Sixpence In His Shoe

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Sixpence In His Shoe

by scifigrl47

Summary

Steve and Tony should really read the fine print on what they're signing. Then again, some mistakes are not really mistakes.

Notes

I took part in the wonderful "Stony Trumps Hate" fandom auction this spring. My winner was kind enough to provide me with a great prompt, and I'm hoping that I can do justice to it. As this is... Me, there'll probably be a few chapters before the inevitable happy ending!

Warnings for some really dumb choices by some really dumb boys, with alcohol involved. No one is drunk. But alcohol is involved and probably played a role in this dumbness.
"Purpose of your visit?"

Tony paused, the paper cup of cheap coffee that he'd been given when he'd gotten in this godforsaken line hovering inches from his mouth. "We got shot down over your airspace," he said, his voice flat. "By Doctor Doom." He raised one tuxedo clad arm. It had gotten through the whole mess relatively unscathed. He wasn't sure how. "He invited us to a party. There were actual invitations and RSVP cards, it was." He shook his head. "We came to a party. And then he decided to shoot at us."

The customs officer stopped, his mouth drawing up in a tight little knot. He stared at Tony over the top of his half-moon glasses, his eyes dark slits. Then, he switched his basilisk gaze to Steve. "Purpose of visit?" he repeated, the tip of his pen tapping out a quick, almost frantic, rhythm against the paper of his form.

Tony nearly went over the top of the counter at him. Steve, as if realizing this, clamped a firm hand down on his shoulder, pinning him in place. "We needed to make an emergency landing," he said, sounding entirely too calm for Tony's peace of mind. "Our jet's currently being repaired by an approved crew, as soon as we're able to take off, we'll be out of your hair, sir."

"Fixing the goddamn bullet holes," Tony muttered into his cup. "Goddamn Doom and his goddamn Doombots." Steve's hand tightened, a faint, gentle squeeze. Tony subsided with a sound that would've been an obscenity if he had the energy for obscenities.

The customs officer stared at him, clearly unamused. Tony was pretty sure the guy wasn't amused by much. He wondered if it was an occupational hazard of customs officers, or if the sort of people who became customs officers just lacked a sense of humor in general. Maybe it was on the employment form. He wondered if he could sneak that into the StarkIndustries employment applications. Probably not. HR didn't have much of a sense of humor about forms, either.

The man pushed himself up out of his chair. It took about five minutes for him to get fully upright, and once he was there, he stopped, as if he'd forgotten why he bothered. Tony stared at him. He stared back. "Wait here," he said at last, picking up both of their passports and their Avengers paperwork. Then, without another word, he toddled off towards a door in the rear of the customs office.

Tony glanced at the huge line behind him. Despite the hour, the queue line was full to overflowing, people perched on top of their luggage and sitting on the floor. Two men, who looked like locals, were playing cards, the draw deck tucked in the pocket of a jacket thrown on the upraised handle of a suitcase. A woman with two small children clinging to her skirts and a baby in a sling against her breast was handing out cookies and dried fruit from wrinkled paper bags. Powdered sugar floated like snow to the floor, coating the toes of the smaller boy. A group of students was clustered together, speaking in halting, uneven sentences, their head bent over well-worn phrase books. Florescent sticky flags marked pages that were apparently of particular interest, fluttering like nervous wings every time they turned a page. An elderly lady in a wheelchair napped, her head hanging forward, her lips parted, her hands folded in her lap. The airline employee pushing her chair appeared only slightly more awake than she was.

On the other side of the glass that separated them from the row of bored, blank faced customs officers, a door opened and then shut with a firm, unmistakable click. Tony glanced at the pile of half-filled forms that the officer had left behind. "Yeah, we're not going anywhere," he said,
resigned.

"Don't make this any harder than it has to be," Steve said, his voice pitched low, his head bent next to Tony's.

Tony tried to glare a hole into the uncaring door. "How long have we been friends?"

Steve made a considering sound under his breath. "Five years now?" Steve leaned an elbow on the counter. "Of course, that was before we got into this line, so I'd guess about six now, maybe seven-"

Against his will, Tony's lips twitched. "You think you're funny."

"You just smiled, so apparently, I am funny," Steve said, his mouth kicking up on one side. There was a smugness there that Tony was pretty sure he shouldn't encourage. Not that he had a choice. "No 'think' about it. I just got a bone fide smile out of you, and after today, I would've thought."

"Yes, yes, you're a funny guy, and I'm very easy when it comes to you, which you should know, after all the years we've been friends," Tony said. He gestured at the room at large with his lousy paper cup of coffee. "So you should know, I never make things harder than they have to be."

Steve choked on a laugh. "Now who's funny?" he asked.

