curl over in on himself.

He couldn’t think of anything past the pain that stabbed through his abused ass with each bump of the wheel along the road and the pressure on his cock where it strained against its golden cage. Everything hurt. It seemed to envelop him. He would find a moment of peace by sitting in a certain position, only to have it taken away at the first jostle of the carriage. There was no relaxation. No respite. Just the next jolt of pain, the interminable pressure on his cock that burned like sparks of fire, the nearly overwhelming need to touch himself that roared through his veins and pounded an echo in his ears.

His whole body throbbed in a constant ebb and flow of pain and something approaching the edge of ecstasy. His balls were tight and heavy, and the weight of the cage kept tugging at him, not painfully, but an extra layer of constant stimulation no matter what he did. His cock was on fire, sticky and messy with spurts of useless precum that coated the inside of his thighs and made his inner robe cling to his groin. His mouth was dry. His eyes kept watering. He wanted to weep, truly, but he couldn’t with Cam here. Sweat collected on his brow. A bead of it dripped down from under the head-covering he was wearing and caught on his eyelash, making him blink.

His whole body was over-warm in the fancy robes he was wearing for the occasion. He was sure his face must be flushed, though the silk veil, with its golden beads that made tiny, tinkling sounds as he moved, that covered his head and the lower part of his face gave him at least some semblance of privacy. He was grateful for that much. Still, Cam kept giving him looks that had grown from curious to concerned. Steve wanted to reassure him, but couldn’t trust himself to speak, so he just shook his head and looked away, trying to pretend he was interested in the scenery that passed by outside the carriage’s window.

Cam tossed his hands up at Steve’s silence and sank back against the carriage’s plush seat with a disgruntled sigh, then leaned forward and pushed the curtain aside, peering out again. Steve watched him wave out the window with a sort of dim enthusiasm, then reach into the small bag
that sat in his lap and come out with a handful of coins. He tossed the few remaining coins out the window as the carriage trundled past a line of peasant children with their hands outstretched, laughing and screaming in delight as they chased the royal procession down the road.

“Do you want some water? Or food? Ms. Potts said there will be dinner at the inn tonight, but there are confits, pickled vegetables, and some bread and cheese, if you want it. And some candied oranges,” Cam said, mumbling the last, as if it was a mere afterthought. Steve watched him rummage around in one of the small chests near his feet, coming up with one of the potted confits and holding it out to Steve with a hopeful expression. Steve shook his head and gritted his teeth. “Are you sure you are not unwell?” Cam asked for probably the fifth time. “You do not look well,” Cam continued. “You barely even noticed all the people who came out to see us off. Nearly the whole city turned out! Even more than before. Ms. Potts said they would, because the King was leaving for so long, but I have never seen so many people all in one place. It was amazing,” Cam beamed. “Did you hear them calling for you?” Cam asked.

Steve nodded once, jerkily, but that seemed to satisfy Cam as far as a response went. Luckily, the boy was largely content with his own conversation.

“They come to see you! The King’s Prize. I think they were almost as excited to see you as they were the King. Everywhere, at Court, in the taverns and lodges, in the shops and down at the port, in the shacks down on the Low Road and in the merchant’s manses, everywhere, they talk of you, Raj’Inama.”

That much was true, Steve thought with a grimace. Even Steve, in his state, had noticed the tenor of the crowds. He wasn’t sure what to make of the fascination, but he couldn’t deny it. Throngs of people had come to see them off, which probably wasn’t all that unusual, given that the King was leaving the city for a trip that would take several months, but Steve had been surprised by the level of interest there was in him. He wasn’t sure what it meant for Tony. For what would come. He let his eyes fall closed and bit the inside of his cheek as the carriage bounced slightly and his whole body lit up in pain and something so close to pleasure, he couldn’t name it with any certainty. He couldn’t think about Tony now. He couldn’t think about anything. He seemed only capable of feeling, and even that was threateningly close to overwhelming. He opened his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath, tried to swallow and ended up having to stifle a groan as the carriage trundled around a bend in the road.

“You are very popular with the common folk, you will see,” Cam went on, seemingly oblivious to Steve’s distress. “Always, the Castle servants and slaves, they ask me about you, but I tell them, they are not fit to speak of you, for you are the King’s own, and he would not like anyone to carry tales. This is true, I think,” Cam nodded firmly. “He worries,” Cam added, almost as an afterthought. “I heard him talking with General Rhodes this morning after I finished helping you dress. The King said that he should leave you in the Tower, where you are safe, but he could not bear to be without you. General Rhodes said the King would worry the whole time either way, and at least this way, he will not be in such ill sorts because of—because of…on account of having your company,” Cam finally settled on.

Steve supposed that was one way to put it, though he doubted General Rhodes had been quite so delicate.

“I am glad we are going, aren’t you? It will be an adventure! I never thought to see so many places in my whole life, and here we are, traveling with the King himself from one end of the Kingdom to the other. There is so much to see. The King said the whole capital could fit into the Great Port at Koltun. Can you imagine such a thing? Lady Van Dyne must be nearly as rich as the King, I think. And General Rhodes said the Red Wastes have storms of sand that can bury a man.
Do you think that is true?” Cam asked, sounding caught between fascination and horror at the prospect.

“Not—not where we are going,” Steve managed to assure him with a breathy gasp as the carriage rumbled on. He swallowed, feeling the click in his throat, and breathed out. At least he had managed to respond, finally, though Cam seemed not to notice his reticence.

“I did not truly think so,” Cam replied, sounding somewhat relieved. “Our carriage is very beautiful, is it not?” Cam observed, reaching out to run a hand over the silk-lined interior. “The finest in the whole world, I think.”

It likely was, not that Steve was able to appreciate it much, other than the plush, cushioned seats, for which he had said a grateful prayer of thanks this morning. Any other time, and he may have appreciated the beauty and attention to detail that had surely gone into their conveyance. Tony’s hand, no doubt. The man might prefer building his machines, but he had an artist’s eye, Steve knew. The carriage was meant to draw attention, clearly, and proclaim something that Steve thought he only barely understood. Tony could not say some things with words, so he opted for elaborate gifts or public spectacle, but he meant something by all of it, and the carriage, like Steve’s collar and the ring he wore, was one of those things that was meant to say more than what Tony could speak.

The outside of the carriage was elaborately carved and painted in bright colors, with gilded lilies topping the four points of the roof and the King’s own crest over the back. Inside, it was even more sumptuous, with soft, cushioned benches on opposite sides, which could be pulled out to form a large bed - should Steve get tired - silk-lined walls, and numerous compartments, many cleverly hidden to allow enough space for the occupants to move around. A table folded out from under the window opposite the door, then cleverly secured in place again.

Even the vaulted ceiling was covered with soft blue panels, the color of the sky, awash in painted scenes of birds, trees and flowers—lilies, mostly, Steve was able to notice--embroidered with seed pearls, actual feathers, and threads that had been coated in gold to make them gleam. Heavy curtains could be pulled over the windows to give them privacy, but Cam preferred to have them drawn back, so that he could see the passing countryside. And be seen. Steve thought Cam rather enjoyed playing the part, waving imperiously as the procession made its way through the city, Steve recalled, watching as Cam explored the carriage’s compartments where foodstuffs, bottles of water and wine, books, dice, cards, and even a miniature chess set awaited their amusement.

The carriage jolted over a particularly large bump in the road, and Steve had to bite down on his lip to keep from moaning. He must have made some sound, because Cam gave him a strange look, then went back to leaning out the window, watching as the city grew smaller as the procession made its way down the road. Steve leaned his head back against the carriage, trying to adjust his position as best he could for the swaying motion, and closed his eyes, trying to focus on anything other than the sensations wracking his body.

Tony. He could think about Tony.

Tony had woken him this morning some time after the sun was already up, Steve remembered, letting the thought warm him. Steve had still been in some kind of heady daze from the night, but had come to wakefulness with the feeling of Tony’s beard scraping across his neck and jaw as he kissed Steve awake, the soft, warm look in Tony’s eyes, the murmur of his voice caressing Steve’s skin, the way his hands coaxed Steve awake with soft, lingering touches.

Somehow, in all of that, his mind still hazy from the night, Steve had not quite realized the import of things until Tony helped him up to relieve himself, chuckling lowly as Steve stared stupidly at
his reddened cock chafing against the gold bars that encased it. Steve had opened his mouth to ask Tony to remove it, then closed it again. He hadn’t been sure if he wanted that or not. He wasn’t sure, even now, what he wanted. He wanted not to think about what this journey would bring, one way or the other, and he certainly had that.

Tony seemed to always know what he wanted, what he needed, even when Steve didn’t, and for now, that was oddly comforting, to just put himself in Tony’s hands. There was always so much to think about. So many decisions to make. So many responsibilities to bear. But, not this, he remembered thinking as he stood in Tony’s bedchamber with Tony supporting him on legs that felt like they were made of jelly. This could be Tony’s. As soon as he thought it, his body seemed to agree. His muscles loosened, and he slumped a little against Tony, earning a soft grunt.

Tony had led Steve to the tall mirror in his dressing room then, letting Steve see himself, as if he knew that Steve needed that. He didn’t understand why he did. Why it mattered to see the evidence of the night before. But, Steve remembered the feeling of seeing the marks on his body like a visceral fire lighting under his skin. Long, red stripes had still been visible across the pale skin of his ass and thighs, though they had begun to settle into bluish bruises.

Steve wasn’t sure what to feel about the marks and everything that had culminated in them. He had no measure of comparison. It had been a long time since Mr. Sullivan took a switch to Steve’s hide for cutting through his field, telling him he could take the ones meant for Bucky, too, since Bucky had been too fast for the old man to catch, and that had certainly felt very, very different from what Tony had done.

They were beautiful in a strange way, the pattern of marks on his body. The contrast of colors, maybe, or the way each mark, each color, seemed to brighten with its own spark of pain, from soreness to a sharp sting, depending on how he moved or stood. It was his, his and Tony’s, but Steve’s to control now, and that thought had been punctuated by a bright burst of pleasure that warmed his chest and sank low, down the line of his cock. The marks were a part of him now, belonged to him, but were something he could give Tony, too. He didn’t know why that mattered so much, but it did.

Tony had certainly seemed pleased, Steve recalled. Beyond pleased, really. Like he was deeply, abjectly grateful. Awed, even. That thought had made Steve’s insides twist in helpless joy, that he could give such a thing to Tony. He thought, staring at their reflections, that maybe it was something that only he could give to Tony, though he couldn’t say why. It felt right, though. Wondrous. To be able to move such a man so profoundly. There was power there. Heady and luminous, but it was power, in its own way. Your pleasure is a gift, that was what Tony had said, but Steve didn’t think he had understood what Tony meant until that moment.

Tony had taken a long moment to admire his handiwork, cupping Steve’s ass in his hands and gently lifting and kneading the abused flesh until Steve groaned, helpless, his body going liquid, except for his cock, rigid and demanding in its cage. Tony had dropped his hands from Steve’s ass, then wound them under Steve’s arms to wrap about Steve’s chest, pulling him close. Beautiful, Tony told him, laying his head against Steve’s shoulder and looking over at their shared reflection. Thank you. His eyes were wide and liquid, his voice coming out thick and shaky.

There was a strange pride to the marks, almost like battle scars, something earned, but without the fear and horror behind them. When he thought about the night, about kneeling on the bed and waiting, waiting for it, knowing it was coming, the thick, brown strap right there, and him just… waiting, it made his insides water and twist, sending pulses of heat down his trapped cock. Tony said pain was just another side of pleasure, like a coin that had been flipped, but still had the same value.
He had caught Tony’s eye in the mirror then, Steve remembered as the carriage rolled on. He hadn’t known what he wanted to say. Everything. Nothing. His thoughts had been a knotted jumble and a smooth plain at the same time. If he tried to pluck a thread loose, it disappeared, floated away into nothingness, but the urge to say something was there, gnawing at him.

“Say it. Tell me again,” Tony said, low and entreating, speaking the words into the curve of Steve’s neck.

“I love you,” Steve responded instantly. The words flowed over him, warm and bright, pushing away whatever weight there was pressing down on him. He closed his eyes and ducked his head, feeling light, almost dizzy with it for a moment. He heard Tony tutting at him and felt the press of his lips to Steve’s shoulder, grounding him, tethering him, drawing him back to himself.

“Know that I will think of you. All day,” Tony promised in a low whisper. He disentangled himself and came around to face Steve. He took Steve’s face in his hands and pulled his head down low enough to place a light kiss against Steve’s forehead. “My beautiful one. I want you to remember that. When I am riding up there with Rhodey and the rest of the dignitaries, listening to them drone endlessly on about whatever it is they want of me before I can escape them, I will be thinking of you. Of this. Of how good you are for me, my treasure.”

Steve had only been capable of nodding mutely at Tony, too awash in pain and shocked humiliation at the idea of wearing this thing while they were traveling, having it on around other people, around Cam and General Rhodes, around everyone, while Tony—Tony knew about it. Shame and arousal had warred in Steve’s mind, blending together until he couldn’t tell which was which. Tony really meant for him to keep this on. His mind hadn’t been able to move past that. The idea of it just kept thumping at his skull, sending pulses of heat down to his cock that built into a wall of pressure, pain, pleasure and mortification.

Tony would be thinking about it. All day. Tony was thinking about now, Steve thought. Riding up there with his soldiers and the nobles who were accompanying him on this stretch of the journey, Tony would be thinking about Steve, about what Steve was feeling, knowing what Steve desperately needed, how much he ached for Tony’s touch, for any kind of friction or release.

Tony knew what every lurch of the carriage was doing to Steve. He knew that each bump or divot in the road sent sparks of bright, stinging fire through Steve’s ass, where the marks of the strap had left long, red stripes that were fading to purplish bruises. He knew that Steve needed to touch himself with a desperation that was slowly veering towards madness. He knew that the constant sway of the carriage afforded Steve little in the way of relief. He was up there, with Rhodes and the rest of them, thinking about Steve, and knowing. Knowing what all of this was doing to him. The thought sent a rush of hot shame through his gut that made Steve want to squirm. It mixed with a deeper heat of arousal that pooled low behind Steve’s cock, which throbbed insistently against the confines of the cage around it. The combination was almost too much.

He wanted to touch himself. Needed to touch himself. Rub at his cock, even through his robes, shift up against the seat, take his cock in hand and give his balls some relief from the weight….something, anything, but Cam was right there. He suspected Tony knew that, too. Tony knew that Steve was suffering. He was up there thinking about it. Doing his duty, playing his role, and thinking about Steve. That thought, almost more than anything else, burned bright inside Steve, sending a thrill of desire straight to the head of his cock. He could imagine it, bulging against the gold bars of the cage, a deep, angry red, the vein on the underside throbbing with need. He wondered if Tony was imagining it, too.

Steve shook his head, trying to clear it, though the motion did little to calm his aching body.
Whether it had been Tony’s intention or not, the overall effect was to push every thought beyond what was happening with his body out of Steve’s mind. In a way, that itself was a welcome respite. Steve could admit. He had long dreaded this day, to the point of near panic last night, and now, all he could think about was sensation after sensation. Pain. Pleasure. Need. Ache. It all crashed through him, over and over, like waves on a shore.

“Are you sure you are not unwell?” Cam asked again, tipping his head to the side as he pulled away from the window and regarded Steve with sudden interest. “You are very pale, Raj’Inama. You should eat something. It will make you feel better, you will see,” he added, reaching for the larder chest.

“I’m fine,” Steve hissed out through clenched teeth. He felt a bubble of laughter well up inside him, though he managed to keep it at a groaning chuckle. Fine. He was fine. He could barely remember to breathe, too caught up in the constant, demanding pulse of his cock and the aching soreness of his ass to do much of anything, and the thought that Tony knew this was driving him insane with desire, but sure, he was fine. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to throw himself at Tony and beg for release or murder the man as soon as he saw him. Steve laughed again, a broken, sobbing sound, and nearly shoved his fist into his mouth, but gripped the front of his robe instead, twisting the finely wrought material in his hand.

“You are not fine,” Cam retorted with a pointed sharpness. “The King said I was to take special care of you today, and if you become distressed, I am to signal the carriage driver to get a message to him. He will come and insist you eat, and then you will feel better. You will see,” Cam finished, crossing his spindly arms over his chest.

Steve sighed and held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Give me the damn bread,” he grumbled, knowing when he was beaten. Cam, much like Steve’s own mother, and probably just about anyone who had gone hungry too many times to count, held tight to the certainty that food could fix most of what ailed anyone.

A slightly mollified Cam reached into the larder chest and unwrapped a piece of bread from the bundle, then took out a small jar of jam and spread it on top. He passed it over to Steve, who dutifully took a bite.

“How much longer until we get there?” Cam asked, glancing out the window again as Steve chewed.

“Did you not just ask that a short while ago?” Steve demanded with an exasperated grimace that was punctuated by a stab of pain that lanced through them as the carriage took the bridge.

“The Inn is called Firstpost, did you know that? The King said it is because one of his ancestors had to stop there when his horse went lame, and the innkeeper told the old king that he would take his bad fortune no further along the way with him. And he didn’t! The old king had great success on his journey, and so, it became tradition that any king or queen who leaves the city will spend the first night there,” Cam recounted, clearly enamored with the story. “I hope we leave our bad luck behind. Do you think we will? The King says we will, so it must be so. But, sometimes luck works differently for kings than for slaves, I think,” he finished, frowning for a moment before whatever worries he had passed from his mind, as they were wont to do when you were that young, Steve remembered. Cam opened the larder again and pulled out the bag of candied orange slices, happily popping one after the other into his mouth.

“You should rest after you eat,” Cam encouraged him around a mouthful of candied orange that clung to his teeth.
Steve nodded once, finished his slice of bread, then closed his eyes again, grateful for the excuse not to have to respond. Steve couldn’t sleep, of course, not with the having to move and shift in a vain effort to find a moment’s respite for his aching bottom, the effect of which was to worsen the situation with his cock, where each movement triggered a beat of agonizing need down his length. He tried not to move about too much, lest he draw Cam’s attention again, but sitting still was simply impossible.

Finally, the carriage slowed and came to a halt while they waited for the other riders and carriages in the procession in front of them to dismount. Steve sat up and looked out the window, past Cam’s shoulder, to where a crowd had gathered around a large building made of grey stone and timber, with various pastoral scenes painted on the front and a royal crest just over the door. Smoke puffed out of the chimney in a slow, meandering curl. A large stable was off to one side. Next to it was what looked like a small brewery. It hardly looked suited to house a king for the night, but tradition demanded it, and Ms. Potts, who had planned their journey down to the most minute detail, certainly understood the importance of observing tradition.

Firstpost, as it was known, whatever name it had originally borne lost to time, was a fairly nondescript inn situated at a crossroads. It was popular with merchants traveling between the port and city who often spent the night, as Cam had chattily informed him at some point during their ride out of the city, whether this was out of necessity or some delight at sleeping in the bed of kings.

It seemed the entire village was out to meet them, Steve noticed as their carriage approached, though that wasn’t exactly a surprise. It was hardly every day that the King came through. Many of the crowd would probably only see this once in their lifetime, and in a world without much in the way of entertainment, this was something not to be missed. Most were simple folk, farmers, shopkeepers, and the like, but as he peered out the window, Steve could see some of who he assumed were landed gentry of some kind. Not high ranking enough to appear at Court, but they were surely not going to miss an opportunity to greet the King.

The carriage finally ground to a stop, finally, just in front of the inn, where the crowd of people were parted around a long, gold-trimmed red carpet that had been rolled out across the ground all the way to the door of the inn. Steve could see the top of Tony’s head between the soldiers and others who surrounded him, clamoring for his attention. A murmur of voices rose up outside. The crowd was calling for their King. And then…then him. Raj’Inama, they called out, pointing at the carriage. He saw Tony’s head turn, and could just barely make out a small, satisfied smile playing on his lips, before he disappeared behind a wall of people.

“We are here!” Cam announced excitedly. “Do you hear? They call for you!”

Steve wasn’t sure what to make of the interest, but he understood performance. He knew that people needed their stories almost as much as they needed food on the table and a roof over their heads. He understood what a symbol could mean to people. He suspected that Tony did, too. Not for the first time, Steve thought about how much Tony wanted Steve to like this place. To see the beauty in the land and its people, after all the ugliness. The idea that Tony wanted his people to like Steve, to see him as something other than a mere concubine, that was new. Though it went a long way to explain the luxury of the carriage and the opulent robes Steve wore, Steve realized. Tony was showing his people Steve’s value, in perhaps the only way he could.

One of the guards opened the carriage door and set a small step down on the ground outside. Cam hopped out first, then waited dutifully outside the carriage for one of the servants to extend the carpet to the carriage. He held out his hand then for Steve to climb down. Steve honestly wasn’t sure if he could walk, let alone do so with any dignity. It was far worse now than when they’d
stopped for a relief break earlier, and Steve had barely managed to make it to the copse of trees for a moment’s privacy before he collapsed against the side of a big oak.