"Not my fault that a lot of things in this world apparently have to be very, very hard," Tony said. "Like this entire trip. And goddamn Victor Von Dumbass and his goddamn-"

"You might've had something to do with how this all worked out," Steve said. Tony turned a stricken face in his direction, and Steve held up a hand, his index finger and thumb an inch or so apart. "Tiny something to do with it."

"And this is how our friendship ends," Tony said, leaning an elbow on the counter. "With baseless accusations and a complete lack of understanding of how I function."

"Oh, I'm well aware of how you function," Steve said, taking the cup of coffee out of Tony's hand. Tony made a grab for it, but Steve stepped back, staying safely out of reach. He sniffed at the cup, his brow wrinkling. "What is this?"

"Caffeinated motor oil," Tony said, making another attempt to reclaim the cup. "And the only thing keeping me alive at the moment. Give it back."

"I'm pretty certain this isn't actually edible," Steve said.

"Hasn't killed me yet, so."

"Yeah, the list of things that haven't killed you 'yet' is pretty long and gets more worrying for me with each passing day," Steve pointed out. He sucked in a breath, and, before Tony could do more than curse, downed the rest of the coffee in a single swallow. He came up coughing, his face flushed, a hand clapped to his mouth.

"I hope you enjoyed that," Tony told him.

"God, no, that was VILE," Steve said. He sounded shocked, and Tony struggled against an entirely inappropriate sense of satisfaction.

"Good," he said, just as the customs officer reappeared from the rear office.

He tottered over to his chair, hefting himself into it with an audible grunt of displeasure. Next to their
forms, he set a mug of tea. "Now. Where were we?" Tony gaped at him, his mouth hanging open, and the officer glanced from him, to Steve, and back. "Did you drink the coffee?" he asked.

Steve managed a nod. "It's... Strong," he said.

"It's shit," the officer said, glee coloring the words. He tapped the end of his pen against the cup. "Tea. Much better."

"I'll keep that in mind," Steve said.

The officer nodded, a pleased look on his face. Then he looked back down at his forms. "Now. Purpose of visit?"

Steve's arm clamped around Tony's waist with a speed and a force that Tony hadn't thought was possible. In a second, he went from standing on his own to being pinned against Steve's chest, his feet barely on the ground. "Hi," he whispered, amusement sweeping over him. "What're we doing?"

"Keeping you from creating a second international incident today," Steve whispered back.

"A SECOND-"

"We're here for unscheduled, unforeseen repairs," Steve said, ignoring him. "Our plane sustained damage leaving Latveria. There is an approved ground crew that was dispatched by the local SHIELD office attempting to get it back up and running now. We estimate it will be ready to go in a few hours. By morning at the latest."

The officer studied him. "Latveria?"

"Yes, sir."

The officer nodded, then leaned to the side. "Ay," he called, rattling off a string of words that Tony didn't have a chance of following. But in the line, one of the students ducked under the stanchions, working his way to the front of the line. A quick exchange between him and the officer, and he handed over his phrasebook. The officer bent over it, flicking through pages until he found what he was looking for. He looked up. "Doom is a-" He stabbed his fingertip against the page. "Asshole of man."

"Yes," Tony said with all due gravity. "Yes, he is."

The customs officer closed the dictionary and handed it back. The student retreated back to his place in line, and the officer reached for his stamp. "Case will be reviewed in the morning, if you are still here. Until then-" The stamp came down with a very final sounding thump on first Tony's paperwork, then Steve's. The officer pushed them back across the counter with a wide grin. "Welcome to Symkaria. Enjoy your stay." He leaned to the side. "NEXT."

"Are you KIDDING me-" was as far as Tony got before Steve reached past him and scooped up both their passports.

"Thank you, we appreciate your understanding," Steve said in that bright voice that he used when he was really hoping no one noticed how many things in the general vicinity were on fire. For some reason, it almost always worked.

It worked here, too. The customs official just waved a hand at them, his attention already focused on the rawboned woman in the mink stole and cutoff jeans that moved up behind them. Before Tony could get another word out, Steve lifted him off his feet and hustled him towards the exit of the line.
"This is undignified," he said, from between clenched teeth.


"I'm buying this entire country," Tony said, as they exited into the airport proper. He resisted the urge to kick Steve in the shins. "You planning on putting me down?"

"You planning on making a scene?"

"When do I ever-"

"I'm not even going to let you finish that lie, really, you're just embarrassing yourself." But Steve's arm loosened, lowering him to his feet. He leaned forward, his mouth so close to Tony's ear that Tony could feel the heat of his breath. "Behave."

And the thoughts going through his head were the exact opposite of behaving. Tony peeled Steve's arm away from his waist, ignoring the dirty, filthy, horny part of his brain. It was hard. That was a pretty big part. "Buying the whole country."

"Stop it," Steve said, and he was grinning, his blue eyes bright, his hair flopping over his forehead. "Remember rule 22."

"Was that the 'don't punch a head of state' one or the 'mocking of others tech is only allowed when they're actively breaking one or more laws or international statutes' one?" Tony asked.

"It's the 'no threatening colonialism' one," Steve told him.

"We have entirely too many rules, you know that?" Something smelled like coffee. Immediately distracted, Tony headed in that direction, leaving Steve to trail after him.

"We have most of them for a reason, and the reason is you," Steve said. They were attracting stares, which Tony wasn't surprised by. It was late, and the battered old airport terminal was typical of Soviet era buildings: big, impersonal, and gray. The sight of Steve was going to turn heads under ordinary circumstances. Dressed in a perfectly tailored tux, he was capable of stopping traffic.

Not that there was much traffic in here at this hour.

"Be fair," Tony said. "Some of them are Clint."

Steve's lips twitched. "Okay, a lot of them are Clint." He started ticking them off on his fingers. "Clint, Natasha, Carol, Thor-"

"You can't just list the whole team," Tony said. "That's- No, Steve."

"Sam and Jan are pretty well behaved, actually, so-"

"Jan has got you so hoodwinked, it's not even funny. She is absolutely the cause of like, 90% of our problems, but when you show up, she just acts surprised." Tony spread his hands, looking around with wide eyes. "'Who could've done this? We have no enemies?'"

"We actually have a lot of enemies, so-"

"It's- It's a joke," Tony said. Steve stared at him. He sighed. "Look, it's late, I'm tired, I'm banned from helping with the repairs-"

"You threatened an airport official with a power drill, Tony."
“Look, we don't have to get into the reasons WHY I'm banned, it's completely unimportant, the only thing that mattes is that I am going to go stir crazy if I have to sit here and watch SHIELD grunts make a ruin of my plane, and we've got a day pass in our passports. Wanna hit the town?” He tucked his hands in his pockets. "We're dressed for it."

Steve glanced down at himself, then at Tony. "I'm not really up for anything fancy," he said, with a lopsided smile. “It's been a very long day, Tony.”

“You're telling me. I had a champagne bottle used as a deadly weapon against me, and that's only the second time in my life I can say that.” Tony threw an arm around Steve's shoulders. "Come on. Let me introduce you to the joys of ordering food from a street vendor in the middle of the night while wearing a tux.”

"Why do I think this is going to end badly?" Steve asked, but he was smiling when he asked the question.

"Because you're a cynical, cynical man," Tony told him. "Come on. Let's find the local equivalent of an overcooked hot dog. My treat."

*

The center of the city was barely contained chaos.

"This is not my fault."

Steve bit back a smile. "You're efficient," he agreed, catching Tony's elbow before he could get swept away by the crowd, "but not even you could make this much trouble, this fast."

In the fractured light of the streetlights, he saw Tony's teeth flash in a feral sort of grin. "You always did underestimate me, Rogers." He twisted around, watching the crowds. "But yes. Even for me. This seems excessive."

The streets were full of people, holding signs painted on cardboard and sheets, rainbow flags tied around people's shoulders and dangling from upraised fists. There was singing and chanting coming from various groups, and something that Steve would've identified as parade floats moving clumsily through the crowds. On them, girls with shaved heads combat fatigues also wore flower crowns and small domino style masks, their hands covered in glitter as they tossed fistfuls of rainbow confetti into the crowd. Musicians and DJs were scattered in each moving platform, the traditional instruments mixing with modern house music to form a riotous, almost cacophonous sound. Dancers followed behind, shoes kicking up gleaming rainbow clouds with each step.

"So, I'm guessing gay rights protest?" Tony asked, grinning. A teenager wearing a mask along with his patched, ragged jeans and well-worn t-shirt darted out of the crowd, grabbing Tony's arm. He said something, his smile brilliant, and then pressed a kiss to Tony's cheek. Laughing, he dashed away again, the glitter in his hair gleaming as he disappeared into the crowd. Tony grinned after him. "Very amiable protest, but yes." He was laughing when he looked in Steve's direction. “Maybe a little bit gay.”

Steve had never envied a teenager as much in his life. Partially for the pure joy on the kid's face, the complete embracing of who he was and what that meant, and partially because he could kiss Tony so easily, without even thinking about it. Without having to consider what that meant, what Tony would think it meant.

Steve took a deep breath. He absolutely was not in love with one of his best friends. He had to keep
reminding himself of that. Maybe someday he'd actually believe it.

Steve squinted at a few of the signs passing by. He didn't speak the language, but the symbols had become universal, it seemed. "Love is love," he said, because those were some of the few English words that were visible. Two older women stepped around him, their arms linked together. They were wearing masks as well. "The masks are new."