And Tony knew it. Tony knew. Tony was waiting for him. Standing out there in the cool, evening air, with the crowd at his back, chanting for him, reaching out with their bouquets, hoping to catch the King’s eye, even for a moment, and the whole time, Tony was thinking about Steve.

About this moment. Seeing him again, knowing what Steve was feeling, what he had gone through the whole day.

Steve’s cock jerked against his thigh, a bright, shooting pain burrowing down its length. Steve shifted and stifled a groan. He closed his eyes, sucked in a long breath, and breathed out. Heart thumping in his chest, he slowly pushed himself off the bench and bent down to step out of the carriage. He had to take Cam’s hand for support. His legs were quaking too hard not to. Cam gave him a questioning look that Steve couldn’t manage to return. He was too busy searching for Tony. For a moment, Steve couldn’t see him in the crowd, and a stab of panic burst in his chest. Then, the people parted, hurried out of the way by soldiers, and Tony was there. His gaze locked onto Steve’s, like an anchor, dragging inexorably along the bottom of the ocean, until it finally caught.

Slowly, on stiff, unwieldy legs, Steve walked towards where Tony, resplendent in his black breeches and red brocade waistcoat, waited. Tony waited, knowing. Knowing what Steve had done for him today. Tony had thought about it all day, and Steve had given that to him. A warm tingle filtered over Steve’s skin, like stepping closer to a fire. The pain that had seemed unbearable a moment ago was still there, but muted somehow. Pushed back. Tony was in front, waiting and knowing, his eyes dark pools of almost black as Steve approached. His ears filled with the cries of the crowd—cheers for him, for Tony, for the spectacle of it, he wasn’t sure--and the blood pounding through his body, a rushing sound, almost like waves breaking. There was pain, yes. Each step dripped with the aching agony of it, this rushing, pounding, breaking pain and pleasure, and yet, he moved towards Tony almost with ease, like some invisible tether pulled him along.

As he walked, Steve tried to remember all the rules Ms. Potts had gone over before the trip. Do not touch him. Keep silent, unless he asks a direct question. Never walk in front of him. Do not eat until he eats. Never interrupt. Do not sit until he is seated. Do not stand until he rises. Do not hand him things, but it was acceptable to take something from him, if offered.

There were a lot of rules about how to treat the King in public, it turned out. Tony had gamely wagered that Steve would manage to keep to them for no more than a day. Don’t touch him, Steve reminded himself, though, now that he could see Tony, Steve thought he might truly not be capable of not touching him. He wanted to throw himself at Tony, prostrate himself at Tony’s feet and beg for release, wrap himself in Tony’s arms and collapse, he didn’t know. All of them. None of them. The world was reduced to a flat plain of nothing, an endless, still sea, except Tony and the need to feel him, to cling to him, to be enveloped by him, in his words, his touch, his gaze.

Steve stopped in front of Tony and dipped his head and shoulders, as Ms. Potts had taught him to do. Not quite a formal bow. Something more familiar. More intimate. Not exactly protocol, but Tony had pointed out that protocol was what he said it was, and that had ended the debate. Another signal, Steve supposed, holding himself like that for a long moment, then raising his eyes and straightening his back.

“Raj’Inama,” Tony said softly, his voice warm. He reached out and cupped Steve’s jaw, his thumb grazing lightly over Steve’s cheek, just above the seam of the veil. Steve nearly went limp with relief, leaning in to the familiar gesture. Warmth bloomed inside his chest. He felt boneless, liquid, as if he could melt into Tony’s hand, if he truly tried.
“I trust your journey was pleasant,” Tony added, his voice tinged with wry amusement.

Steve was going to strangle the man.

His eyes must have managed to convey something along those lines, because Tony grinned, dropped his hand and tipped his head back with a laugh. He turned towards the inn, where the proprietor waited to greet him as he had every royal who had ever stayed there, kneeling down and offering Tony a tankard of ale and a plate of salted meat and bread, which Tony dutifully plucked a few bites from, took a drink, and proclaimed it a good place to rest for the night. The crowd loved it, cheering loudly at each turn. Steve heard an old man explain to the young boy with him that he had once watched the King’s father do the same, and then Cam was urging him along towards the door. He saw Tony look back over his shoulder once, then disappear inside the doorway.

Steve followed, slowly, stiffly, ignoring the curious stares from the crowd. His body still ached and stung, but the soreness was a dull throb now. The drumbeat of pain and pressure on his cock had faded almost as soon as Tony touched him, swirling low and warm in his belly, just behind where his cock strained against its cage. He ignored it as best he could, and hoped he managed to walk as if the only thing wrong was a result of a long carriage ride. Only Tony would know differently, Steve thought, feeling the familiar burst of soothing warmth at the thought.

A young boy held out a small bouquet of wildflowers for him, which Cam took and replaced with a coin from the purse at his waist and made the boy grin with delight. Emboldened, more children followed suit with eager, outstretched arms full of fresh-picked flowers they held out in offering as Steve swept past the parted crowd and into the inn.

The bottom floor of the inn held a large common room with benches and tables for serving food and drink surrounding a stone-faced hearth over which a pot of stew brewed, a common enough sight, even to Steve’s eyes. Smells from the kitchen and the crush of people filled the room, but the rushed mats on the floor were new, and someone had hung sprigs of lavender on the doorways. Cam ushered him towards the stairs. No one spoke to him, let alone touched him, though Steve could feel the weight of their curiosity on him.

He was thankful, again, for the anonymity the robes and veil offered. As elaborate as they were, they allowed him to all but disappear into the role he had been given. The King’s Prize. The foreign concubine who had so entranced the King. Nameless. Faceless. No one. Anyone, everyone. He belonged to the King, yes, but the story belonged to each of them. An image that each of them could conjure on their own. That was who they came to see. That was the story they wanted. So, Tony gave it to them. And in return, they showered Steve with an adoration that bordered on fanatic. Tony had warned him, before they left, that word of him had spread and to expect the interest. Tony worried it would unnerve him, Steve thought. He wasn’t sure how to tell Tony that of all of this, this part was the most familiar.

The King was granted the entire second floor of the inn, which encompassed a few chambers for weary travelers. A line of guards had formed, separating the crowd from them and leaving open a path to the stairs.

“The largest one is for you and the King,” Cam told him, pointing towards the door at the end of the hall where two familiar guards stood. “I will be just here,” he added, nodding towards one of the other rooms. The door was open, revealing a small bedchamber with a single bed, table, chair and small fireplace. “General Rhodes is seeing to the soldiers. He says he will camp with them, so it is just us. This way,” Cam continued with a hint of his usual imperiousness as two serving girls stepped out of the King’s room and plastered themselves, wide-eyed, against the hallway wall so that Steve and Cam could pass. They gave quick curtsies, which made Cam grin, then shot off
down the hall tittering behind their hands as soon as Steve had walked by. Josiah opened the door for them, while Peran gave Steve a welcoming nod.

“What a day! Never seen a crowd like that before,” Josiah said by way of greeting. “Wonder what they were all having a gawk at?” he teased, giving Cam a wink. “The King’s Scribe, I think it must have been. Word travels fast, young Cam.”

“I have never seen so many people in one place. There were more people there than in the rest of the entire world, I think,” Cam grinned, clearly pleased.

“Bah. You all act like it was some kind of parade, not a damn security nightmare. I thought we were never going to get past the city walls,” Peran complained, frowning.

“Ignore him. He lost his sense of amusement along with all his hair,” Josiah said, pantomiming a whisper to Cam behind his hand.

“I have not lost all my hair, and I never had a sense of amusement,” Peran replied archly, face stiff. He broke into a smile then, shaking his head. “Go on with you, then. Don’t keep him waiting. He’s been in a mood all day, worrying about this one,” Peran finished in a gruff voice, jerking his thumb at Steve, though his eyes were bright with humor.

“Do you think they need more water, Josiah? Do they need a rest, Josiah? Is the pace too fast for the carriage, Josiah?” Josiah mimicked, ticking off each question on his fingers.

“I saw you riding by a few times,” Cam said. Steve was somewhat surprised that he hadn’t noticed that himself, though he supposed he had a good excuse for his lapse.

“To set his mind at ease,” Josiah nodded formally.

The bedchamber provided for the King was far more well-appointed, Steve noticed right away. A large, four-poster bed sat against one wall, draped in heavy, emerald green curtains. On the other wall, a tapestry depicting a hunting scene hung, with two sconces set with bright candles. A stone hearth glowed on the opposite wall, flanked by a table between two plush chairs sitting atop a rug that looked new. A tray piled high with food sat on the table. Next to the tray stood a large pitcher, two goblets, and a bottle of wine. There was a large wooden bathtub in front of the fireplace. Small curls of steam still wafted from the edges.

“Ah, there you are,” Tony said, drying his hands on a cloth as he walked in from the antechamber. “Thank you for attending to him today, Small Hands. Go on to the kitchen and find yourself some food before the soldiers get it all,” Tony ordered. Cam gave him a quick nod, threw a mischievous look at Steve, and hurried out of the room. One of the guards closed the door behind him. Finally, he was alone with Tony.

Tony stared hard at Steve for a long moment, looking him up and down, head cocked to one side. Familiar spikes of heat bloomed in Steve’s belly. He was more aware of the way his cock pushed against the metal confines that held it than he had been just a moment before. Almost too aware, as if it was the only thing he could think about. Tony was looking at him….cataloging him, in that sharp, intense way that Tony could, and he knew.

Tony knew.

That was the thing that made Steve’s insides squirm in mortification and seem to heat until they melted. Pulses of pressure sparked down into the shaft of his cock, building, building, building against the head. And still, Tony knew. It was the most wonderful, awful, mesmerizing feeling.
He didn’t know what to do, and for a moment, he could feel the edges of panic set in. He blinked at Tony. Licked his lips under the veil. Swallowed. His throat was parched. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears. He needed something. He had no idea what. No words would come. No request formed. No entreaty. All his plans for what he would do when he was finally alone with Tony were gone, and there was just… too much. Too much to feel. Too many thoughts in his head. Too many things he wanted. He didn’t know what to do. A soft, involuntary cry escaped him.

“Shhh,” Tony said, voice low. He was suddenly there, right in front of Steve, hands rubbing at Steve’s arms. That was good, Steve thought. He stopped shaking. He hadn’t realized he had been. “You’ve been so good all day for me. Can you be good a little longer?” Pleasure wound through him at Tony’s words. Steve nodded. He could do that. He wanted to do that for Tony. “Good. Take off your clothes. Then kneel there on the rug by the table. Can you do that for me?”

Steve nodded again. He reached up to undo his robes where they where clasped together just under his shoulder. His fingers seemed too large for the task, at first, fumbling a bit at the buttons, but he got them undone, then made easy work of the stays and belt. Tony watched. He didn’t say anything, but the scrutiny was enough to heat Steve’s skin far better than the fire ever could. His eyes were dark in the room’s low light, deep, brown orbs that lazily studied Steve’s frenzied movements. His mouth was slightly parted, though, and his hands kept brushing against his breeches, as if his fingers craved something to touch. Steve forced himself to slow down, earning a small, pleased tilt to Tony’s lips. Finally, Steve managed to undo the final tie, and he shrugged the robes off his shoulders, letting them fall to the ground in a pool of blue sprinkled with gold, almost like the sun-dappled water at the beach where they spent so many days these last months. His slippers were next, then he carefully unclasped the veil and lifted the entire head-covering off, letting it, too, fall to the floor.

He stood there in front of Tony, in only his collar and the cage around his cock, letting Tony’s gaze wash over him. It enveloped him, pushing back at the pain, the longing, driving away everything that wasn’t whatever this was between them.

“Good,” Tony said, his voice low and rough. Steve watched his throat work around the single word, as if it had been a struggle just to say it, and felt a surge of warm happiness at the realization of how deeply the sight of him could affect Tony. Steve turned and walked towards the chair. He heard Tony suck in a sharp, shaking breath as he did. Something akin to pride burned its way across Steve’s skin, straightening his back and making his shoulders widen. The marks he wore on his skin were Tony’s, as much as his, but it seemed to matter so much more when Tony could see them. It was better then, when Tony could see them, though he had no idea why. It was just one of those things that was true.

Steve knelt down on the rug by the chair, as he had been told to do, and waited with his back to Tony. He thought Tony enjoyed looking, and that thought made his cock stiffen impossibly harder, lifting the cage up until it jutted out proudly in front of him, impossibly hard and aching. The deep red flesh pressed hard against the gold bars that surrounded it. Tony’s colors, Steve thought wildly, a burst of need lighting a line of fire down to the tip at the realization. His balls were pulled taut with the weight of the cage. His ass and thighs ached with a dull, throbbing soreness that seemed to echo through his whole body. He desperately wanted to come. He didn’t ever want to come. He wasn’t sure what he wanted, but he thought if Tony touched him now, he would come on the spot.

A long span of heartbeats passed before Steve heard the soft footfalls of Tony’s approach. One of Tony’s hand’s settled on Steve’s head, stroking through his hair. He didn’t touch Steve’s cock, of course, though his eyes fell to it, gaze caressing and possessive. Pleasure warmed Steve’s belly, coiling low, behind his straining cock.
“Beautiful,” Tony murmured, then sat down in the chair in front of Steve.

Steve wondered if Tony would have him suck his cock. His eyes dipped to the bulge in Tony’s breeches, and his mouth watered at the sight. He liked doing that for Tony almost more than he liked it when Tony did it to him. He liked the feeling of Tony’s hand wound in his hair, the weight of Tony’s cock on his tongue, the musky, sweaty scent, the feel of the velvety skin over the hardness of his shaft, the rough scrape of it on his throat when he took Tony all the way down, the soft noises Tony would make, the taste of his seed spilling into Steve’s mouth, he liked it all, but if he didn’t get relief soon, he wasn’t sure he could manage to do much of anything other than just let Tony take his mouth. His cock twitched again at the thought, small beads of fluid appearing at the head. When he finally dragged his gaze up, Tony had a small smirk playing on his lips. He knew. Of course, he did. He always seemed to know what Steve was thinking when they were like this. The thought was soft, suffusing his mind with a sort of lightness that seeped into his limbs and muscles, like he was slowly going weightless.


“Please what?” Tony asked, canting his head to the side and regarding Steve carefully.

“I—” Steve started, then broke off. He had no idea what to say. He opened his mouth again, only to close it, shaking his head, a feeling of dismay settling heavily in his stomach. He could feel his legs tremble where he knelt. The pain was there again, pressing at the edges of his mind in dull, throbbing pulses. “Please,” he begged again, beseechingly this time. He needed something. He had no idea what. But, he trusted that Tony would know, and this was part of it, he knew, giving that over to Tony. “Please,” he said yet again, shaking his head, then tipping his chin to look up at Tony. “Please.” His voice was steady.

“Good,” Tony replied, making Steve’s shoulders sag with relief. His face gentled, eyes going soft. “Close your eyes,” he said, reaching out to cup Steve’s jaw and letting Steve rest his cheek against his hand for a long moment, until Steve’s eyes fluttered shut. “That’s it, my treasure. Let go. You’ve done so well for me today. So good for me, Steve. You have no idea what it was like, to have this today, of all days. All I could think about was you, did you know that? Of course, you did,” he replied when Steve hummed affirmatively. “You knew. When the city ministers talked to me about taxes and appropriations, when Rhodey wanted to discuss the guard rotation, when we rode up here and I drank their ale and ate their bread, as my father and his father once had, all—” he broke off abruptly, drawing in a breath and letting the words tumble out in a rush, “all I could of was you.”

Tony’s voice was fierce, sharp, heating Steve’s skin like he might open his eyes to find the words branded there. The power of being able to give Tony something like that, of having that much influence over his thoughts, of being that precious to him, it was a heady, intoxicating thing that filled Steve’s mind and made his chest expand near to bursting, or so it felt. No one else could do this. No one else could give Tony this. It felt exhilarating. Blood pounded through his body, his heart thumped wildly in time. He felt invincible, indomitable, like he was coming out of battle, victorious and battle-scarred, with his shield in one hand and his sword in the other. It didn’t make sense. He was kneeling in front of a foreign king with a slave’s collar around his throat, yet he couldn’t deny the feeling.

“Keep your hands at your sides. Now, open your mouth for me,” Tony commanded. Steve let his mouth fall open. “Good,” Tony praised, his voice light. Steve waited patiently for the familiar taste of Tony’s cock sliding past his lips and settling on his tongue. Steve wasn’t expecting the sweet taste of a plump, honeyed date to fill his mouth, and almost drew back in surprise. “Now. Chew,” Tony said around a laugh, as if he knew what Steve had been thinking. He probably did,
Steve thought as he chewed. The date was delicious. He had eaten them before, but this one was fantastic. The sweet flavor filled his mouth as he chewed the fleshy fruit. Tony hummed thoughtfully as Steve swallowed, and a moment later, he felt the hard edge of a goblet at his lips and drank a few sips of watered wine before Tony took it away.

“Good,” Tony said. “Open.” Steve did. This time, it was a piece of buttered bread. It, too, was fantastic, Steve realized. A bite of tender, seasoned pork followed. More wine. Slivers of cheese. Roasted vegetables. Steve hadn’t realized how hungry he was, but everything tasted amazing, and there was something profoundly caring about the way Tony would choose each bite and carefully place it in Steve’s mouth, almost as if it were ceremonial. An offering. The way they used to make to the old gods, placing bits of food on plates of bone or antler and praying for rain or sun.

Maybe it was his own issues with food, or the lack thereof, but it had always been a source of comfort, even when he was past the gnawing hunger of his childhood, knowing that there was food readily available. Sam had teased Steve, once, before Bucky put a stop to it, for saving bits of his rations in the pouches on his belt like a crow with its cache, but it had made Steve feel better to know they were there. This had that same feeling of comfort. Certainty. Security. Tony’s touch. Tony’s care and attention. Wonder at what the next bite would be. Delight at the flavors as he chewed. He was so concentrated on eating, he realized after a while that he hadn’t thought of the ache in his cock or the pain from his bottom for a long time. When he did, he found the sensations were still there, still strong and insistent, but not like they were before, and as soon as Tony placed the next bite in his mouth, it was easy to let his mind slip into thinking of that instead.

“Open your eyes,” Tony said finally, as he took the goblet from Steve’s lips and set it down on the table. Steve opened his eyes and blinked up at Tony.

Tony was watching him carefully. His eyes were dark, catching the glow of the flickering fire as if they burned from within. There is a fire inside him. The thought was strange. Disturbing in a way he couldn’t name. It passed through his mind and was gone before he could grab onto it, though, and then there was just Tony. Tony, reaching out and taking Steve’s face in his hands, thumbs stroking over Steve’s cheeks, his eyes intent on Steve’s face. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Steve’s in a kiss that was oddly chaste at first. He tastes better than anything else, Steve thought, his mouth falling open, tongue darting out to trace the seam of Tony’s lips. He heard Tony let out a low moan, his head tilting back slightly as Steve’s mouth opened over his. Tony slid out of his chair and went to his knees in front of Steve, flicking the tip of his tongue against Steve’s lips, teasing at first, then delving deep, circling against Steve’s before drawing back again.

Arousal sparked in Steve’s belly, like a dam breaking and a great river of need and desire flowing deep, pushing its way past everything else and rushing, rushing over his skin, his mind, pooling at the base of his cock. Fluid leaked out, dripping from the tip of the cage and down onto the rug. It should embarrass him, how messy he was, but Steve couldn’t bring himself to care. There was only Tony. The feel of him, the taste of him, the scrape of his beard against Steve’s skin, the cut of his teeth on Steve’s lips, pain and pleasure and Tony.

Tony’s tongue dipped into Steve’s mouth, twisting around his own, sliding past one side, then drawing back and gliding over the other. He tasted like wine and spice and Tony. His hands were in Steve’s hair, tugging his head back for better access. Steve obliged. He sucked Tony’s lower lip into his mouth as he did, pulling lightly as he arched his neck into the kiss.

A groan escaped him, rumbling its way from his chest up his throat and into Tony’s mouth like an echo. Tony broke his mouth away for a moment, muttering a curse, then took Steve’s lips again, hard and forceful this time, all delicacy and technique abandoned, just some amalgam of need, passion and possession. It was Tony taking and Steve giving, wild, feral hunger and desperate
longing. He could feel it in the grasp of Tony’s hands clutching at him, fingers skating over his back, then lower, to cup his ass and knead the abused flesh until Steve let out a soft cry that Tony captured in his mouth. His eyelashes were wet. He wasn’t sure if it was from him or Tony, or if it even mattered. He let Tony take what he needed and gloried in giving it to him. This. God, this was what he wanted so very much, to make Tony feel this way, to let Tony make him feel this way, it was beautiful and perfect. A gift, he thought, the word humming through his mind with a pleasant rush of warmth.

Seemingly reluctantly, Tony finally pulled his mouth away and pressed his sweat-slicked forehead to Steve’s, his breath coming out in pants. Steve’s own was matching it.

“Steve,” Tony husked out, drawing out the name like a prayer. He huffed out a puff of air that was almost a laugh, though it held more chagrin than mirth. “The common folk say you have enchanted me, and perhaps they are right. Is that what you have done?” he asked in a low, rough voice, one hand tracing its way down Steve’s cheek. His eyes were bright and dark with desire, but strangely soft. “I think you have,” he added in a voice barely above a whisper.

Tony dropped his hand down to Steve’s cock, cradling it in his palm where it jutted out between them. He ran his thumb up and down over the bars, just grazing the skin of Steve’s cock where it bulged and strained, seeking release. Steve gasped. He squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall back, hips thrusting uselessly into Tony’s hand.

“Please,” Steve said.

“You’ve been so good. So good, my beautiful one,” Tony murmured, stroking Steve’s cock through the cage. “I’m going to take this off. You can come whenever you want.”

“Please. Please, yes,” Steve chanted, letting his head fall forward onto Tony’s shoulder. “Please Tony. Please.” He looked down and watched as Tony deftly opened the lock and slowly removed the cage, finally freeing Steve’s cock. Steve managed to suck in a quick, sharp breath before the sudden release of pressure hit him. He cried out, body shaking, hips juddering into Tony’s hand, pleasure and pain rolling over in on themselves in his head until he couldn’t tell one from the other. There was just feeling. Just feeling and Tony.

Tony slathered the gathering fluid over the head of Steve’s cock. The friction was exquisite torture. Too much sensation and not nearly enough. Tony’s hand left Steve’s cock for a moment, and Steve cried out at the absence, but it was back again soon enough, this time coated with a slick, viscous oil. Not warm this time, as he was used to, but warm enough in Tony’s hand as he wrapped it around Steve’s cock and gave it a strong, hard stroke.

“There you go. Beautiful. Look at you,” Tony encouraged. His hand glided up and down twice more over Steve’s cock, wrist twisting at the head. A sob wracked though Steve’s body, and he curved his back into an arch, head grinding against Tony’s shoulder. Tony’s other arm caught him as he nearly collapsed forward, a soft groan all he could muster. “That’s it. So good. Now, come for me, Steve. Come for me, my love, there you go.”

That was enough. Steve’s hips thrust forward against Tony’s hand once more as Tony stroked his cock, gently this time, with a barely-there pressure after so much. Helplessly, Steve’s hips gave a last, ragged thrust, and finally, a thick, white stream of cum coated Tony’s hand and splattered on his breeches. His vision filled with pinpoints of white starbursts and he let his eyes slip shut for a moment as the last few thrusts wracked through him. He kept coming, spilling into Tony’s hand, not that he seemed to mind, just stroked Steve through the last of it, using Steve’s own cum to smooth the last few passes of his hand. Steve opened his eyes again, mouth hanging open, breath coming in heaving gulps. The sight of Tony’s hand, slick with Steve’s seed, caressing Steve’s cock
through the aftershocks sent a heady jolt of heat through Steve. It was breathtaking. Exhilarating.
Humbling. To be cared for like this, to be cherished. He didn’t know how to express it. He wanted to
tell Tony how grateful he was, but there weren’t words for it. There was only this.

For now, anyway, Steve thought. The words ran like ice through his veins. He couldn’t think
about it. Not now. It was too much. If he thought about it now, he would find himself telling
Tony the truth or making a promise he wouldn’t be able to keep. He lifted his head a little and
blinked up at Tony. Tony was gazing down at him, eyes soft and adoring. He patted Steve’s back
with the hand that was half-holding Steve up. I’ll never not be his, Steve realized with a
bittersweet pang as he stared up at Tony. And he, mine. Something about the thought niggled at
the back of his mind, but he couldn’t seem to focus on it, not now. He had no idea how to parse
loving someone you knew you were fated to destroy. He wasn’t even sure which of them he
meant. Maybe both.

He watched Tony hurriedly reach up and dip his hand in the pot of oil Steve only now noticed on
the table, then undo the ties of his breeches and take himself in hand. A part of Steve wanted to
help, wanted to touch Tony like that or offer more. Tony could use him. He wouldn’t mind. He
thought it might even be good, in the strange way that things like that were good with Tony. In his
head, he could see Tony pushing him down on the rug, bending him over and spreading the bruised
cheeks of his ass and taking him, there on the rug where he could feel the burn of it in his ass and
on his knees. Tony didn’t, though, just gave his cock a few quick, perfunctory strokes. Steve
thought he should maybe help, but Tony had told him to keep his hands at his sides, so he did. He
liked watching. He liked watching, and knowing it was about him, even if he wasn’t doing
anything. There was something thrilling in that power, Steve thought, as Tony gasped, gave a
small cry, and came into his own hand, letting it spill over onto the rug between them.

Tony was quiet for a long moment. Steve could hear him breathing. He watched Tony’s chest rise
and fall from where his head lay against Tony’s shoulder. His own breathing followed suit,
seemingly of its own accord.

“That was…” Tony began, then broke off, shaking his head and letting out a puff of air through his
nose. He wiped the sleeve of his shirt across his brow where a fine sheen of sweat had formed,
then reached over and grabbed a cloth from the table to wipe his hand. “As always, you leave me
in a state of amazement.” He bit his lip, then glanced up at the ceiling where a circle of candles
burned on the chandelier, blinking rapidly for a moment before looking back down at Steve.
“Let’s get you cleaned up, how about it?”

Steve nodded once, pushing his thoughts aside, and watched Tony wipe his hand on his breeches,
seemingly unconcerned about the mess Steve had made. Tony stood up, then guided Steve to his
feet and helped him to the tub where it sat warming in front of the fire. It was low enough for
Steve to step into rather easily. The water was lukewarm now, which was probably good, he
thought as he let out a slight hiss when it reached the flayed skin of his thighs. It wasn’t as bad as it
had been this morning, but was still raw enough to sting. He sank down on his knees, bracing his
arms on the edges for support and let his chin dip down to his chest. His eyes drooped closed. The
whole day seemed to cover him like a heavy blanket, warm and weighted. His mind chased the
feeling. Or ran away from something else, Steve wasn’t sure. He didn’t fight it, though.

Tony found a soft cloth and bathed the sweat and dirt off his back and neck, then soaped his hair,
massaging clever fingers into Steve’s scalp until Steve thought he might melt like some kind of
wax figure, boneless and malleable.

Tony was surprisingly quiet the whole time, though he occasionally made a low humming noise as
he worked the knots out of Steve’s shoulders and neck. Steve could hear his throat clicking when
he swallowed, as if he kept almost speaking and then deciding against it.

“Can you stand for me?” Tony asked after a while. Steve turned his head to look at Tony. For a moment, Steve just stared dumbly at him. He wasn’t even sure what Tony was asking. “The water is getting cold,” Tony pointed out. Somewhat sheepishly, Steve realized he was right. It didn’t make sense at first, because he was melting.

“I can stand,” Steve said, or thought he did. The words sounded slurry and garbled, even to his own ears. Tony smiled indulgently at him, got up and returned with a large cotton towel, which he tossed over one of his arms.

“Up with you, then,” Tony urged. Steve stood. It was harder to do than it should have been. The muscles of his legs trembled. Tony wrapped the towel around his waist and got one arm under Steve’s shoulder to help him out of the tub. His toes curled into the rug as he stepped out. Tony grinned at him. “Bed,” he added with a slight nod towards the waiting bed.

Tony helped him to the edge of the bed, where Steve collapsed onto his side, then rolled over onto his stomach. He turned to look at Tony, then reached out and grabbed for his hand, pulling Tony down towards his chest.

“Not just yet,” Tony protested with a low chuckle, catching himself by bracing his hands on the side of the bed next to Steve. “You might not have noticed, but I’m rather something of a mess.” It was true, Steve saw now. Tony’s hair was wet and slicked back. His pants were splattered with water and, well, other things. One tail of his shirt had come loose and dangled haphazardly.

“I like you a mess,” Steve said. He grinned again. “You’re always beautiful. But, you’re more… you when you’re a mess.”

“That so?” Tony mused, clearly trying to contain a smile. He threaded his fingers through Steve’s hair, leaving the wet, spiky ends sticking up in points, then leaned over and pressed a kiss to Steve’s forehead. “Sleep,” Tony said softly. “You need to rest.”

“Stay,” Steve said, a frown creasing his brow. He reached out again for Tony’s hand, interlacing their fingers.

Tony looked down at him for a long moment, one hand lightly smoothing Steve’s hair down. His eyes darted away quickly, then back to Steve’s again. “There is no where else I would want to be.”

“Good,” Steve said, then gave Tony a satisfied nod.

Tony shook his head, a soft smile playing on his lips. He tugged his hand away long enough to get up to douse most of the candles and pull his boots off. The rest of his clothes followed suit, joining the boots in a pile on the floor. Then, he crawled in the bed and sidled up next to Steve, urging him over onto his side so they were facing each other. Tony drew the coverlet over them both, pulling it all the way to near Steve’s shoulder. He took Steve’s hand in his own and wound their fingers together. It was the hand that bore his ring, Steve noticed as his eyes drooped closed. Tony seemed to notice, too. He was staring at it. There was something strangely sorrowful in his gaze that made Steve’s stomach clench, but it was gone, shuttered behind a soft, heated longing as he lifted his eyes to Steve’s.

“Say it,” Tony whispered, his voice soft. “Tell me again.”

“I love you,” Steve replied, the words coming easily to his lips.

“Again,” Tony breathed out, his voice ragged.
“I love you, Tony,” Steve said. He tightened his grip on Tony’s hand and felt Tony’s hand do the same. “Always.” Steve felt Tony relax and heard him let out a breath. He smiled up at Steve.

“Sleep now,” Tony urged. “I’d wager you have earned it, my dearest one.”

Steve was halfway there as it was, and Tony’s words ushered him the rest of the way over the precipice. He thought he heard Tony say something else, but the words were too quiet, barely a breath, and his mind had already slipped into the dark cradle of sleep. He dreamed something too good to remember, and woke grasping for the wispy remains of the dream as the first rays of dawn broke through the curtains.

Steve blinked awake, then reached up to wipe the sleep from his eyes. He didn’t quite want to wake up fully just yet. He was far too warm and contented as he was. During the night, he had somehow migrated virtually on top of Tony, using Tony’s chest as a pillow, and now, he could feel the steady rise and fall of Tony’s breaths underneath his cheek and hand and the comforting thump of Tony’s heartbeat.

“I see that you have decided to join the rest of the world,” Tony teased, his voice light and warm. One of his hands was stroking Steve’s head, nails scraping lightly over Steve’s scalp. It felt divine. Steve hummed with pleasure and buried his nose against Tony’s chest, taking a deep breath and letting his nostrils fill with Tony’s scent. Splaying his hand, he dug his fingers through the fine whorls of dark hair, then followed their trail down the center of Tony’s chest to his stomach. He was rewarded when Tony sucked in a sharp breath, ribs jolting against Steve’s cheek. Steve grinned as Tony reached down and grabbed for his hand.

“Careful,” Tony warned lightly, “or we’ll never make it out of bed.” Steve could hear the smile in his voice. The ease. The carefree joy. It reverberated through him, like an echo, and Steve found himself smiling in return, though Tony couldn’t see it.

“Wouldn’t want to be late to take our leave,” Steve said agreeably.

“Why? You think that they will leave without me?” Tony asked around a derisive huff. Steve shook his head against Tony’s chest.

“Good morning,” Steve said, twisting his head up to look at Tony, who was regarding him with arched eyebrows and a satisfied smirk, eyes sparkling with mirth.

“I trust you slept well,” Tony replied. There was a knowing, pleased gleam in his eye as he watched Steve stretch, testing his muscles after the day before.

He was still sore, yes, but not terribly so. It was a good sore, in a way, almost like he had run a long distance on a whim, the way he had once his body finally let him. His cock was heavy and half-hard where it fit between their bodies. Still overly sensitive to any touch, he noticed as he shifted slightly, causing the shaft to rub against the top of Tony’s thigh. Tony hummed, face breaking into a smile.

“I don’t know,” Steve said, a yawn swallowing back the last part of the word. “Bed was kind of lumpy,” he shrugged, reaching down to cup Tony’s cock in his hand. He grinned up at Tony, who spluttered out a laugh and drew one leg up, rolling slightly to lean down and capture Steve’s mouth in a kiss.

“Impertinent,” Tony said, still smiling as he drew back. He tilted his head to the side and regarded Steve, eyes narrowing as he stroked his hand through Steve’s hair again. “You are sure you are well?” he asked, his tone dipping to concern. Steve nodded.
“I’m fine,” Steve assured him when Tony didn’t look quite convinced. “Really. A little sore, I guess, but…” Steve trailed off with a small frown.

He wanted to say that he was good. Great, even. It didn’t make sense, though. How could he feel so good after being punished like that? But he did feel good. Full of a wonderful ache and a bone-deep satisfaction. There was a sense of accomplishment in the back of his head, almost like when he planned some maneuver that worked exactly the way he had imagined it. He felt like he could do anything, and had the desire to do nothing. Languid and sore, his thoughts meandering and strangely focused on small details, content and pulled bowstring-taut at the same time. Everything was a contrast. None of that made sense, but he was warm, and Tony felt so good, he couldn’t seem to find the energy to question it.

“I know—the night before last…that was, well. That was extraordinary, is what it was,” Tony said quickly, then flattened his mouth into a thin line before continuing. “But, what I mean to say is, that was—that was quite a lot. For you. You’ve been so wound up these past few weeks, I—I know it has been building. It was bound to come to a head. Though, I did not expect it that night or else I never would have left you, party be damned. I can’t say I was entirely surprised, however. This journey…” he trailed off, frowning and looking away, towards the fireplace where a few embers still crackled. “It isn’t that I don’t see how difficult all of this is for you. I know it is not easy on you to be a part of this. To accept it. To be…what you must be for everyone else. I know that. I—it is asking a lot of you. Perhaps too much. Perhaps I am being selfish, to insist you join me in this, I don’t know,” he finished, letting his head fall back against the pillow.

He swiped a hand over his face, clearing his expression, then looked back down at Steve. The hand that had been in Steve’s hair dropped down to cup his jaw, and Steve leaned into it, as he always did, seeking Tony’s touch. Tony’s thumb stroked over Steve’s bottom lip, his eyes following the motion for a moment before he lifted his gaze back to Steve.

“You’re not selfish, Tony. You’re about the least selfish person I know. I wanted to come with you,” Steve said.

The words rang hollow to his ears. He knew them for a lie as soon as he spoke. He needed to come on this journey. Had to. This was his best chance to escape, perhaps his only chance to ever make it home again. But wanted to come? No. No, he hadn’t wanted to come. He was able, now, to be honest with himself about that. He wanted to stay here, like this, with Tony for the rest of his life. He wanted to wake up and make Tony smile. He wanted to feel the way Tony made him feel, like he was the most cherished person in the world. He wanted to make Tony happy, to give him whatever it was that he wanted from Steve. He wanted all of that. But, not like this, Steve thought, swallowing thickly and dropping his eyes to Tony’s chest, though he could still feel the weight of Tony’s gaze on his skin. He reached up and touched at his collar, watching Tony catch the motion. Not like this, he thought.

“You give me far too much credit,” Tony said after a long moment. “Regardless, it does not make all of this less difficult for you,” Tony pointed out. Steve dragged his eyes back up to Tony, who grimaced, and wiped his hand over his mouth as if the words tasted bitter. “I know—Steve, I know this is hard. I know this isn’t what you want! It isn’t what I want, either, dammit —I—” he stopped, dropping his hand down in a fist against the bed next to his side and he let out a breath laced with frustration. Finally, his eyes found Steve’s again, and his expression softened. “It is what must be. As imperfect as it is.” He sounded resigned, Steve thought. “There are rules. I give you as much leeway as I can, but there are limits, Steve. I hope by now you would trust that those limits are there for your protection, not on some whim of mine. With Zola, then Obie—there is already more talk about you and your influence than I would like,” he added. “It is imperative that you listen and obey, for my sake, if not your own. I can’t be seen as weak. Not even for you. You must
understand that."

“I’m sorry,” Steve said after a long beat of silence. “I just---I was in your room, and I—I needed to get out. I don’t know. I just had to—to not be there anymore. Leaving…the castle, the city,” Steve trailed off. Leaving you, he thought, struggling to explain what had driven him from Tony’s bedchamber the night before last without giving away the true cause of his disquiet. He wasn’t even sure if he understood it fully himself. It was all a hazy, disjointed mess in his head when he tried to think of it. Even now, he could taste the panic, like ash and blood in his mouth, and if he closed his eyes and tried to think about it for too long, all he could see in his mind was a map with a path through the mountains. “Leaving behind what I guess I’d become used to, I don’t know. I didn’t mean to cause a problem. I never thought about running into someone else. I don’t know, I didn’t think. Couldn’t. It was like it was all too jumbled in my head and then it just…spilled over.”

“I know, and I know you have been dreading this leaving in a way. I, as well, in a way not so different than you, I expect,” Tony said. He leaned down and held Steve’s gaze. “I like our life there, too, you know? It is easy, in our insular, little world at the Castle. Having to parade around in front of those who would judge themselves your better. Easy to forget the rest of the world exists. Leaving…it means facing that it does. It means facing a lot of things that I would far prefer to shield you from, but I cannot keep you locked away there forever, nor do I want to. That is no life. And you deserve as wonderful a life as I can make for you. I promised you this,” he added, his hand coming to clasp Steve’s where he was clutching Tony’s chest. Tony traced the pad of his finger over the ring with his sigil that Steve wore. “I keep my promises,” he said, gaze going hard for a moment. “All of them.”

Steve held his tongue. He remembered Tony once telling him that he would burn the world to the ground if someone tried to take Steve from him. He wondered if that included Steve himself.

“You didn’t cause a problem, by the way. Not this time. So, put that out of your head,” Tony replied. “Sunset will keep her mouth shut, if she knows what’s good for her,” Tony assured him. His gaze softened. “One day, when it gets like that, when your head gets too full, before you do something rash, I hope that you will come to me and let me help you instead of trying so hard to deal with it entirely on your own. You’ve no need to do that now, Steve. You are mine. And all of that, it is mine to help you with, to take from you when I can, and when I can’t, to help you find a way to carry it. I would like that very much, you know,” Tony finished gently, stroking the back of his knuckles down Steve’s cheek.

“What—what do you mean?” Steve asked, a confused frown furrowing his brow.

“Let me ask you this, do you feel better today than you did the other night when you ran out of our chamber?” Tony asked. Steve nodded. He did feel better, strangely enough. His body hurt, yes, but tense agitation that had plagued his mind for the past few weeks, keeping him up and preying on the edge of every thought, that was gone. Yesterday, his head had been too full of some heady mix of pain and pleasure to notice anything else, but now, yes, he could honestly say he did feel better.

“Your mind is more focused. Clear. At ease?” Tony continued, ticking off each description like he already knew the answer. Steve frowned. Maybe he did.

“I—yes?” Steve replied, the word coming out like a question. “How did you…”

“Pain, the right kind of pain at the right time, can do that for some,” Tony explained. “It can overwhelm. Push everything else away and leave your mind a blank slate, where you can write something new when you are ready. There can be clarity there. Like the world is translucent, and you can see right through all those thoughts and worries that plague you. And pleasure. There can be pleasure there, too. Incredible pleasure. As I think you have discovered.”
“That woman…Lady Bain,” Steve began. “Is that how you know about—about this? How it feels? She said…”

“I imagine she said a great many things, none of them particularly flattering,” Tony said. “I thought you might have questions about that.”

“She knew you,” Steve reminded him.

“Yes. Yes, she did. Or, she thinks she did. I met her many years ago, when I was very young. And very stupid,” Tony sighed. “I was at Mita. It was after my parents died. I was…” he trailed off, mouth forming a grim line. He shook his head and raised his eyes to the canopied top of the bed. “I was not thinking clearly. I didn’t want to think at all, more accurately,” he corrected, looking back down at Steve. Steve could certainly understand that, so he nodded in what he hoped was encouragement. “You truly want to hear this now? Not some night when we are very, very drunk and I can make you forget everything I tell you about my youthful foibles?” Tony asked with a huffed grunt. “So be it, then. Lord Bain, her father, was a high ranking member of one of the oldest shipping guilds, and she was his only child. Older than me by a few years. She was beautiful, of course, but that wasn’t it, not really. She was daring, almost wild, in a way, I suppose, but charming, too. Bewitching, really. She walked into a room, and all the heads turned. When I first saw her, I was enchanted, and she seemed to know exactly what I needed at a time when I was…lost. I didn’t want to be who I was being forced to be by circumstance, not then, not when I thought it meant stepping in to take the place of a man I barely even knew, let alone—well. Let us just say that I was not ready for rule. In a great many ways. You should ask Rhodey about it,” Tony muttered, huffing out a caustic, bitter laugh.

“He would say you are more suited to it than you allow yourself credit for,” Steve replied. “And that you speak with your father’s voice when you talk of yourself, though he was far more like the man he said you were than you could ever be,” Steve added in a low voice, glancing up at Tony and watching his jaw work as he tried to find some way to chip away at Steve’s words.

“Hmm. Well. You and Rhodey would likely be the only two people in the entire kingdom with that opinion,” Tony harrumphed, though he looked almost uncomfortable with the praise, his eyes darting to and fro before finally settling on Steve again. “But, I thank you. As to Sunset, she would most definitely not have held that high an opinion of me. Or of anyone other than herself, come to think on it,” Tony mused, chewing on his lip.

“She said…” Steve began, splaying his hand wide on Tony’s chest, over his ribs. He liked the feel of him breathing, warm and steady, and the rhythmic thump of his heart. It was comforting in an indescribable way. “She said…that you liked to please her,” Steve said, chin jutting up a bit. “That she would…ah—that you would watch.”

There was a long pause before Tony answered. “Yes,” Tony finally said, his voice flat and tired. “Yes. To both of those.”

“What—” Steve started, then broke off, shaking his head.

“What did she mean?” Tony guessed. His mouth twisted and he let out a little huff of air. “That I did what she told me to do. That’s what she liked, and I liked making her happy. Or, I thought I did. I don’t know. I don’t know if I truly liked anything back then. But, it was the only thing that seemed to break through the numbness. The inertia. Doing what she wanted may not have been my finest idea, but it was something. And I needed something. Anything. I wanted to feel, and I did. For a while. For a while, even the things she made me feel were better than the sheer absence of it. Until they weren’t, and I looked at what my life had become and realized that was not what I wanted. Er, not coincidentally, this happened right around the time I discovered she had stolen my
seal and was using it to authorize all kinds of contracts for her father’s company,” Tony finished with a rueful grimace. “Young. Stupid. See?”

“You…did what she told you to do? Like—like this, with us?” Steve asked haltingly.

Something hot and sour curdled in his stomach, spreading up his spine and clawing at his mind. The image of Tony on his knees in front of that—woman, that horrible woman, came unbidden, but he couldn’t shake it. His insides went cold. Bile rose in his throat. He hated it. The whole idea of it was—was wrong. Utterly and completely wrong, though he didn’t know why it should be, since it was the same as what he did with Tony. Then his mind conjured the picture of Tony kneeling in front of him, Tony taking Steve’s cock into his mouth, Tony tied down, blindfolded, head thrown back, knuckles white, while Steve rode his cock. It was such a bright, startling image. Desire clouded his mind for a moment, making his mouth go dry. Did he want that? Did Tony crave that? He had no idea, but now that the idea had sliced its way into his mind, he could barely push it aside enough to focus on what Tony was saying.

“No! God, no,” Tony burst out, aghast. “No, it was—it was nothing like this. Nothing.”

“Then, what…” Steve began, voice trailing off as he frowned, still trying to shake the image of Tony spread eagled on the bed loose from his mind. “But you enjoyed it. What she did to you? At least in the beginning. You—you liked that?” Steve asked, his mind a swirl of curiosity, repulsion and arousal. He wasn’t sure what to think. Tony had said things, sure, but Steve hadn’t really put much stock into any of it, other than that Tony enjoyed a breadth of experience that was somewhat daunting.

Tony sighed and wiped his hand up and down over his face, then flattened his mouth and looked down at Steve. One hand smoothed Steve’s hair back from his forehead, almost absently. Steve could almost see his mind turning inward. He wondered what Tony was thinking about, but didn’t ask. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer, if it was that Tony was remembering his time with Lady Bain. Steve frowned. He didn’t like thinking of it. He didn’t like Tony thinking of it. He couldn’t say if that was because it had ultimately not been something that Tony felt was good for him or some dark, covetous reason that Steve did not care to dwell upon.

“Yes. I liked what she did. In a way. I told you, pain, pleasure, these are names we give to what the body feels. One, we say is bad. One, we have decided is good. But it is all feeling. Sensation. The body doesn’t know or care what label we give it. But the mind…” Tony explained. “The mind cares. Pain can feel good. Pleasure can make you feel awful. My body enjoyed what I did with Sunset, but my mind…she knew how to manipulate me, though I was the one who gave her all of the tools she needed, let us leave it at that,” he said, stopping to tilt his head down at Steve, regarding him with an intent look. “What did you feel during your punishment? Pain?”

Steve nodded. He thought about the strap, the way it had whipped through the air and snapped against his skin. It had hurt, yes, but when he thought of it, it wasn’t quite with remembered pain, not the way he remembered getting his nose broken when he called Finn Braugher for a liar and a thief after he stole Mrs. Traegher’s silver spoon, the one her Da brought over from the Green Isles, sewn into his coat pocket in case he needed to make an offering to the Sea Queen should the voyage become treacherous.


“Good,” Steve admitted, somewhat reluctantly. Not because he wasn’t sure that it was true, but because it was embarrassing to acknowledge, even as the word left a trail of warmth curling in his chest. “But, why …”
“You put your faith in people. Individuals. Your friends. Cam. I daresay, me. You demand a lot,” Tony said, “and you like it when you are proven correct. When someone meets your expectations. When your trust is rewarded. I, as it happens, like to have that trust. As much as you find comfort in finding someone to gift it to, I like being the one who you decide is worthy of receiving it. It’s…profoundly humbling. In a way I haven’t experienced before. To have someone like you trust me the way you do, not because of the power I was born with, but despite it, I think. It’s—it’s…I don’t know if I have words for how it makes me feel,” Tony said, his voice almost reverent, eyes turning to crescents as he regarded Steve. “You’ve no idea what you do to me. What you mean to me.”

“I see you struggle, you know,” Tony continued. “Against all of this. Against what is and what must be. I keep thinking you’ll stop, but you won’t, and we both know it. You think you want to, sometimes, I know you do, but you don’t, not really. It’s in your blood. It’s where you live, in that moment right before the first blow lands, that’s you. You’ll never leave it. You can’t. The fight’s here,” Tony added, tapping a finger against the side of Steve’s head, “between how things are and how you believe that the world could be.”

“I don’t see how that—how that has anything to do with…with what we do,” Steve protested. “Do you not? You demand so much of everyone around you, but it is nothing compared to what you demand of yourself. All those fights you got into when you were young?” Tony reminded him, his face going solemn for a moment. “Your war. Obie and Zola. You’ve never been one to walk away, even when perhaps you should. It’s a heavy burden to carry, to be willing to stand against whatever wrong you see, no matter the cost. There’s a toll to be paid. That you sometimes allow me to help you put all of that aside—that…that pressure to always do what you believe is right, regardless of the cost—even for a little while, that—you have no idea what that means to me, Steve, no idea,” he stopped, brow pulling together.

“Tell me, then,” Steve said. “Please.”

“I don’t know if I can fully explain it. If anyone truly can. Even the elders at the pleasure houses guard their secrets so closely that you wonder if they truly know anything. But…sometimes, it builds up inside you, this pressure,” Tony continued, his gaze going steady and inward. Steve wondered what he saw in his minds-eye, what memory had captured him, but didn’t ask. He wasn’t even sure which of them Tony was talking about. “It’s all screaming in your head, demanding release, pulling you apart, but the only outlet you know is violence. This is…it’s another way. Pleasure and pain, when done right, it isn’t violence. It’s—it’s beautiful. Wondrous. That kind of submission. That kind of giving, that trust. Trust that I can take care of you. God, Steve, it’s the most breathtaking thing in the world to see, and I…for me, I—there is so much I want to do in this world. So much I want to make better. To fix. And I can’t. I can’t, and it haunts me that I can’t. But, when I can—when I can give that to you, when I can watch you come apart under my hand and put you back together, it is the most glorious feeling. I can’t describe it. That is my release, as much as it is yours.”

Steve frowned for a moment, considering. He couldn’t deny that he enjoyed what happened between him and Tony, even the punishment. Sometimes, maybe especially the punishment. He liked having the decisions taken out of his hands, for once. As soon as Tony told him what to do, it was like a vent of pressure releasing in his mind. And there was something comforting about putting his trust in Tony. Surrendering to Tony required letting go of control, of fear, of everything. He didn’t have to think, just feel and react. Yet, he felt oddly protected in those moments, like nothing could truly hurt him. Tony would take care of him, he was sure of it, and as much as he liked giving up control, he liked that certainty, too. There was an incredible sense of closeness, almost oneness, in the knowledge that Tony would know what he wanted. In those moments, he
belonged to Tony, and Tony to him, in a way that went far beyond any collar, and there was something deeply powerful in that, Steve thought. And almost more than anything, he liked being able to please Tony, to give him something that Tony so desperately craved. Tony deserved that, even if he didn’t think he did. To be able to give that kind of pleasure and validation to someone like Tony…it was beautiful.

And he was going to leave all of that behind. Because Tony was right about him. More than even Tony, with all his brilliance and his eye towards the future, could possibly know. Steve couldn’t walk away from a fight, and the choice between what was right and what was easy was the bloodiest of wars, it always had been. The price of freedom was high, it always had been, but he had never shied away from paying it. Until now. Until Tony. He sighed, swallowing thickly. The journey would take many weeks. His best chance for escape wouldn’t occur until they were on their way back from the desert, when the Red Mountains split open with a spiders web of crags and paths. He could give Tony this time. He could give Tony what he wanted, what Steve wanted, at least for now. For now, he could be what Tony wanted him to be. Happy. Content. At peace with the way things were. They could live this lie, at least for a time. It wouldn’t be enough for either of them, but it was all he could give.

Tony would hate him for it, Steve knew. One day, Tony would despise him for this lie, most of all.

There are no secrets. Only lies, Steve thought.

“It—it means a lot to me, too, Tony,” Steve replied, clearing his throat. He didn’t want to talk anymore. Whatever he was going to say curdled in his stomach.

Tony stared down at him for a span of heartbeats, then let out a breath, lips quirking into a half-smile. “You will join me in my carriage today,” Tony announced. “Rhodey insists on riding with his soldiers, and if I lack for company, Lord Harris insists on joining me and telling me more about why I should strip lands from Lord Emerson because the old reprobate has managed to produce thirteen bastards and no legitimate heir, despite the, no doubt quite formidable efforts, he committed to the attempts. Breakfast first, though,” Tony said.

“Have you any? Bastards, I mean?” Steve asked.

“Me? God, no!” Tony winced. “Not that anyone has ever brought to my attention, and I’m sure they would have.” A stab of relief in Steve’s gut punctuated Tony’s words. He knew from Cam that Zola made sure the female concubines took certain medications on a strict schedule, but he had wondered. Not that it should matter to him. Still. He couldn’t deny that he felt it. Tony leaned down and captured Steve’s lips in a searing kiss. “Good morning,” he said again, smiling.

“Good morning,” Steve replied, rolling off of Tony and allowing him to slide off the bed. He watched from the bed as he got up and put on a morning robe, then rang the bell for food.

Tony padded back across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, picking at the coverlet where it rested over Steve’s hips. He let one hand rest on the curve of Steve’s thigh, then tugged slightly, urging Steve over onto his stomach. Tony picked up the edge of the coverlet and pulled it down, baring Steve’s bottom to the chill of the morning air. Steve felt the rough scrape of Tony’s hand glide across his flesh and shivered with the feel of it, warm and possessive as he lightly cupped and kneaded the skin. Steve kept his eyes on Tony, watching Tony’s expression darken with pleasure even as a slight frown creased his brow.

“Ah, youth,” Tony huffed after a moment, drawing his eyes back up to Steve’s face. “The marks are barely there. I’ll not go as easy on you next time.”
“That was going easy?” Steve asked. Next time. More. Harder. He didn’t know what Tony meant, but it didn’t seem to matter to his body. He felt his cock stir at the thought and shifted slightly on the bed as it hardened underneath him. Tony raised an eyebrow and gave him a pleased, knowing look.

“Disobey me again and find out,” Tony replied, then grinned wickedly, waggling his eyebrows in an exaggerated motion. Steve rolled his eyes. “I saw that.” He gave Steve’s ass a sharp, stinging slap, then bent over and placed a quick kiss to the curve of Steve’s hip, smiling teasingly up at Steve. “I knew you would be trouble the moment I saw you. I swear, I have never seen anyone kneel with less obeisance,” he laughed up at Steve, shaking his head at the memory. “You looked like one of those wild beasts, crouched down about to pounce and tear my throat out. Naturally, I wanted you right away.”

“I was worried about Cam,” Steve reminded him. Tony pushed himself up and looked away. One of his hands played with the folds of his robe, twisting it into his fist.

“I know,” Tony said. He looked down, then over at Steve. His mouth was a flat, grim line, his eyes full of sorrow. “I do know that, Steve,” he stopped, wiping a hand over his mouth and jaw. He looked away again, finally dragging his gaze back to Steve. “It is not how I would have wanted things between us to begin. I can’t—I can’t do anything about that, not now, but I—you do not worry now. Not…not for a long time, I hope.”

“I do not worry, Tony. Not since the very beginning,” Steve said, his voice soft. He knew that this plagued Tony, perhaps more than it bothered him. He wasn’t sure if that was the way it should be, but it was the way it was. Steve reached out and grabbed Tony’s hand, interlacing their fingers and squeezing. “Hey,” he said, drawing Tony’s gaze back to him. He rolled over and sat up, scooting down the bed until he was nearly face to face with Tony. “I don’t worry. That has nothing to do with—with any of this. With us. Not now.”

“Good,” Tony said. His voice tremored, and he dropped his gaze to their hands, then lifted his eyes again. “I would never want that from you,” he said very quietly, but his eyes held Steve’s with a fierce intensity.

“I know,” Steve replied. “I know that, Tony.”

“Very well, then,” Tony said, clearing his throat. “That’s—that’s good.” He squeezed Steve’s hand in an almost conciliatory gesture. He sounded relieved, Steve thought. Tony accepted blame as if it was his due, Steve knew, and perhaps to do so was the province of a king, though in Steve’s experience, those in power were often the most willing to cast responsibility onto those who bore the consequences.

Steve let go of Tony’s hand and lay back down, staring up at him. “How would you have had things with us begin?” Steve asked curiously.

“Well, it certainly would have been easier had you been trained properly in one of the pleasure houses,” Tony shrugged, his mouth twisting. “Though…I would not change the man you are, even for the ease that would come with it. Sometimes, in my mind, I think about if we—” he broke off, shaking his head.

“If we, what?” Steve asked.

“A fool’s dream, that is all,” Tony said quickly, his voice clipped. He stood up and tightened the belt at his waist, ran a hand through his hair, then stopped and looked down at Steve. Steve watched his throat work, then finally, he let out a sigh. “Even I cannot always have what I want.”
“What do you wa—” Steve started. A knock on the door cut him off and drew Tony’s attention. He gave Steve an admonishing look before getting up and pulling the curtains around the bed, leaving Steve in darkness while he called out an order to the guards to allow whoever it was with their breakfast to enter.

Breakfast turned out to be a somewhat hurried affair, now that the world seemed to know that the King was awake. Steve barely managed to put on a robe and down a piece of buttered bread before Cam came in, followed by two of Tony’s personal servants. Cam ushered him out of the room and down to the smaller antechamber where Cam had spent the night with one of the trunks meant for Steve. Somehow, getting dressed and on the way ended up taking far longer than Steve would have imagined, despite everyone’s attempts to stick to the schedule Ms. Potts had so meticulously prepared for them. Cam went through several outfits before settling on cream colored robes embroidered with golden threads and a matching headpiece that covered his hair and most of his face, save for his eyes, where a ruby the size of a small pebble hung just above them. Something simple for travel, Cam said, while Steve made a face. Tony clearly approved, though, Steve noted when he stepped out of the inn and made his way towards Tony’s carriage. His gaze was warm and appreciative.

Despite the late morning, they managed to leave Firstpost without too much delay. A crowd gathered to see them off, and watch Tony thank the innkeeper with what Ms. Potts had told him was tradition. Three gold coins, which Tony dropped one by one into the man’s hand while the crowd roared their approval. Tony gave them a jaunty wave and a practiced smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, but they loved him all the same. A part of Steve wanted to shout that they barely knew him, that all the carefully cultivated stories, even Steve’s own appearance in them, wasn’t really who Tony was, but he knew the value of a myth. Probably more than most, he understood the protection it gave to power.

As Tony had ordered, Steve rode in Tony’s carriage instead of his own, much to Cam’s disappointment, though Tony had a few of the younger pages join him for company. Tony spent most of the day’s journey working on the designs for various modifications he was considering making to the Jerak’ho. Occasionally, he surfaced from wherever his mind went when he was designing long enough to ask Steve’s opinion, frown at him and insist Steve’s idea was impossible, then set about trying to figure it out. Steve tried to sketch, but the terrain proved too rough as they moved further away from the inn. He finally settled into reading one of the books his painting instructor had given him. This one went into great detail about different types of brushes and strokes, new pigments and ways of blending the paints. Tony suggested that Steve read it aloud after lunch so that they might both be lulled to sleep, but he seemed amused and pleased that Steve had taken to his lessons with such devotion.

At midday, they stopped long enough to stretch their legs, water the horses and have a brief respite. Steve walked a short way from the camp, ostensibly to have a moment of privacy. Tony’s guards followed at a discreet distance. He returned quickly, lest they become concerned. Tomorrow, he would do the same. And the day after and the day after. Then he would stray a little further. Stay a short while longer, returning each time to allay whatever suspicions his absence could possibly arouse. When the time came, he hoped this trust would earn him a few precious minutes before anyone sounded the alarm. He sighed heavily and waved to the guards as he approached, letting them fall into step behind him.

They spent the night at some lesser lord’s keep, which he and his family had vacated to make room for the King and his entourage. Tony worked late into the night, only coming to bed when the fire had all but gone out sometime in the moonlit hours long after Steve had fallen into slumber. He woke long enough to roll over and wrap himself around Tony’s warmth, then fell back into a dreamless sleep.
The third day brought a bright, cloudless sky and Steve’s first look at the Ridge. It was a hard, barren landscape, awash in whites, browns and grays. A few sparse, brown-leafed trees clung to the rocky ledges, but otherwise, there was little in the way of vegetation. A long, sinuous gorge snaked through the land where old mountains rose like a spine. Mines, rich in ore, and quarries of stone had made the Lord of the Ridge one of the richest men in the realm, second only to Tony, Steve supposed as he peered out the window of his carriage. The road here, at least, was flat and smooth. One of the benefits of having master stoneworkers on hand and a seemingly endless supply of fresh paver stones.

Tony was riding up front with Rhodey and several peers who had joined their caravan for some part of the journey, all seeking a moment’s audience, which relegated Steve back to his carriage with Cam. As they passed one of the larger quarries, where huge pieces of stone the size of small buildings were being sliced from the sides, he could see a number of workers. Freemen and women with the surnames Mason, Miner, Smith, Cutter, and, of course, Stone, including the rather recently-ascendant Lord Stone, not that Tony would speak of him. And slaves. Hundreds of them just at this one place, wearing simple metal collars with a white stone embedded where Steve’s golden one held a ruby. They were old and young, some with wrinkled, leathery skin who sat on the rocky ground and hammered stone, others as young as Cam or younger, Steve thought, who loaded wagons and poured water over stone where the cutters worked it. The Lord of the Ridge’s massive wealth bought nearly limitless labor, which made him richer and richer, and each of them more and more disposable. It was backbreaking work. The sun beat down hot and hard, with no shade and little respite. They stopped their labors long enough to watch the King pass. Steve wasn’t sure if it was curiosity, respect or just a chance to stop without fear of reprisal, even for a moment.

Cam looked over at Steve, took a drink from the pouch of water he was holding in his lap and leaned back against the carriage’s seat.

“The King promised he would get me a bird,” Cam said.

“Tony threatened to put a bird on your head if you didn’t stop begging to accompany him on his tour of the mines,” Steve corrected.

“Do you think he will let me go? I should very much like to see a mine. The Deep Illum, they call it. It is the deepest mine in the whole world,” Cam replied, completely unconcerned. “Mother said spirits live in there and call to people from the center of the world, trying to confuse them so that they get lost. The King says that is superstitious nonsense.”

That, at least, sounded to Steve’s ears like something Tony would actually say. The Deep Illum wasn’t truly the deepest mine in the world, Tony had explained one night when they were talking about the journey. There were three others that were likely deeper, Tony said, but the Illum was certainly the deepest one in the realm and filled with gold. Tony said the taxes on that alone paid for half the naval fleet.

“I’m sure he will let you join him if you wish,” Steve replied. “I don’t think there are spirits in the mines, but the danger is real enough, even though I’m sure you won’t go that deep. You must not wander off.”

“I will not stray, you will see,” Cam promised, eyes wide and solemn. He leaned forward and peered out the window again. “Look! There, do you see it? You can see the top of it, just there!” Cam pointed excitedly. “Isn’t it amazing? Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Steve followed the direction Cam was pointing, and sure enough, between a gap in the mountains, the main tower of Highcastle loomed over the Ridge. Seeming to almost be born out of the dark
tan, almost gray, stone of the craggy mountain itself, Highcastle was the nearly impregnable fortress that was home to the Lord of the Ridge. It sat atop a peak that was almost sheer rock, with nary a slope to it, and was accessible only by a steep path that only a few hardy locals would even attempt, and a pulley system that hefted men and supplies up and down the rockface. It was, truly, a marvel, Steve could admit. Tony said the type of stone used to build it was all but depleted now, along with the way in which to work the stone to be able to build something like this. The people who had originally built it came over with the first Stark king, and brought with them little more than a few tools and their secrets, now lost to time. As they wound their way closer, Steve could see where repairs had been done to the outer fortifications using a clearly different type of stone. Still, it didn’t detract from the sight. He shook his head in awe, silently agreeing with Cam’s exclamation of amazement.

The current Lord of the Ridge, Lord Rand, was waiting with his son at the bottom, both decked out in their finery, Steve saw as they approached. Tony alighted from his carriage, and both Lords Rand went to one knee, along with their retinue of guards, nobles and the like who had come to greet the King. Steve could only see Tony’s back from his vantage in the carriage, but Steve could see him gesturing widely, as he often did when he talked. By the time Steve’s carriage ground to a halt, sending up a plume of chalky dust under its wheels, their hosts were rising and greeting Tony with a warm familiarity.

“It has been too long, Your Highness,” Lord Rand announced. “Daniel was barely away from the wetnurse last time you visited.”

“It has been a while,” Tony agreed. “It is good to see you, Wendell. And you, Daniel! You’ve grown into a fine young man, from what I hear.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” the younger man, Daniel, said with a practiced bow.

“Let us get up, then, shall we? You must be tired from your travels,” Lord Rand observed. “Your rooms await, and we will toast your good journey at the feast tonight. I am glad you will be staying with us long enough to enjoy some of the Ridge’s hospitality. My son has prepared a small tourney for your amusement the tomorrow after our morning tour to Deep Illum. If any of your knights would care to participate, they are more than welcome.”

Tony turned and looked behind him, then nodded at his guards. The door to Steve’s carriage swung open, and Cam hopped out. Steve followed. He walked slowly over to where Tony waited, keenly aware of the stares, as much as people tried to avert their gazes. Tony’s eyes were on him, though, and that steadied him as much as anything.

“That sounds delightful,” Tony said mildly, watching Steve as he approached with a spark of amusement in his eye. “There is nothing I love more than watching my soldiers fight for my entertainment. In fact, I will provide a special reward for the champion, how about? What say you? Should the finest soldier earn a boon for his performance?” Tony asked. “The Raj’Inama agrees with me,” Tony announced. “You’ve no idea what a rarity that is, so let us accept it and call the matter settled,” Tony said, earning a slightly confused look from Lord Rand, which he quickly hid behind an agreeable smile.

Steve smiled ruefully from behind his veil and felt his face flush with heat. He was thankful no one else could see it, though he had no doubt Tony knew the effect his words had on Steve. Steve bowed his head to Tony, then to the Lords Rand.

“Welcome to the Ridge,” Lord Rand said by way of greeting. “Should you need anything, Master Eram is our harem master. He would be honored to assist you,” he added, gesturing towards a tall, balding man with a thick neck and soft belly who had the look of a kindly grandfather about him
that Steve suspected was far too carefully cultivated to be genuine.

“Most certainly, King’s Prize,” Master Eram said, bowing lowly. “We are, of course, at your disposal, Your Highness.”

Steve frowned, his back going rigid, and glanced at Tony, who caught his eye and gave Steve’s arm a light squeeze.

“I brought with me all that I require, but I thank you,” Tony replied smoothly. “My officers may appreciate the diversion, though. General Rhodes, in particular, could definitely use a good—”

“I’m literally standing right here. You know I can hear you, right?” Rhodes cut in, stepping forward as Tony grinned.

“I know that the last time you were so inclined, it was a bit confusing for you, and the lovely lady you woke up with, what was his name?” Tony asked, tapping his bottom lip with his finger, as if trying to recall.

“Don’t do that. They’ll believe you,” Rhodes admonished, shaking his head. “Thank you, Lord Rand, but I prefer the soldiers I have specially selected for the honor of guarding the King not to be diverted from their task. Seeing as how that is kind of important,” he added, directing the words at Tony before he turned back to Lord Rand. “If it’s all the same to you.”

“Of course, of course, General Rhodes, I would never want to interfere with your command,” Lord Rand said in a conciliatory tone, glancing back and forth between Rhodes and Tony. Steve was used to their banter by now, but he remembered how strange he had found it at first. They loved each other, though, that was the heart of it, Steve knew, and years of shared history informed everything they did or said.

“He’s so conscientious,” Tony said, clapping his hands together. “Which is why he has to ride by himself. Shall we?” he finished, gesturing to the large, raised platform that was affixed to an enormous pulley system.

A slatted metal gate wrapped around it, encasing the platform. Next to it were huge, interlocking wheels that turned on a stone base, pushed by a team of twelve men in little more than loincloths and their collars. Steve stared at them for a long moment, though none of them looked back. They were staring down at their prong on the wheel, waiting for the order to push. This could have been me, Steve thought then looked over at Tony, who was chatting with the young Lord Rand. He wondered if Tony had even noticed.

“Ready?” Tony called out, glancing over his shoulder at Steve.

Steve gave the men a last, long look, then nodded and followed a few footsteps behind. He stepped onto the platform next to Tony. Cam followed, looking upward with no small amount of concern. A young boy rushed forward to close and lock the gate, someone gave a shout, and the men set their backs to it, digging in to the well-worn groove in the ground beneath their bare feet and slowly forcing the wheels to turn. It didn’t take long for the cables to go taut, lifting the caged platform off the ground with a surprising steadiness.

The people down below grew smaller as the platform rose. Steve gripped the railing and leaned over. Cam clutched at his robes and covered his eyes, making a distressed sound.

“Nothing to fear, Small Hands,” Tony said. “They have done this for centuries, isn’t that true, Wendell?”
“Indeed,” Lord Rand replied. “The Highcastle’s lift system is quite safe, I assure you. It has been around in one form or another since the first of us arrived here.”

“You should build a machine,” Steve said, looking down at the men push the wheel in a slow, never-ending circle. Steve said the thought aloud without quite meaning to, drawing several startled glances. Tony gave him a sharp, curious look, probably because he had spoken out of turn, but didn’t rebuke him. Instead, his eyes glazed over for a moment, then his face relaxed into a smile that Steve would have called almost proud.

“I should,” Tony replied. He leaned over the railing, then turned and craned his neck back to get a better look at the mechanism attached to the platform’s cage. “It might be possible…yes, if you—which you could, you’d just need a counterweight…bit like a drawbridge, really…”

“Er,” Lord Rand began. “Your Highness?”

“You could, truth be told. One or two men could operate the whole thing. It would be a fascinating project,” Tony said. “I’ll have to see what I can come up with.”

“Really?” the young Lord questioned, sounding surprised, but fascinated.

“I’ve been working on several designs that are not quite so different, at least conceptually,” Tony replied.

“Ha! Is that not remarkable? We should be honored to have something of your own design, Your Majesty, most honored,” Lord Rand announced with a booming voice. Steve privately thought Lord Rand saw a way to draw the King back to the Ridge more than anything particularly useful, but he supposed he couldn’t blame the man for disbelieving what Tony could do. If Steve hadn’t seen it for himself, he wasn’t sure if he would believe it, either. “It would certainly save money on slaves for the wheel,” Lord Rand continued. “Seems the stonemaster is always asking me for more. They go through them so quickly down there, you know, and only a certain sort can man the wheel. Hard to find those at a price that makes it worth the investment, particularly when they don’t tend to last very long.”

Steve winced and closed his eyes, his knuckles going white where he gripped the railing. His robes were red today. Tony’s color. They caught in the wind as the platform made its steady climb, whipping around him, his veil catching the wind and flying up in front of him, and for a moment, everything seemed bathed in blood.

He had seen that before, he remembered. On a field so deep with bodies that his boot couldn’t find the ground, when his vision was painted red where it dripped down from his brow. Not his. He didn’t know whose blood it was, not anymore. He could see it, as clearly as if he were standing there. His vision clouded with the haze of smoke. He blinked down at his hands. They were covered in red. Dripping with it. It clung to his skin. He could smell it, a pungent, metallic scent that filled his nose and mouth. He could feel the weight of the shield on his arm as he held it aloft. He could feel something else, too, quickening through his veins like fire through a field of dry brush. Something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

One part of his mind, distant, like it was coming from the bottom of a very deep tunnel, insisted it was just his sleeve, but he could see it. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them and looked back down at his hand. Bucky stared back at him, dangling from the railing while Steve stood there, moored to the spot with horror. _Steve_, Bucky mouthed. This isn’t right, Steve thought, but it was overwhelmed by other thoughts, coming in rapid succession, rolling over and over each other in his head. I wasn’t fast enough. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I messed up.
The thought that if he just jumped, he wouldn’t see it anymore burst in his head seemingly out of nowhere. It was crazy, he knew, but he had a moment where he couldn’t shake it, no matter what he did, it just sat there, thumping against his skull. Jump, and he wouldn’t see it anymore. The wheel is turning, he thought with a sudden, strange clarity, the way the first, bright rays of the sun cut through the last of the night.

Tony’s hand covered his where he clung to the railing. The contact jolted him. He stumbled back from the railing, making Cam look up from where he had ducked his head against Steve’s side and give Steve a curious, concerned look. Steve gaped at him, blinking in confusion, then looked down at the railing again. Bucky was gone. Of course, he was. It wasn’t real. It was never real. He was with Tony. Going to Highcastle.

He felt Tony’s other hand on his back, warm and solid, pressing against his spine, holding him in place, pressing hard, like he could push out whatever was in Steve’s head. Maybe he could. Steve wanted that to be so with a need that bordered on desperation.

“You’re alright,” Tony soothed, his voice barely audible over the wind. “I’m here. Listen to my voice, Steve. You’re alright.” Steve looked over at him, then back down at their hands. Tony’s was on his. He could feel the cool, smooth weight of the ring Tony was wearing. Gold, with the Stark crest, flanked by twin rubies on each side. His sleeve fluttered in the wind. There was no blood. Steve cast a quick look around him. Everyone seemed to have averted their eyes or suddenly become fascinated in some shared topic of discussion, anything to avoid looking at the concubine who was, they probably assumed, fearful of the sudden height.

“Everything okay?” Rhodes asked. He stepped forward between the rest of the group and where Tony stood next to Steve.

“Fine,” Tony said, glancing quickly at Rhodes before looking back at Steve. “We’re fine. Just not used to being up this high.”

“Quite common, I assure you,” Lord Rand chimed in from behind them. “The Highcastle earned its name for a reason, after all,” he added, forcing a light chuckle that seemed to break the pallor.

Tony gave Steve a hard, inquiring stare. Steve nodded, and dropped his eyes back down to the railing. He could still feel Tony’s hand on his back, rubbing lightly now. His breathing calmed and steadied. His heartbeat returned to something akin to normal. It had all happened so fast, and now, it seemed to pass just as quickly.

The platform finally creaked to a halt at the top. Several servants rushed forward to secure it, then opened the gate for the passengers to step off. Steve wasn’t sure who was more relieved at that prospect, him or Cam. The King alighted first, of course, followed by the Lords Rand, Rhodes and the rest of the nobles who came from nearby keeps to fill the castle to nearly overflowing, all in the hopes of a spare moment with the King.

Steve and Cam, along with their retinue of guards, including Josiah and Peran, were left to follow Master Eram to the Lord’s chamber, which he had given over to the King for the duration of his stay. The guards stationed themselves outside the chamber’s door, leaving Steve and Cam to follow the portly harem master inside. Though not nearly as large and finely appointed as Tony’s rooms back at the Castle, the chambers were light and airy, made of the same tannish, pocked stone that built the rest of the castle. Food and wine waited for them on a large trestle table.

“Your things will be brought up shortly,” Master Eram informed them. “Should you need anything further, you’ve only to ask. I have never had the honor of serving the King’s own before. It is a rare thing, at least these days. As a young girl, my predecessor served the Raj’Inama to the King’s
great-grandfather. Though, that did not end particularly well, I suppose,” he finished with a shrug.

Steve looked over at Cam, who hastily set about stoking the perfectly good fire.

“Thank you,” Steve said. Eram nodded politely and left, leaving Cam and Steve alone.

“So, what happened to the ones before me?” Steve asked.

“Different kings,” Cam replied. He lifted open a box on the desk and perused the contents for a long moment before shutting the lid with a soft snap.

“That bad, huh?” Steve said with a slight wince.

“I would not know, Raj’Inama. That was long ago, and I am not one to listen to such stories,” Cam said.

“You begged Tony to take you down into the catacombs where you insisted there is a hidden torture chamber because Peran told you that you could stand on the grate at the center courtyard and still hear the screaming if you listened hard enough,” Steve reminded him.

“I never heard screaming, and I stood there quietly for a very long time,” Cam said with a disappointed sigh.

“Yes, I can’t imagine why Peran would have told you that story, which you so clearly did not want to hear,” Steve retorted, giving Cam a pointed look.

“I think,” Cam began, walking slowly over to the window to peer out into the bailey. “I think it is easy to forget what you are when someone like the King treats you as different. But, you are not different,” Cam continued, his voice slow and halting. “Not really. Not to the rest of the world. You are only different because he says it is so. So, you should make sure that he keeps saying it and give him no cause not to. That is what I think.” He turned to face Steve, eyes narrowed, then he grinned and clapped his hands together with clear anticipation. “Though,” he started, drawing out the word with as much dramatic flair as he could muster, “the last Raj’Inama only lasted a short while. She was poisoned by the king’s wife, or so they say, for the queen did not like the king’s favor falling so heavily on another. Then she gifted him with three new concubines who all looked exactly alike! Can you imagine such a thing?”

Steve shook his head and started to respond, but was cut off by a knock on the door. Cam hurried to open it. Servants and slaves filed in with trunks and satchels belonging to the King and Steve. Cam took over directing them where to put everything, while Steve took a chair by the fire. Once they were done, Cam made himself a plate of food, told Steve he would be back to help him dress shortly, and headed down the hallway to one of the small servants’ chambers.

As soon as he disappeared, Steve doffed the veil and headcovering and took off the heavier outer robe, stretching his arms above his head in an attempt to work out the kinks in his back. It was strange to have privacy, Steve realized as he got up and walked over to the window where Cam had stood. The bailey was surprisingly large and had been set up for the tourney Lord Rand had mentioned, with a box for the King and nobles and a standing area for others who were fortunate enough to attend. From behind him, Steve heard voices and laughter. He recognized Tony’s, though knew it for show instead of the genuine one he gave when he was truly happy about something. Steve turned, watching as Tony slipped through the door, thanking Lord Rand for his hospitality, then promptly shutting it in what was probably the man’s face and leaning his back up against it, one hand rubbing at his temples. He sighed and pushed himself off the door, his eyes searching the room until they found Steve. He visibly relaxed then, a smile playing on his lips, his
eyes going soft as he approached.

“How fare you?” Tony asked.

“I’m fine,” Steve replied.

“You had me worried,” Tony admitted, coming to stand in front of him. He gripped Steve’s arms in his and rubbed up and down with a gentle, light motion. “One of your waking dreams again, then?”

Steve nodded and swallowed past the lump in his throat.

“Ah,” Tony said. “Do you want to share what you saw this time? It’s alright if you don’t,” he added quickly, almost like an apology.

“No, it’s—” Steve started, then grimaced and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Tony’s gaze was darting over his face with clear concern, so he tried to shake off the malaise. “I was looking at the men pushing the wheel. Thinking that it could have been me. That I could have just as easily ended up there,” Steve said in a flat voice. He saw Tony wince and look away, blinking quickly and flattening his mouth into a thin line. “I was looking at the wheel, and then, I was in a battle. An ambush, really. It was—bad,” Steve managed to choke out. “I was looking at the wheel, and then, I was in a battle. An ambush, really. It was—bad,” Steve managed to choke out. “It was like I was there. I could see it. Smell it. Taste the smoke in my throat. Feel the blood on my hands. And then…then he was there, and I wasn’t fast enough. I wasn’t fast enough, again, and— it was so real, I—"

“Shhh, it’s alright, Steve. You don’t have to say more than you need to,” Tony offered in a gentle tone. “You know it wasn’t real. You’re safe. You’re safe, and…"

“No, no, it’s—it’s…I know it wasn’t real. I know that. It’s just…it feels real. When it’s happening. It feels so real, Tony. Maybe I’m going mad,” Steve said with a nervous, shaky huff of air.

“You are not going mad,” Tony insisted, the words hissing through his teeth with a startling vehemence.

“You are not wrong,” Tony snapped, then brought one of his hands up to scrub over his face. “I’m sorry, I just—I do not care to hear you so hard on yourself. You are not wrong,” he repeated, softer this time, but no less urgent. “You have suffered. Tremendously. More than anything, I wish it were not so, but you have. Your mind still reminds you of that sometimes. Bruce tells me this is common enough with soldiers. The war follows them. It follows you. Like a shadow. Sometimes, it seems so real, I can almost see it,” he sighed, raking a hand through his hair before returning it to hold onto Steve’s arms again, giving them a tight, reassuring squeeze. “I wish you would take the elixir Bruce prepared for you. It would help you to sleep.”

“I sleep just fine,” Steve replied.

“You cry out for him in your dreams. Not always. Not even often. But, sometimes,” Tony corrected. His words were soft, but his expression was grave. “And when you do, you sound—God, Steve, you sound miserable.”

Steve wrenched himself out of Tony’s grip and stepped away. He ran a hand through his hair again, and shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Rest here tonight, if you like. There is no need for you to come to this feast Rand has planned,”
Tony suggested. “I have to pretend to enjoy our host’s company for the evening, but there is no reason for you to have to play a part,” he sighed. “Though, it would have been far more tolerable with you at my side.”

“I would be allowed to attend?” Steve asked.

“As my beautiful, mysterious, yet completely silent concubine?” Tony asked with a laugh. Steve shot him a disgruntled look, making Tony’s smile go all the wider. “If only they knew,” he muttered, eyes twinkling. “Yes, you can attend. I only kept you from joining me back at the Castle because of all the matter with Zola and Obie. Out here, they don’t exactly observe rules of Court anyway, and besides, who would gainsay me? But, tonight, as much as I would enjoy your presence, it would please me more if you rested. Rand is just going to talk my ear off about more naval support for the guild ships, anyway. Which is fine, if he wants to add some additional taxes to our coffers to support it, but he complains bitterly about his portion as it is.”

“When you put it like that, it sounds almost too good to miss,” Steve quipped.

“At least I can use the lack of your company as a reason to make an early night of it,” Tony replied. He walked the few steps to where Steve stood, leaned up and placed a quick kiss to Steve’s lips. “I should change. There’s a chamber, just through there,” Tony said, pointing at a large, curved door set just off the fireplace. “Ostensibly for Lord Rand’s spouse, but his wife died birthing the boy, and he never saw fit to remarry after he had his heir. He keeps his own favorite in there now--much to dismay of his son, I understand--but it is free for your use while we are here.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t accompany you?” Steve asked.

“I shall survive one night without you, my soldier. Go. Rest. You’ll feel better in the morning, and Lord Rand has planned quite the entertainment, I’m given to understand,” Tony replied. He was already pulling off his overcoat and walking towards one of the pull-strings on the wall to summon one of Rand’s manservants to help him dress.

Steve nodded and ducked out the door Tony had indicated. The room was smaller, but had a large window that overlooked the bailey. From this vantage, Steve could better see how the stands and lists had been set up for tomorrow’s tourney. There was a small wooden table set with two chairs and several candles alongside a small fireplace and even smaller bed. Whatever Lord Rand’s wealth, he didn’t seem to lavish it upon his concubine, Steve noted. Not the way Tony did, that much was clear. Several of his trunks had been brought to the room, presumably at Cam’s direction. He opened one to find his sketchbook, several of the books he had brought for the trip, and a stack of the old ledgers he was still working his way through on the bottom, bound with a threadbare ribbon. He paged through one of the books on philosophy that Tony had suggested he read “so that we might argue about it,” and passed that over in favor of his sketchbook and charcoals. He tried sketching for a while, mostly of the Highcastle where it perched atop its mountain like a stone bird on its roost. It was an impressive sight, even as much as what was below it bothered him.

He wondered what Clint would think of it, high up as it was and offering such an incredible vantage. He wondered if he would ever get to tell Clint about it, or if this whole plan was doomed to failure. He wondered which outcome he really wanted, though he didn’t let himself try to answer that question. He had been asking the wrong questions for a long time, and he was done with that now. His decision had been cast a long time ago, really. It just took him awhile to realize it.

A knock drew his attention, and Cam announced himself before coming in without waiting for Steve’s reply. He carried a plate of food and jug of what was likely ale by the look of it, which he sat down rather abruptly in front of Steve, huffing like he was out of breath.
“Here, I have brought you food from the feast,” Cam said in a rush, arranging things on the table in front of Steve. “The King said that I may return to the hall if you’ve no need of me, but I am to tell him in great detail how you fare. So,” he gulped down air. “How do you fare?”

“In great detail?” Steve teased. “I fare well.”

Cam pursed his mouth and tilted his head to the side, his hands going to his hips in a gesture that was fairly familiar to Steve. “There is a man juggling four balls at once, a minstrel, and an acrobat who can twist herself into a tiny shape no bigger than your trunk there.”

“Tell His Highness that I am fine. I have been sketching and reading, and now, I will eat and drink, and he need not worry,” Steve said with an exasperated sigh. He glanced sideways at Cam, who was giving him a considering, narrow-eyed look.

“You are not very good at this,” Cam said. “But, that is passable. Do not worry, I will say it better for you. He will be pleased, you will see.” He grinned jauntily, and swung around to go.

“Cam,” Steve called out, making the boy stop as he pulled open the door. Steve sighed and grimaced. “Tell him that I miss him. Tell him that I look forward to his return,” he finished with a rueful smile.

“Better,” Cam pronounced with an approving grin as he hurried out.

Steve picked at his dinner. Truth be told, he did miss Tony. And this was only the beginning. A life without Tony seemed impossibly bleak and empty, yet that was what he was willing to risk everything to have it. Finally giving up on his appetite, Steve got up and disrobed. There was a basin of fresh water on a stand next to a stack of cotton cloths, which he used to clean himself. He wrapped one of the lighter robes around himself, grabbed Tony’s philosophy book, and went back to the Lord’s chamber to wait for Tony.

Steve must have fallen asleep. He didn’t remember drifting off, but he heard the sound of voices outside the chamber door, and woke to a gash of light, followed by the heavy thump of the door closing. He could see Tony’s shadowy form moving across the room, dousing the remaining candles, then tossing his coat, boots and the rest of his clothing as he went, like he was shedding an ungainly skin.

Tony groaned as he slid into bed and rolled over to wrap his arm around Steve’s stomach. Steve obligingly lifted his arm to allow Tony to press himself against Steve’s chest, as was his wont. His breath warmed Steve’s skin, and Steve felt him heave a sigh, pressing his forehead against the curve of Steve’s ribs.

“How was the feast?” Steve asked. “I heard there was all kinds of entertainment.”

“That’s one way of stating it,” Tony said, sounding somewhat begrudging with the praise. His voice was low and worn from overuse. He sounded tired. More than just from the weariness of travel. He fidgeted against Steve’s side. The hand that was claiming Steve’s stomach started tracing a pattern, and Steve could hear a slight hitch in Tony’s breath, though he remained quiet for a long while. “Damn it,” he snapped all of a sudden, pushing himself up and raking his hand through his hair, then dropping it down next to him on the bed in a fist.

“Tony?” Steve said quickly, sitting up on his elbows. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Tony replied. “Nothing you need worry about. Unexpected news, that’s all. And unwelcome.”
“Tony, what…tell me,” Steve implored. He reached out and tugged at Tony’s arm until he felt Tony’s body go slack and fall back onto the bed next to him.

“Ty will be here. In the tourney tomorrow,” Tony husked out, staring up at the canopy above them where deer and pheasants frolicked amidst the swirls of damask.

“Lord Stone?” Steve said, feeling shock sharpen the words. His body went rigid, like it was preparing for a fight, though he forced himself to relax. He felt Tony nod once and heard him hum affirmatively under his breath.

“Apparently, he is a friend to the young Lord Rand, who was unaware of…the circumstances of our acquaintance, let us say,” Tony replied, a bite to each of the words. “Ty applied for the tourney, and he knew no reason to disallow it. He is, after all, a knight and a noble,” Tony huffed out a bitter laugh. “Lord Rand offered to withdraw the invitation, of course, but if I agreed to that, then it would obviously be because his presence bothers me, and I refuse to give Ty that satisfaction.”

“Are you sure?” Steve asked softly. He heard Tony let out a long sigh, then felt the bed shift as Tony rolled over and rested his chin on Steve’s chest.

“Yes. Yes, I am sure,” Tony replied. “I only have to watch a damn tourney, not suffer the man’s company. It’s just…” he trailed off. Steve could feel the light brush of Tony’s beard across his chest as Tony shook his head. “I’ve no wish to remember past mistakes. I have paid for them and, I hope, learned from them. And in a strange way, I owe Ty my gratitude. Were it not for him, Zola would not have found you, after all,” he finished in a soft, thick voice. “I cannot entirely regret what brought you to me.”

“I do not regret it, either,” Steve said quietly. He thought that was even true. It was for now, at least. He felt a tremor run through Tony at his words.

“You’ve no idea how happy that makes me, Steve. Truly,” Tony replied, his voice sounding oddly tight for a moment. “So, if I must endure his presence, so be it. It…it does not matter, not now.” He sounded almost surprised by the words, Steve thought, then felt him huff out a shaky bark of laughter.

“You could always tell Lord Rand that you can’t attend the tourney because your concubine’s need for you is too great. I would be willing to provide whatever cover such a ruse required. Purely in the interest of you avoiding discomfort, of course,” Steve suggested with a small smile. That earned a surprised bark of laughter from Tony, and a quick kiss to the center of Steve’s chest, just below his ribs, where Tony flattened his cheek, using Steve as a pillow.

“Of course,” Tony said agreeably. The weary annoyance was gone from his voice, at least. “Tell me one of your stories, so that I may sleep,” Tony urged after a long beat of silence.

“That boring, huh?” Steve asked around a sheepish, lazy smile.

“You know that isn’t what I meant,” Tony replied, lightly jabbing his finger into Steve’s side in mock rebuke.

Steve sighed, leaned his head back against the pillow and tried to think. “Have I told you about Scott?”

“The thief who you claim can squeeze through virtually any opening?” Tony replied around a yawn. “Your team is strange, you know that, right?”
“Yeah. Yeah, I know. But, they worked. We worked. When it mattered. You’d like them,” Steve said, almost as an afterthought. As soon as he said it, though, he knew it was true, as wrong as such a thought should be.

“I’m sure I would. Tell me more about them,” Tony said in a quiet voice. “Take this nonsense with Ty from my mind.”

Steve’s thoughts wandered, and he found himself regaling Tony with one of the team’s missions that had almost gone completely wrong, saved by happenstance or luck or a combination of whatever it was that made them a team. He could feel Tony relax against his side, his breath evening out, his body stilling along with his mind, or so Steve hoped. There was something deeply satisfying about managing to get Tony to relax, and talking about the team kept them real when it was so easy to let that life slip away. Memories pulled away like the tide going out, constant and inexorable, but talking about them…he could picture them all in his head as clearly as if they were pantomiming the actions in front of him.

A pang of longing hit him, and he blinked, grinding his jaw against the sudden emptiness in his chest. He missed them. He missed who he was with them. And he loved Tony. His mind couldn’t seem to let him settle on any of those thoughts, just kept skipping over each of them like a rock across the smooth surface of a lake. When the story finished, he almost thought Tony asleep, but felt him stir slightly and give a pleasant hum of warm breath against Steve’s chest.

“I think you embellish your tales to entertain me,” Tony said after a moment.

“If you met them, you’d know that embellishment is not required,” Steve huffed out over a low, deprecating chuckle.

“I should like that. I think I would like that very much. I know how you miss them. You should have companions, I’ve told you. Not just myself and the boy, much as I love to monopolize your time,” Tony mumbled. His voice was rough with weariness, but his hands were moving across Steve’s skin again, tracing delicate patterns that made Steve wonder if Tony even realized he was doing it. “You could invite them here. They would be honored guests.”

Tony left the offer hanging there between them, as he had before. Steve had tried to picture it in his head more times than he could count, this idyllic future where he had everything he wanted, but the idea of the others seeing him like this was always accompanied by a mixture of horror, shame and certainty that it would lead to ruin. Clint, Nat, Sam…these were not people who could possibly abide here, and if they knew of this—this thing with Tony, they would look on him with disgust and disappointment.

“Sleep,” Tony muttered with a sigh. Steve wasn’t sure if he was telling himself that or Steve, but it seemed to work for both of them. He fell into a fitful sleep, dreamed of slipping into a dark, cold void of nothingness, and woke to light filtering in the windows feeling like he hadn’t truly slept at all.

Tony, he saw immediately, was already up, fully dressed in a golden tan surcoat and matching breeches, and ushering servants in bearing trays of food and his precious brew, which he plucked off the tray at once and poured into a nearby cup. He must have dressed himself to give Steve more time to sleep, Steve realized with a stab of gratitude. Who, but Tony, would even care about the sleep of a slave? Sometimes, nothing about Tony made sense to Steve. He couldn’t reconcile the man his heart seemed so sure it knew with the man who his mind knew Tony had to be.

Oblivious to his confusion, the servants set the trays down, bowed and hurried out, while Steve rolled over on his side and watched Tony pluck a few bites off one of the plates.
“Up, eat,” Tony said as he chewed, glancing over at Steve. He looked haggard, and Steve wondered if Tony’s sleep had been as disturbed as his own. “It will be a long day, I’m afraid.”

Right. They were visiting the Deep Illum this morning, and then the tourney was the afternoon’s entertainment. The tourney with Lord Tiberius Stone participating. Steve scowled.

“Don’t blame me, Pepper made the schedule,” Tony shrugged. “At least the mine is interesting,” he added, walking over to nudge Steve’s legs over far enough on the bed so that he could sit down.

“Cam is worried he will be spirited away,” Steve said, stretching. He caught Tony’s eyes watching him as he did, a smile playing on his lips that Steve returned even as a yawn wiped it away.

“Cam worries about a lot of things,” Tony replied. “I promised him a bird.”

“You threatened to get him a bird,” Steve corrected.

“I asked Pepper to arrange to have a pair of those brightly colored ones that speak brought to the menagerie. He’ll like that, I think,” Tony said.

“A talking bird?” Steve repeated in confusion. Of course. Of course, Tony would find something far beyond what was ever imagined. It was one of those small things that Tony did with regularity, Steve realized. A thoughtfulness that bordered on excessive at times, Steve thought. Like he had to repay affection with generosity. Perhaps in most cases, he did, Steve supposed.

“They’re quite smart. They train them to speak. Some speak hundreds of words, and they can live as long as a man. The Atilan court keeps seven, as tradition, since their rulers take a vow of silence. One of the birds only speaks insults, I’m told. I think I’d like that one best,” Tony grinned.

Steve shook his head. The world was a strange place. Far stranger than he had ever imagined. Sam often said Redwing told him something, though Steve just always assumed that was because of his understanding of the bird’s squawks and mannerisms. He wondered what Sam would think of a bird that actually spoke. The same bittersweet longing as he felt the night before washed through him, but he pushed it aside and reached out for Tony. They only had this time together. He wasn’t going to waste it by thinking of things he could not have.

“Talking birds,” Steve said, shaking his head and falling back flat against the bed.

“And for you,” Tony said in a lazy voice, tugging down the coverlet from Steve’s hips as he drew out the words. “I rather like how good gold looks against your skin,” he said. He ran a hand up Steve’s thigh, fingers trailing lightly into the crevasse between his legs. “The gold for your collar came from a huge piece taken out from the Deep Illum centuries ago, did you know that?” Tony asked. Steve shook his head, trying to concentrate on Tony’s words while his hands were roaming over Steve’s body. “The same piece also formed the king’s crown, the one with the ruby to match. I always thought that one was so ostentatious when I was younger,” Tony said with an air of distraction.

“It is,” Steve replied.

“I think it is my favorite now, though. It…feels right. In a way that I…I mean, it is still ridiculously ostentatious, yes,” Tony said with a short huff of laughter. Steve’s breath hitched as Tony’s fingers grazed over his balls, lifting and caressing them, then giving each a slight squeeze. “Tony,” Steve warned in a low voice. He let out a puff of air and twisted a bit, angling for Tony’s hand.
“Something amiss, my treasure?” Tony asked in a light, teasing voice. “Just trying to make sure you are…up and about this fine morning,” he continued, clearly amused.

His eyes lifted to Steve’s, a bright, pleased gleam warming them. Steve watched him bite at the inside of his cheek, mouth pursing as he tried not to smile too widely. His hands fell away from Steve’s body and he pushed himself off the bed, making Steve groan and roll towards him without quite realizing what he was doing. His cock was trapped between his body and the bed, and he couldn’t resist the urge to rut against the friction that was offered. Tony tutted his disapproval and lightly slapped Steve’s bare ass, which seemed to only make Steve’s current situation worse.

“None of that,” Tony said as Steve grunted and shot Tony a frustrated look from under his lashes. Tony grinned.

“Tonnnnnnyyyy,” Steve ground out.

“You beg so prettily, can you blame me?” Tony chuckled. “Eat. Then ring for Cam. He was already skulking about the hallway this morning when they brought the food.”

Steve groaned weakly in protest, but forced himself to sit up, swing his legs over the side of the bed and throw on a robe to hide the evidence of Tony’s ministrations. Breakfast passed quickly, and Cam came in to help Steve get dressed in a flowing robe of pale gold that he said was in honor of their visit to the mine. Golden cuffs went around his wrists and an elaborate headdress of golden chains over a diaphanous piece of ivory fabric completed the outfit. Cam said he looked fit for such a prodigious occasion. Steve thought he looked like something the mine had spit out to advertise its wares.

They met the rest of the group in the great hall, which gave Steve his first glimpse of the now barren feasting tables and banners that hung above them bearing the King’s standard just above the Lord of the Ridge’s sigil, a bright, golden fist. The ride down from the Highcastle was uneventful enough, though Cam steadfastly refused to open his eyes. Lord Rand’s sturdier carriages, pulled by mountain-bred ponies who were used to the rocky, uneven terrain, waited for them at the bottom. Once they were in their carriage, Cam chattered in an endless combination of nerves and excitement.

The Deep Illum was a sprawling, steppe-sided hole in the world, teeming with activity as slaves and horses moved rock and earth and brought forth its riches. Some paused to look at their group, whether out of curiosity, respect or respite, Steve still didn’t know. He seemed to be the only one to notice, other than the overseers with their golden fist sigils pinned prominently on their robes, who shouted at them to get back to work. Steve glanced up at Tony, who walked at the head of their entourage with Lord Rand, his son, various Knights of the Ridge and Tony’s own guard, though Josiah and Peran stayed close to Steve.

“Are you truly going in there, lad?” Peran asked dubiously as they made their way down into the pit. “You can stay out here, you know. If I’m not wrong, Josiah wouldn’t mind joining you,” he harrumphed a bit, looking over at his fellow guard, who did look a little pale, Steve noted.

“Give me an enemy to fight, not a hole in the ground to crawl into of my own accord,” Josiah said with a slight shudder.

“If the Raj’Inama goes, then so shall I,” Cam said. “I am to stay with him at all times and make sure he is safe. King’s orders.”

Steve glanced at Peran over Cam’s head and caught the gruff, older man trying to hide a smile.
“Ayuh,” Peran huffed. “Seems we have our tasks in common, then, young sir. Perhaps we will make a soldier of you, yet.”

“I’m to be a scribe, not a soldier,” Cam protested. He sounded affronted. Steve let out a low laugh that was mostly caught behind his veil, though he heard Peran grunt approvingly.

“A wiser occupation, with a far better retirement, I’d say,” Josiah chimed in, though he was grinning. “Quite the operation they have here, isn’t it?” he asked, scanning the pit with the same practiced gazes that Steve supposed most soldiers developed. Threats. Exits. Weapons. It became habit when your life depended on it.

Saying the Deep Illum was ‘quite the operation’ didn’t truly capture the massive scale of the earthworks, let alone the mine itself. A large treadwheel, manned by at least a dozen slaves, powered the massive hoist that brought up the larger deposits and a smaller one ran the bellows, which stood outside the dark, gaping maw of the main shaft and blew precious air to the workers down below. The main shaft looked a bit like a huge mouth, with long planks of timber supporting the sides for teeth. Next to a draining pump, a huge hammer fitted to a water wheel coursing with the water that was drained from the mine crushed the rock that was brought up from below.

It was both an impressive testament to ingenuity and determination and a monument to greed and oppression. There was an unreality to it that only he seemed to be aware of, like if he tried to see it all at one time, he would be overwhelmed from the effort to reconcile it all. It was easier to ignore the dark, seedy underbelly of it all, and focus on the glory, which he supposed was how all of this seemed to fade into the background for people like Tony, who were used to a lifetime of seeing only the shadows on the wall. How easy it was to be blind to suffering that was not your own.

Steve sighed and settled his gaze on Tony, who was surrounded by their party, of course. Tony was examining some of the drainage equipment, though he beckoned Steve forward as soon as he saw him. Tony was deep into an animated discussion with one of the overseers about the mechanisms and design by the time Steve made it up next to him.

“See this?” Tony said, pointing at a cylindrical chamber. “I’m wondering about something with a bit more power behind it. You’d need a crank mechanism to build the pressure, but you could use the water wheel there, too, you’d just have to separate it with a sort of, I don’t know, a sealed joint, let’s say. Then the plunger pumps down, see here, like so,” he said, making a motion with his hands next to the cylinder. “And suctions the water up, then discharges it here,” he finished, pointing at the release valve. “It could work.”

“Indeed! A brilliant idea, Your Majesty, just incredible!” the overseer gushed excitedly. He scratched at his head a bit, frowning down at the pump as it steadily chugged the water from deep inside the mine. “I never would have thought of such a thing.” Steve wouldn’t have been sure if his enthusiasm was genuine or not, but he knew that whatever Tony was suggesting would actually work, in all likelihood.

“Ha!” Lord Rand exclaimed. “You see, Daniel? I told you of the King’s genius, did I not?”

“You did, Father,” the younger Lord Rand replied.

“I like to tinker. A hobby,” Tony demurred. Tinker, Steve thought, shaking his head. He wasn’t sure what it was that Tony did, but it could hardly be called tinkering, he knew that much. “The Raj’Inama must put up with my occasional distractions, but you need not do so. I know the length of our visit is, regrettably, short,” Tony said smoothly, though Steve had little doubt that Tony
would have happily spent weeks ‘tinkering’ with Lord Rand’s mining equipment, but not if it meant having to enjoy more of the Ridge’s hospitality. “Let us see this mine of yours, Lord Rand. I haven’t visited since I was a boy, but I remember it being like nothing else I had ever seen.”

“That it is, I daresay,” Lord Rand agreed, puffing out his chest a bit. He followed one of the overseers towards the mine with the air of a man who wanted to project a familiarity that he had not truly earned, leaving Steve with little doubt that the elder Lord Rand did not make many trips to the mines or quarries that filled his coffers. The younger Rand appeared to be more at home here, Steve noticed, even greeting several of the overseers by name.

The Deep Illum’s cavernous opening quickly narrowed into smaller tunnels and shafts, some of which the overseer told them, could only be traversed by one person at a time. They couldn’t go very far in, Lord Rand told them, though the deepest tunnel went so far down, they had not fully measured it yet. It was dark, even with the occasional torch, most of which looked newly installed for their visit. Steve tried to imagine what it would be like to work in here in almost pitch blackness, or worse, down below, where the air was so thin, it was impossible for anyone to stay down there very long. Amidst the dull clangs of the excavation, there were, in fact, the chirps of birds, who rode in small cages attached to some of the workers belts. Cam pointed, wide-eyed, at one, then promptly stayed huddled close to Steve, who listened with one ear and watched as dead-eyed slaves hammered chinks into the rock, looking for that precious vein of gold.

By the time they walked out into the sun and fresh air again, Steve was beyond glad of it. Cam and the other soldiers, too, by the looks of it. What had Josiah said about crawling into a hole in the ground? It felt a bit like walking forward into your own grave, Steve thought, and for a lot of the slaves, that was likely what it was. He looked around him. Where did they come from, he wondered. From afar, like Steve, seeing the Deep Illum’s grand maw for the first time when they arrived here from the markets? Or had they been born here and always know this would be their fate?

“Your Majesty, on behalf of the Ridge, I’d like to present you with some gifts, which, I believe, you will find to be a testament to the Deep Illum’s bounty,” Lord Rand was saying, drawing Steve’s attention to where he stood next to his son, who took a box from one of the overseers, opened it, and presented it to Tony with a formal bow. “Illum gold. The finest in the world,” Lord Ridge added with a note of pride. “A scepter, to mark the occasion of your visit, crafted by our finest smiths. May it please you, Your Highness.”

Tony seemed unsurprised by the gesture, Steve noticed. He remembered Tony’s words from the morning, which he had discarded as teasing.

“It is truly extraordinary, my Lord. I thank you,” Tony replied, hefting the scepter in his hands and testing the weight before settling it back in the box.

“It is Illum gold that marks the Raj’Inama as yours, my King, as it has been since the very first,” Lord Rand continued, waving one of the other overseers forward and taking another gilded box from his hands, which he opened with a bow and held out for Tony to take before straightening himself. “An honor that we are pleased to see you continue. We hope that this token of our esteem also pleases his Majesty,” Lord Rand finished, making the other nobles in attendance titter with low laughter.

“I am sure that it will,” Tony replied. He gave Steve a quick look over his shoulder, then handed the box to one of the guards with a nod. “The Ridge and the Crown have long had a special relationship between them. Your generosity is most appreciated, Lord Rand, as is the skill of those who mined and wrought such beautiful gifts.” It sounded formal enough to Steve’s ears, but he
caught a couple of looks exchanged at the words.

“Of course,” Lord Rand replied, dipping his head. “I do believe that we have food and drink waiting for us just up the Ridge. Shall we?” he suggested, spreading his arm wide.

Spits of roasted mountain goat, along with various vegetables, nuts and salted fish waited for them under golden awnings that had been erected to give them some protection from the merciless sun. Lord Rand sat to Tony’s left, then his son, and then General Rhodes, but the seat to Tony’s right was reserved for Steve. It was a strange thing, Steve realized, as he ate. He had spent so much time confined to his quarters or Tony’s chamber, and yet, here he was, sitting at the King’s table, at his right hand, and none raised a word of complaint. Not that they would in Tony’s presence, of course, but most seemed unfazed by a slave dining with them, so long as that slave wore the King’s collar of Illum gold, at least. This was what Tony meant by things being less formal out here, Steve surmised, catching Tony watching him as the talk turned to the afternoon’s tourney.

“Daniel, do you plan to participate?” Tony asked. “I’ve heard you are quite the swordsman.”

“I try, Your Majesty,” the younger Lord Rand said. “I don’t think I’ll have much of a chance against Lord Stone, but I shall endeavor to do the Ridge proud.” Possibly only Steve noticed the way Tony stiffened at the mention of Lord Stone.

“We have several knights who will provide worthy opponents, though were I a betting man, I admit, my purse would go on Lord Stone’s success,” Lord Rand replied. “I’ve rarely seen a finer hand with the sword, and in the lists, he is yet unbeaten.”

“Lord Stone is quite good,” Tony admitted gamely, “though, I have had the good fortune to see a warrior who I believe would be more than a match for Lord Stone. What say you, Rhodey?” Steve blinked in surprise and looked over at Rhodes, waiting to see how he would respond.

“He made me feel like a first year squire hoping for my spurs, that’s for sure,” Rhodes replied. “I still plan to best him one day, though, don’t think I don’t,” Rhodes added with a smile, jerking his chin up in challenge. Steve couldn’t help but smile from behind his veil, though he wasn’t sure what Tony was playing at.

“One of your knights?” Lord Rand asked. “I hope you will permit him to join the tourney. We could use a real competition.”

“I’m afraid I had to leave him behind at the Castle, though I already miss our sparring sessions. I am an apt student, or so he assures me, but I am almost certain that every time he ends up on the mat, it is only because I am King and not my combat prowess,” Tony said in a tone laced with amusement. Steve was in the middle of a drink and nearly choked on his wine. He shot Tony a withering look, which Tony returned with a raised eyebrow and a pleased smile. “Some other time, perhaps,” Tony offered, then changed the subject to something to do with the guilds that let Steve’s mind wander back to the various training sessions he and Tony had since the day he fought Rhodes and his men. It was fair to say that a number of them ended with Steve on the training mat, though not the way Lord Rand was probably imagining, Steve remembered with a flush of heat.

When their repast was over, Steve, Cam and the guards followed Tony and the rest back to the carriages, though this time, Tony eschewed riding with Lord Rand and motioned for Steve to join him.

As soon as the carriage door closed, Tony groaned and leaned his head back, unbuttoning the top of his surcoat. “God, it’s hot,” Tony grumbled. He picked up the long, wooden box that held the scepter, opened it, then tossed it aside and reached for the other box. He flipped open that lid and
lifted out what looked to Steve like a handful of delicate gold strands, though when Tony held the 
edges between his finders, Steve could see it was more of a sleeveless shirt made entirely of gold 
chains that were strung together. “The far more interesting gift,” Tony mused, giving Steve a half-
lidded look over the top of the garment before coiling it back down into its box. “Wear it under 
your robes for the tourney. At least I’ll have something pleasant to occupy my mind.”

Steve stared down at the box for a long moment, his cock twitching with interest under his robes. 
Tony hadn’t…not since the night before they left the city, though Steve had assumed that was to 
give him a chance to heal from his punishment, but now, the thought took root in his head and he 
couldn’t shake it. He looked up at Tony, who flashed him a knowing look from across the carriage 
as it trundled back down the road to the Highcastle.


“Impressive,” Steve replied.

“It certainly is that,” Tony agreed. “It has kept the Rands in power for generations, though they 
long for closer connections to the Crown. Only one Rand ever married into the royal family, and 
they do not forget that. Hell, I’m fairly sure Wendell sent his son to Court in the hopes he would 
catch my eye. Not that it wouldn’t be a good match, but…” he trailed off, biting his lip and turning 
to look out the window.

“But,” Steve said. He swallowed, or tried to. It hurt. He knew it must be, but the pain and jealousy 
were so thick, he thought he might choke on them. Of course, Tony would marry one day. Of 
course, he would. He had to. Steve knew that. He wanted that for Tony, he told himself, though a 
voice in the back of his head that sounded a lot like Bucky’s named him a liar for the thought.

“But,” Tony sighed. “But, a lot of things. You did not sleep well last night,” Tony pointed out, 
clearly changing the subject.

“The water,” Steve said simply.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, then raked a hand over his face. “Is it because of what happened on 
the platform, do you think?”


“*That*,” Tony began, “is because I have to face the man who played me for a fool in front of the 
whole kingdom and pretend that it bothers me naught that he did. Rhodey thinks Ty means it as an 
insult, and I should call the tourney off entirely.”

“Maybe you should,” Steve said.

“But, you don’t really think so,” Tony guessed, his voice low and considering.

“No,” Steve replied. “I think Rhodes is right, but I wouldn’t give Stone the satisfaction.”

“What would you win, if you entered?” Tony asked, tilting his head to the side and narrowing his eyes at 
the question.

“Yes,” Steve replied.

“Very certain of you,” Tony grinned. “I don’t doubt it. I like that, you know. That you could snap 
my neck before the guards even realized what was happening. I like watching you go down on 
your knees for me because I tell you to, when I suspect that if you didn’t want to, there is no force
on earth that could truly make you submit. I liked that about you from that first night, when I thought to myself that I had never seen a man manage to kneel without showing a modicum of deference. Truly, quite the feat.”

“It…feels good. When it’s you,” Steve said. His mouth twisted, and he looked down at his hands where they clutched at his robes.

“I bought the men working the wheel,” Tony said. “They, and whatever family they may have here, will be sent to the Castle to work after we leave.”

“What?” Steve asked sharply, his gaze jerking up to Tony’s. “Why?” Tony rolled his lip between his teeth and glanced away, then dragged his gaze back to Steve.

“Yesterday, you said that you saw them and thought how it could have been you. I suppose the thought stayed with me, and…well. Lord Rand will have replacements for them in no time, though I’ve promised him a machine to do the work eventually. It is nothing. A single drop in an ocean. I don’t even know why I did it, except to please you, of course,” Tony sighed, raising his eyes to Steve. “But, I could not leave them there.”

Steve stared at him, hearing his heart tick off each beat against his ribs. He wasn’t sure what to think or what to say. It was only a handful of men. It meant nothing, Tony was right. Except, it didn’t quite feel like nothing. Steve couldn’t name what it did feel like, but not nothing.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

“Thank me properly after the tourney,” Tony replied with a painted-on leer that didn’t quite chase the pall out of his eyes. “It’s nothing,” he said again with a slight wave and shake of his head.

“It’s not to them. It’s not to me,” Steve replied.

“Then…I am glad of it,” Tony said. “I believe I did it for you.”

“And I believe you did it because you’re you. You’re a better man than you give yourself credit for,” Steve said. “If you would just—”

“Just see the world the way you want it to be instead of how it is?” Tony demanded, cutting him off. “Do not make more of this than it is, Steve. I’ve no wish to regret the gesture. But, that is all it is. A gesture. No,” Tony said sternly, holding up a hand when Steve opened his mouth to argue. “Enough. Speak of something else.”

Steve ground his jaw in frustration and let out a huff of air. He was silent for a long moment, watching as Tony looked out the window at the passing walls of rock, his eyes unseeing.

“What will your wheel-turning machine look like?” Steve finally asked, breaking the silence. He wanted to change the subject, true, but as much as anything, he enjoyed watching Tony lose himself in his inventions, in his problems that he could solve if he only worked hard enough, thought about it long enough…it wasn’t that Steve didn’t understand the appeal.

“Glad you asked,” Tony replied after a moment. He gave Steve a somewhat grateful smile, then launched into an explanation of what Steve knew that he could so clearly see in his mind. By the time they reached the Highcastle, Steve could almost picture what Tony was talking about as they walked past the wheel towards the platform. He stood at the bottom, looked up the huge pillar of rock to where the castle loomed, then over at the men waiting at the wheel’s spokes and wondered if they knew how much their lives had changed.
Rhodes’ words about the change he wrought on Tony, the influence he could continue to have, filtered through Steve’s mind as they rode up. Always, in his head, what could be warped with what was. He had made his decision, he told himself, looking over at Tony. But, it was not an easy one.

They retired to their respective chambers to change. Steve took some time to wash where he could using the basin and perfumed water that filled it. Cam delivered the box with the Ridge’s gift for Steve, along with the robes he was to wear for the tourney, deep, wine-colored silks with gold embroidery fanning out from the waist. He refused Cam’s offer of assistance to dress, and instead, held the gold-chained shirt up in front of himself, trying to get a feel for how it looked in the chamber’s small looking glass. With a slight roll of his eyes, he put it on, feeling the cold chains glide over his skin. It hung down the front of his chest, just below his collar, all the way to his upper thighs, just low enough so that he would feel the chains rub against every sensitive spot as he walked or moved.

And Tony would know.

Heat flushed his skin, and he shifted a little, feeling his cock start to harden under his robes. Tony would know. The thought seemed to fill his head with a hazy, buzzing arousal. A warm, liquid heat coiled low in his belly. Tony would know that Steve wore this for him. Only for him. It was a heady thing, to be able to push aside everything else in a mind like Tony’s.

He knocked on the door between his chamber and Tony’s and heard Tony call out for him to enter. As he walked, he could feel the chains sliding across his nipples and cock, and he swallowed hard, throat clicking and a soft moan escaping. Tony glanced over at him with an interested, considering look that traveled up and down Steve’s body.

“Beautiful,” Tony said, walking over to stand in front of Steve. He reached out and pushed the collar of Steve’s robe aside, revealing the golden shirt underneath. “Ah. Good.” Pleasure coursed through Steve at the praise, warming his skin and raising little bumps along his flesh. He dipped his head and lowered his eyes, feeling his face heat, though he wasn’t sure Tony could see it under the veil.

“You look very fine, as well,” Steve replied, glancing up quickly at Tony and then down again, his stomach twisting. He had never been good at this, not the way Bucky had been, all easy charm and glib tongue, at least until he got around Natasha. He didn’t have Tony’s ease with words or comfort in saying them, but he knew how good he felt when Tony told him that he was beautiful, even though he shouldn’t care. He did. He liked it. A lot. He wanted Tony to feel that way, too.

“Thank you,” Tony said, though he sounded clearly pleased by the compliment. I should do that more often, Steve thought. Everyone always fawns over the King, but how many have the chance to tell Tony that he is beautiful? Tony should hear that, as much as I can give it to him, Steve resolved to himself.

“Ready?” Tony asked. Steve nodded, and followed Tony out into the hall, where Josiah and Peran joined them, along with Cam, who was nearly skipping behind them in his excitement.

“I have never seen a real tourney before,” Cam announced. “What events will they have? What will you award the winner? Do you think someone will die?”

“Um, swords, bow and arrow, and the joust, I expect,” Tony said, smiling down at Cam. “The winner will receive a purse of a hundred gold coins, and no, I don’t expect anyone will die, unless it is of boredom, as these things usually drag on forever. The swords and lance tips are blunted for the tourney, though injuries do happen. A lance coming at you from horseback is no small thing, regardless of whether the end is pointed or not.”
“Did you use a lance?” Cam asked Steve, face scrunching up in curiosity.

“I did,” Steve replied.

“Did you kill many of the Hydra soldiers with it?” Cam asked.

“Cam!” Tony cautioned, trying for stern but having to cover a laugh. “Bloodthirsty, isn’t he?” Tony said to Steve.

“You should hear him when the cook is out of sweetcakes,” Steve replied, making Tony throw back his head and laugh. “I did, to answer your question, but Bucky was better with it, and no one was better on horseback than Pietro.”

“His sister is the witch, yes?” Cam said, eyes going wide with some combination of fear and delight.

“Spellcaster,” Steve corrected.

“Spellcasters, thieves, archers, falconers, I am amazed Hydra didn’t simply surrender,” Tony said. “Perhaps one day you will meet them, if they agree to come here, what say you to that?”

“Really?” Cam asked. “Do not tell her I called her a witch,” he said quickly.

“She would not be offended. She has taken the name as her own, in fact,” Steve assured him. “You should have seen the Hydra soldiers scatter when she stepped onto the battlefield dressed all in red as bright as blood. The Scarlet Witch, they called her,” Steve told him. “It was a sight to behold.”

“I should like to meet them very much,” Cam said eagerly. “The King said I could have a talking bird. That must be a spell, don’t you think? Did your witch make animals talk?”

“No, but Sam has a falcon named Redwing, and I think Sam speaks falcon,” Steve replied.

“How do you speak falcon?” Cam asked.

It went on like that until they reached the bottom of the stairs, where Lord Rand waited next to his son and some of the other visiting nobles. At least Cam’s chatter provided a welcome distraction from the way the gold chains shifted over his body as they walked down the steps, Steve thought with a grimace. There were a number of new faces, Steve noticed, who must have arrived just for the tourney. Their party followed Lord Rand and his son to the large box in front of the tourney field where a high-backed wooden chair with a cushioned seat and crest mounted above it waited for Tony. Next to it, a tufted ottoman was clearly meant for Steve, so after Tony and the Lords Rand sat, he sank down onto it and spread his robes around him.

Once the nobles were settled, others were allowed to fill the stands. Proclamations followed by the Highcastle’s herald, and then the participants were announced, one by one, based on rank, which meant Lord Stone came out and greeted the attendees fairly early on. Certainly, the crowd favored him, that much was clear as a roar of approval went up, at least from everyone who wasn’t in the King’s box.

Stone was tall, blond, and broad shouldered, fair of face with a ready smile. Steve supposed there was some superficial resemblance, enough, apparently for Sitwell to think Steve might be of interest to the King.

Steve hated him on sight.
It surprised him just how much he despised the man, though it probably shouldn’t have. This man had used Tony for his own gain. Toyed with his affections, then rejected him as soon as he had what he wanted, which was apparently a lordship and the lands and income that went with it. Quite a boon for a lowly Sir to end up a landed Lord, and all he had to do was make Tony fall in love with him then leave him as soon as he had what he wanted from him. This man held Tony’s regard and threw it back in his face, and Steve hated him for it.

It wasn’t as though he didn’t understand that some of his anger and disgust was really aimed at himself. Steve knew it wasn’t the same, what he contemplated, but he also knew how much his leaving would hurt Tony. Some of that, at least, was on Stone for laying the groundwork. Forever making Tony think he wasn’t worth loving. And I’m going to do it to him again, Steve thought grimly. Take all of this and throw it in his face, say that anything, even death, is better than being with him. He wondered, even now, when his mind churned with plans and maps and strategies, if he would truly be able to do it. He closed his eyes for a moment, heard Tony rise to give the pronouncement to open the games, then reached up and wrapped his hand around Tony’s as he sat back down. Tony didn’t move his hand. He didn’t move at all, really.

Steve cleared his throat as the first participants took the field and shifted a little in his seat. The chains swayed against his chest and cock, not hard enough to do anything, but that in and of itself was frustrating beyond belief, like he was reaching for something and his fingers could only brush it, never actually grasp what he wanted. Tony looked down at his motion, frowned a bit, then huffed out a low chuckle, and his face warmed into a soft, knowing smile. He lifted his hand from under Steve’s and stroked it over the back of Steve’s head through the veil, resting against the curve of Steve’s neck as the tourney got underway.

The first two events passed by quickly enough. Stone won the sword melee handily enough. Steve’s fingers itched for his shield, but Tony seemed largely uninterested, which was its own kind of victory. One of Rand’s knights won the archery competition. Clint would have laughed his fool head off, Steve thought. The final event was the joust. Wine and sweetmeats were passed around, though Steve gave his share of the food to Cam. Finally, it came down to Stone and one of Tony’s guards tilting at each other across the lists. Stone’s lance broke against the other man’s shield, unseating him on the first pass. On the second, both men went down. The third decided it in Stone’s favor, much to Steve’s disappointment. His squire rushed out with a fresh lance, and he rode over to the King’s box, tipping his lance down in deference.

“Well done, Lord Stone,” Tony said, with a wave of his hand.

“Thank you, Ton—Your Highness,” Stone replied. “Forgive me, I meant no offense.” It was far too smooth and practiced to be a slip of the tongue, Steve thought as his back bristled against the insult. He saw Rhodes’ jaw tighten and his hand go reflexively to the sword he wore at his side, but he stayed seated and just gave Stone a hard, disapproving look.

Tony’s face was a study in calm, Steve thought, though he could see the anger simmering under the surface. Tony knew, as Steve did, that had not been a mistake, but invoking his familiar name to remind everyone of what had transpired between them.

“None taken,” Tony replied flatly. “Your skill with the lance is quite impressive,” Tony said, which Steve knew was the exact minimum of expected praise. “The purse is yours. May you use it well.”

“Indeed, I shall, Majesty. I am honored to be able to show you how much my skill with the lance has improved since you last happened to have the chance to enjoy it,” Stone said smoothly. Steve frowned. There was nothing wrong with the words, they were obsequious enough, but there was an
undercurrent to them that Steve didn’t like.

“Is that so?” Tony asked. He leaned forward in his seat, hand slipping from Steve’s neck. Steve could see the tightness in his face. A muscle ticked in his cheek where he held himself steady.

“I know how much you used to enjoy my skill with my lance,” Stone said. Okay, well, Steve understood that reference. He almost couldn’t believe Stone was making it, but there was a brash confidence about Stone that probably came from years of not being denied much of anything, whether by his looks or his charm or his…skills, and now his wealth, courtesy of Tony. “It would pain me to think that you had forgotten, when I know what pleasure it once gave you. I have missed being able to share it with you, my King.”

Steve looked between the two of them, then over at Rhodes, whose gaze was boring holes into Stone.

“I, er, well…” Lord Rand stuttered.

“Your reward,” Tony replied, his voice clipped and edged with anger. He motioned to one of the guards, who brought out a bag that clinked with coins.

“I would be most honored if the Raj’Inama would bestow it,” Stone suggested, his eyes on Tony the whole time. A rush of gasped whispers greeted his words. “What better reward could there be than a prize from the King’s own? A favor for my lance, perhaps, so that it might bring me luck?”

“The Raj’Inama’s favors are for the King alone,” Tony said, leaning back in his chair and resting a hand on the back of Steve’s neck again. He wondered if Stone knew Tony well enough to know when he had taken this too far, because Tony was seething with rage under a veneer of calm. Rhodes could see it, too, Steve noticed, catching the other man’s eye. “As you well know. Enough. Take your reward.”

People were staring. Of course, they were. They were staring at Tony, Steve saw, their eyes filled with questions. Tony’s jaw worked, and he blinked, eyes darting away for a moment. Rhodes started to stand and reach for the bag of coins, probably hoping to diffuse the situation. Stone smiled placidly up at Tony from the back of his horse, his lance resting on the railing of the dais while he waited for his reward.

Steve had…just had enough. Maybe it was because he had held Tony next him last night and told a story to distract him. Maybe it was because Tony bought the men who worked the wheel or because Steve knew what was coming and couldn’t prevent that pain and maybe it was because Stone was an asshole. He wasn’t sure what propelled him up, but he was on his feet before he knew what he was doing. He heard a shocked murmur from around him. Tony called his name and reached out, almost grabbing the arm of his robes, but Steve already had the purse in his hand and was walking down the steps toward where Stone waited with a triumphant expression on his face.

Steve stopped next to where Stone’s lance rested and held up the purse, dangling it from one hand in front of Stone. Then he curled his hand into a fist and brought it down as hard as he could. The lance splintered under the force of the blow, the coronel breaking off and falling to Steve’s feet, and the railing broke clean in two, sending the lance point falling to the dirt in a rain of gold coins. The crowd seemed to gasp in surprised unison, several of them rising to their feet in shock.

“What the hell!!?” Stone shouted, his horse sidestepping as he tried to control it and handle the broken lance. “My lance! Did you see—how dare—” Stone stammered.

“Well,” Tony said from next to Steve’s shoulder. “I believe you have your reward, Lord Stone.
Sorry about your lance. I would not be too troubled. These things happen. I mean, I hear. I can’t say I’ve experienced it myself. But, I’ve heard it said that perhaps one in five lances…” he trailed off, peering over the broken railing to look down at where the lance dragged the dirt. Stone sat red-faced on his horse, mouth opening and closing like he wanted to respond, but thought better of it. “Simply does not work properly when needed. Nothing to be ashamed of, though. I’m sure your lance will be just fine the next time you need to, er, put it to use.”

Laughter accompanied the last of Tony’s words. Stone was glaring daggers at Steve, though he said nothing, just dropped the broken lance, wheeled his horse around and shouted for his squire to collect the coins. Steve somehow thought that had not been the reward Stone had been craving. He looked over at Tony, who was looking down at the broken lance and railing with keen interest. Finally, he lifted his eyes to Steve, his gaze holding Steve pinned there. Steve’s hand throbbed and stung. He could feel blood running from his split knuckles.

“Well, that was quite the exciting afternoon, Lord Rand,” Tony said. He was still staring with a keen eye at Steve. It was almost unnerving, the intensity of his gaze. Steve looked around and caught a number of eyes watching them, though, of course, no one said anything.

“I’m, ah, glad you enjoyed it, Your Highness. I must apologize for Lord Stone’s behavior. Most unseemly,” Lord Rand said.

“Yes. Yes, it was,” Tony said, his eyes steady on Steve.

“If you’d like, there is a celebratory feast waiting back in the great hall, though I daresay our winner will not likely be joining us,” Lord Rand said, sounding decidedly uncomfortable.

“No, I suspect he won’t,” Tony replied. “I think I will skip the feast as well, if you will forgive me. I would like to retire for the evening.”

“Of course,” Lord Rand said quickly, giving Tony a short bow. He almost sounded relieved. Steve supposed that could have gone very badly for him, were Tony the type to pass blame around for any slight.

Tony looked back down at the broken lance laying in the dirt. Steve couldn’t quite tell if he was angry or something else. Steve had, admittedly, overstepped. He knew that. The thought that Tony might punish him washed over him, tying his stomach in knots and sending a pulse of need down his cock, pooling heat and pressure there with a steady drumbeat. Finally, Tony looked back up at Steve, then just nodded and walked slowly off the dais and back into the castle. Steve had no choice but to follow. The guards and Cam trailed behind, though as soon as they reached the chamber Tony was using, he waved them off.

Steve walked in the room and stood there by the door as Tony closed it, waiting. He wasn’t even sure what he was waiting for. Rebuke. Praise. Punishment. Gratitude. He had no idea, and it all swirled around in his head in an intoxicating mixture of need and desire. Tony would know, he told himself. Tony would know what he needed.

The door snapped shut with a soft thud. Tony stared at it for a moment, then slowly turned around to face Steve. Steve opened his mouth to speak, though no words came out. Tony moved, fast and sudden, pulling Steve’s veil off and tossing it aside. His mouth captured Steve’s with a hard, bruising force, tongue pushing inside and delving deep. His fingers went to the belt of Steve’s robes, ripping at it, hands shaking and uncoordinated. He groaned into Steve’s mouth, biting at his lip, all teeth and tongue. There was a frenzy to Tony’s movements, some animalistic need, wild and possessive, all sharp, hard motions, hands tugging on flesh and fabric without care. Steve’s robe fell apart, revealing the golden chains beneath. Tony tore his mouth away, panting hard, and
looked down. He traced his fingers down the front of Steve’s chest, catching on each chain, then down over Steve’s cock. Wrapping his hand around Steve’s shaft, he tugged up and down, ever so slightly. The effect was instantaneous. Overwhelming. Too much and not enough. Need slammed into Steve and pulsed down the length of his cock where it stiffened in Tony’s hand. The chains rolled and slid over the delicate, sensitive skin of Steve’s cock, pain and pleasure slamming together like a wave crashing against a rock, and Steve let out a hiss that turned into a long, low moan as Tony stroked him again.

“Fuck, Steve,” Tony murmured, then his mouth was back on Steve’s as he maneuvered Steve until his back slammed into the wall just next to the door. He let go of Steve’s cock long enough to shove the remainder of the robes off of Steve’s shoulders, then his hand was back, stroking Steve’s length through the cascade of golden chains. He thumbed at the head, rolling one of the strands over the slit, making Steve’s hips judder in his hand. Steve’s head jerked back against the stone wall as he cried out, though Tony’s mouth was on his again in an instant, capturing most of his cry.

Tony stroked him again, and Steve thrust his cock against Tony’s hand, chasing the awful, wonderful friction. Liquid spilled from the head of his cock into Tony’s hand, and Tony rubbed the viscous fluid over the head, spreading it with the chains, which was better and worse, everything and nothing. Tony’s other hand splayed wide over Steve’s chest, fingers rubbing the chains up and down so they caught on Steve’s nipples, a light touch in contrast to the hard strokes he gave Steve’s cock that did something to Steve’s mind, like the contrast of feeling was simply too much to process, so he just slipped under the feeling, where it was all good.

Tony’s tongue teased over Steve’s lips, his beard scraping against Steve’s skin as he delved lower, across Steve’s jaw and down his neck, nipping and sucking as he went. The sting of Tony’s teeth, the rough feel of his beard, the catch of the chains against the taut peaks of his nipples, the hard, rough roll of the chains across his cock, it was almost too much. Too good. His legs were shaking. His vision was hazy as white stars danced at the edges. All Steve could manage to do was tip his head back, close his eyes and let out a groan.

Then, Tony dropped his hands and stepped away, leaving Steve barely keeping himself upright against the wall. Tony looked…beautiful. His hair was a mess, his coat was askew, his eyes were blown wide and dark, and a sheen of sweat covered his brow. His breath was coming in quick, short bursts, and Steve could see his hand trembling as he raked it through his hair. An urgent, needy sound escaped Steve’s lips.

“Tony,” Steve said. He almost didn’t recognize his own voice. It sounded like a plea or a prayer. Maybe it was.

“Turn around. Face the wall. Put your hands on it and spread your legs,” Tony said. There was a shakiness to his voice, but the words still hit Steve’s gut with the same impact as always, twisting his insides with a heady mixture of desperate need, humiliation and anticipation.

Steve stared at him, open-mouthed. For a moment, he almost wanted to balk, say his word and make it stop, not because he didn’t want to do what Tony said, but he remembered doing something similar with Zola, how much he had hated it, the pain and anger and awful sense of failure that went with it, but this was Tony, and Tony had asked him to do it. Tony knew what he needed. As soon as he thought it, he realized it was true. He needed this. He needed to take this back. It belonged to him, and he wanted to give it to Tony. His mind latched on to that idea with an urgent, burning certainty.

Slowly, deliberately, Steve did as he had been told. He rested his forehead against the cool, pitted stone. He put his hands up, flat against the wall. Spread his feet apart. His cock jutted out from
between his legs, lifting the chains around it in an obscene fashion. He could feel the chains slide over the curve of his ass, though the position left the bottom exposed and open. Arousal curled deep within him. The head of his cock spurted fluid, just at the new position. At knowing what was coming. At wanting it. Needing it. He should be embarrassed. He was, but…it was good somehow, too.

“Good. That’s good, Steve,” Tony said. His voice was low and rough, like each word was being slowly dragged from him. It warmed over Steve’s skin, constricting his chest and making his thoughts go calm, smooth, all the tumult pushed somewhere else. Steve let himself sink into the feeling, let it envelope him, until it pushed everything else aside. There was just him and Tony. Nothing else. There was no pain, except what they allowed, and there was beautiful safety in that, Steve thought as his mind drifted.

He felt the brush of Tony’s coat against his side, then Tony’s hand closed over his where Steve’s damaged fingers dug into the pockmarked wall, the rough pads of Tony’s palm brushing over the open skin on Steve’s knuckles with a stinging burn that wound its way down through his stomach to his cock. He twisted his head to look. The ring Tony had given him stared back at him like an eye, brilliant and blue. Dark flecks of dried blood peeked out from between their fingers. He remembered being ten and slicing his palm to baptize a promise to Bucky that he hadn’t been able to keep, and had the disconcerting feeling that he was doing the same, but then Tony’s hand pressed his into the wall and his other hand, slick and warm with oil now, pushed Steve’s ass apart and found his hole, and Steve didn’t think about anything anymore, the sensations driving everything else away.

Tony ground his hand against Steve’s broken knuckles and pushed a finger deep inside Steve’s hole at the same time. Steve gasped out a sharp cry. Pain and pleasure exploded inside him, harsh and burning and not nearly enough. His cock jumped, making the chains slide over it. He pressed his hips back against Tony’s finger, seeking more, and his hands clawed helplessly against the wall. Tony worked his finger in and out a few times, then added another, pushing past the resistance of Steve’s body into his tight passage. Steve didn’t know what he wanted, just more. Tony would know, he thought hazily. Tony twisted his fingers deep inside Steve, brushing against that spot that sent a bright burst of pleasure careening through Steve’s body down to the head of his cock. His hips bucked and he groaned, loud and long, grinding his head against the wall in frustration.

“Tony, please, please, Tony, please,” Steve chanted.

He wasn’t sure if he was saying it in his head or out loud, but Tony seemed to understand. He pumped his fingers hard, stretching and pulling at Steve’s rim, forcing Steve’s hole apart. Finally, he added a third. Steve nearly sobbed. It was so good, so much, and not nearly enough. Suddenly, Tony’s fingers were gone, and he was empty, open and gaping for a moment, then Steve felt the blunt head of Tony’s slick cock pressing against his hole. He pushed back against it, wanting, needing, desperate to be filled. Tony’s hand held his against the wall in a punishing grip, splitting the skin, blood seeping between their hands, and Steve had time to think that maybe it was a promise after all, before everything blurred and stopped as Tony rammed in, hard and fast, pushing past the resistance Steve’s body offered in one, brutal thrust. Steve’s vision whitened out for a moment. His ears rang with a cry that he only belatedly realized had been torn from his own throat.

Tony drew back, pulling his cock out almost all the way, just catching the head on Steve’s rim before pushing back in. His hand curled against Steve’s on the wall as he pounded into Steve’s hole, making Steve’s body rock with the quick, hard thrusts. He set a punishing pace, barely giving Steve any time to think between thrusts. It was the best kind of agony. Steve’s body burned with it, need clawing at his insides. His cock throbbed with the desperation to be touched, but Tony had
told him to keep his hands on the wall, so he did. Each thrust of Tony’s cock filled him, the stinging drag of it as he pulled back leaving him empty and longing, over and over again, a rush of feelings and sensations spilling over each other in Steve’s head.

“God, Steve, fuck,” Tony ground out, his forehead falling forward to rest on Steve’s shoulder as his rhythm faltered and his pace sped up. The slap of skin ringing in his ears, the heady musk of sweat and sex, the taste of Tony still on his lips, Tony’s breath coming in sharp, quick pants against his shoulder, the soreness in his hand and ache in his cock, it all rolled together in Steve’s mind, tumbling down a hill, picking up more and more as it went. Tony pounded into Steve with quick, jerky thrusts that shallowed out, then finally, he groaned and thrust forward hard and deep, bottoming out and hitting that spot deep inside Steve and making Steve’s whole body convulse with pleasure. Tony’s hand wound its way around Steve’s body to find his cock again, gripping it hard and stroking up and down, rolling the chains over it again and again as he slammed into Steve.

“Come for me,” Tony breathed out. He twisted his wrist around the head of Steve’s cock and thrust hard and deep, finding just the right angle and making Steve sob out his name. “Come for me, Steve.” That was all it took. Steve’s cock jerked in Tony’s hand, long, white strands painting the wall and dripping through Tony’s fingers.

Tony pulled his cock almost all the way out, then thrust in hard as Steve’s cock spasmed in his hand. Steve felt the sudden warm rush of Tony spilling himself inside him. Tony went still, groaned, head tossed back as he came. His hips juddered, and he thrust in a few more times, chasing the feeling, then let his head fall forward against Steve’s back, breathing hard and heavy.

They stayed like that for a long moment, until Steve could feel his body start to go boneless, like he could simply melt to the floor if he let himself. He felt Tony pull out, leaving a sudden emptiness. He sighed and heard a soft, answering chuffing noise from Tony.

“That was…” Tony began, then stopped and shook his head against Steve’s shoulder. “Extraordinary. I don’t have words that are adequate.” He slowly peeled his hand from where he held Steve’s against the wall and looked down at it. Steve peered at him over his shoulder, watching as a strange sort of solemnity crossed Tony’s features. Tony looked up and caught him staring, and it disappeared. “Let us get you to bed, my soldier, before you collapse where you stand.”

Steve thought that was a good idea, all things considered, and let Tony help him to the bed. Tony somehow got him out of the golden shirt, wiped down and into the bed while Steve just sort of allowed it to happen. He couldn’t seem to get any traction on actually doing anything. It seemed easier to simply let Tony handle it.

“Drink,” Tony told him, handing him a goblet of water. Steve drank. It was good. He hadn’t realized how parched his throat was. “You are so easy when you are like this,” Tony observed mildly. “Eat,” he insisted. Steve opened his mouth. He saw Tony smile a bit at that, then he dutifully placed a piece of cheese into Steve’s mouth. Steve chewed. That was good, too. Everything was good. He ate a bit more and drank the rest of the water.

“Thank you,” Steve said, looking up at Tony who was in the process of removing his clothes. He finished peeling off his breeches, then sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked a hand through Steve’s hair, plastering the sweat-soaked strands back against Steve’s head.

“I believe I am the one who should be thanking you, my treasure,” Tony said. He looked away for a moment, then lifted his gaze back to Steve. “What you did out there…” Tony paused, eyes narrowing on Steve.
“He was—he was mocking you,” Steve said, face scrunching up in disgust. He reached out for Tony, managing to grasp his arms, and tugged at him a little bit. “I couldn’t—I had to…I’m sorry if I caused a problem. I wish I could just let things go, walk away…”

“No you don’t. And neither do I,” Tony said, his voice soft, but furrows forming on his brow. “A king has many ready to stand for his defense, but as a man…I have precious few who would. What you did today, it—it meant a great deal to me. And it terrified me,” he said, looking down at his hands for a moment before raising his eyes to Steve. “I don’t want to change who you are, Steve. Who you are is—you are like no one else I have ever met. You see something that is wrong and you just, you do something about it. You have no idea how unusual that makes you. I just want to protect you. Some of this—the veil, the guards, all the damn rules—I know it may not seem like it, but it is to keep you safe. If people knew what you meant to me…” he trailed off and looked away again.

“What do I mean to you?” Steve heard himself ask. It was cruel to want to know, to need to hear it, when he plotted to throw it back in Tony’s face, Steve knew, but he was helpless against the impulse to ask, at least now, when everything was still so soft and good in his head and the reasons not to ask seemed so distant. Tony turned back to him. He looked—sad, Steve thought.

“You mean…” Tony broke off, his voice tight and laced with something that sounded almost like regret. “I think that you should let me bandage that hand, and then get some sleep.”

Steve frowned in confusion, then looked down at his hand. As soon as he did, it started to hurt, though he had forgotten about it until that point. Tony lifted it up and examined it, then got up and rummaged around in one of the trunks. When he came back, he had a bowl of water, some cloths and a small jar of ointment. He washed Steve’s hand until the blood was gone and the wounds clean, then applied some of the ointment, which smelled a little like vinegar, and wrapped the wounds in thick, cotton strips. Tony’s ministrations were strangely soothing, Steve thought, as he watched with a sort of detached interest. Exhaustion seeped into his bones. He blinked up at Tony, who smoothed his hair back once again and nudged him down onto the bed.

“Sleep,” Tony said.

“Stay,” Steve urged, reaching up for Tony.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Tony promised. He shrugged out of the rest of his clothes, doused all of the candles except one, then climbed into the bed next to Steve. He was quiet for a long time, his breathing softening and his body relaxing against Steve’s. “Say it,” Tony whispered so low that Steve almost didn’t hear him. “Tell me again.”

“I love you,” Steve replied.

“Everything,” Tony said softly, though Steve had no idea what he meant by it. He tried to think on it, rolling the word around in his mind, but the wispy arms of sleep claimed him before he could.

He was in the cave, like he had been before. Everything was the same. Long, greying fingers of stone reached down from the ceiling of the cave and pointed up from its floor. Small bones littered the dirt in front of a completely smooth stone, taller than a man, and different than anything else in the cave. Different than anything else he had ever seen. He shivered. A kind of thrumming filled his ears, and he had the strange certainty that it was coming from the stone. He could see himself, kneeling before the holy man, while acolytes chanted and made a strange kind of hollow music against their bowls. Er’Skeen painted ash and oil over his forehead and eyes. He held the cup to Steve’s lips. Outside, a storm raged, echoing down into the chamber. Drink, he said. Drink, and be the shield-bearer. Steve looked down at the blue liquid and watched himself do the same. One is
life and one is death, the holy man said. Which one is this, Steve heard himself ask even as he mouthed the words. Each of you is both, Er’Skeen replied, then laughed, high-pitched and echoing, like a child who had been caught at something. Steve watched himself as he took the cup from Er’Skeen’s hands and drank. He remembered the taste of it coating his throat and seeming to spread out through his veins like wildfire. He could almost feel the pain as his other self doubled over and curled up, muscles spasming into a rictus of agony. He looked up from his prone form. The stone throbbed with a translucent, blue light. It filled the cave and washed over him, bathing him in it for a moment, and then was gone, snapped out of existence as if it had never been. That didn’t happen, Steve thought to himself, glancing over at the holy man, who was watching Steve’s other self struggle to breathe. Suddenly, Er’Skeen turned to him, as if he could see Steve, his eyes wide and focused. It isn’t possible, Steve thought. I’m dreaming, he managed to think before the holy man grabbed him by the arms, his face so close to Steve’s that he could feel the man’s warm breath, smell the rot on him, sickly sweet. This didn’t happen, Steve’s mind protested. This isn’t happening. He tried to peel Er’Skeen’s hands off of him, but they were bones, covered in rags, and turned to dust as he clawed at them.

The wheel is turning, Er’Skeen said.

Steve woke up with a start, sitting up in bed. His breath was coming in pants and he was dripping with sweat. His heart was slamming against his ribs. Next to him, he felt Tony stir, and looked over at him as he slowly blinked awake.

“What’s wrong,” Tony said quickly, sitting up and reaching for Steve.

“Nothing,” Steve replied. His voice shook. Or maybe he was shaking. He didn’t know. “A dream, that’s all.”

“The water again?” Tony asked.

“No. No, nothing like that,” Steve said, shaking his head. He rubbed his hands over his face and squeezed his eyes shut, breathing out a long, slow breath. “Just a nightmare, I guess.”

“Are you sure?” Tony pressed.

“I’m fine. Truly. Sorry I woke you,” Steve said. The horror of the dream was already fading. A nightmare. Nothing more, Steve told himself.

“As you say,” Tony said and started to lay back down, then stopped and glanced down at the bed with a frown. “Your hand.”

“Hmm?” Steve said, then followed Tony’s gaze. The bandages had come off his hand at some point during the night.

“Your hand is healed,” Tony said in a flat, odd voice.

The wheel is turning, Steve thought.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you to anyone and everyone reading this. As always, a massive thank you to the incredible tastes-like-cocount. You can find her on tumblr. She's a great person and super talented artist, too.

Comments and kudos are my life and motivation. Find me on tumblr, twitter, discord and Dreamwidth as sabrecmc.

A couple of chapter notes for anyone who is weird like me:

Rand means "ridge" and is taken from the Afrikaans Witwatersrand ("white waters ridge"), the most productive gold-mining district in the world. I thought that fit perfectly to use the Rand family (aka Iron Fist) for the Lords of the Ridge.

The Atilan rulers who take vows of silence is a nod to the Inhumans and the guy who has the psionic voice.

Tony's suggestion of a piston pump for the drainage was a real advance in mining equipment. The Deep Illum is a nod to a certain arts and entertainment district in the city where I live.

Works inspired by this: [Personal Loyalty and Disregard for Protocol](#) by ChibiSquirt, [The Acquisition of Pleasant Occupations](#) by sock_bealady, Art for "The Prize" by sabrecmc by Serinah, [It's Good to be the King](#) by One and Five Nines (Obani)

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