Tony nodded. "I like it. Stylish."

Steve choked on a laugh. "You would."

Tony gave him a look. "Please. You've worn a few in your time, too." He put his hands up on either side of his head, his thumbs planted on his temples and his fingers wiggling. "And wings. Tiny, adorable wings."

"I don't know if you expect me to be ashamed of the wings, but-" Steve grinned as confetti came fluttering down, settling in Tony's dark hair. His fingers twitched against his palm as he resisted the urge to brush it away. "Not going to happen."

"I expected nothing less." Tony grabbed his arm. "Come on. Let's find out where everyone's going."

This was a bad idea. He knew it was. But Tony was grinning at him, his eyes bright, his cheeks flushed, and Steve had always liked a good, honest protest. "Fine," he said, and when Tony let go of his sleeve, moving away, Steve made a grab for him. "Oh, no. You're not losing me in this."

"I'm not going far," Tony said, but he wove his fingers through Steve's, his grip firm and strong. "Try to keep up, old man."

Steve grinned, warmth curling through him. He should pull away. He knew it. But they were far from home, and, despite what they were wearing, no one was paying any attention to them. Probably because there were people wearing things that were far more eye catching. A man in what appeared to be a collection of mismatched leather pieces and two different feather boas passed by, going in the other direction, and Steve caught himself laughing, bright and real, at nothing in particular.

For the first time in about seventy years, he felt like he could blend in.

Tony glanced over his shoulder at him. "You losing it already, Cap?"

"Lost it a long time ago," Steve said, and Tony's hand tightened on his, his fingers firm and familiar. "Move it. I've got your back."

"When do you not?" Tony said, but he was already plowing forward, through the crowd, through the showers of confetti, and Steve followed behind him, just glad to be along for the ride.

Steve wasn't sure how he did it, but somehow, Tony found the center of the chaos, an array of tables and small booths where people in matching shirts were handing out bottles of water, packages of prophelactics, and multicolored domino masks. Tony slipped through a pack of older ladies in matching red hats, tugging Steve along with him.

"Hello!" he said, to the woman behind the table. He pointed at the box of masks. "How much?"

The woman blinked at him. "English?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

Tony nodded, already pulling his wallet out of his pocket. "Enough?" he held up a few bills of the local currency, and pointed at the masks again.
She frowned at him, then at Steve. Steve tried a reassuring smile. It didn't work. She turned and ducked around the edge of the table. Steve watched her go, his eyebrows raised. “That went well,” he said.


“Sorry, I'll try to be shorter in the future,” Steve said, amused, as the woman reappeared, dragging a young man by the arm. His glasses were crooked on his nose, and his hair had been bleached and the tips frosted in pale blue.

The woman pointed at them, a spill of words washing over them. The boy blinked at them. “English?” he asked, his voice curious.

"Yes." Steve smiled at him. "Sorry."

The teenager laughed. "Good practice for me." The woman nudged him, pointing from Tony to the masks, speaking rapidly. The boy nodded. “Free. We take donations.” He pointed at the wooden box at the end of the table. “But free.” He grabbed a few from the box and held them out. “Take one!”

Tony folded the bills and dropped them in the box, earning himself a pleased smile and a nod from the woman. Steve reached out and took a black mask from the boy. “Thank you.” Tony reached around him, taking a red one with glitter swirls along the edges. “Subtle.”

“Always.” Tony turned his over in his hands, a faint smile curling the edges of his lips. He glanced up. "Why?"

The teenager hummed for a second, his nose wrinkling. "Not everyone-" he waved a hand at the crowd. "Dangerous. To be here. Some people-" He stopped again, one finger tapping at the table, where the rainbow flag rested. "No one knows."

"They're not out," Tony said.

"Out, out, yes. Not out," the boy agreed. "But everyone should be here. This-" He gestured again, his face bright, his cheeks flushed below the edges of his glasses. "This is for everyone. Tonight, it's for everyone. But not everyone can be seen. So-" He tapped the mask. "If no one is seen, everyone can be seen?"

"If everyone wears a mask," Steve said, "then everyone's safe." The boy nodded, his teeth flashing in a grin. Steve smiled back. "Safety in numbers."

"Yes! Hide." The boy nodded, a firm dip of his chin. "Be safe. Okay?"

"Thank you," Steve said, as Tony slipped the mask over his face.

“Looks good,” the teenager said. He reached out, grabbing Steve's hand and shaking it firmly. “Glad you came. Thank you!” The woman nudged him, whispering something to him, and he nodded. “Enjoy the photo ops! We have Instagram filter!”

“What?” Steve asked, but the boy was already heading off to speak to someone else, a basket of masks balanced on his hip. Steve watched him go, bemused.

“Huh, what do you know,” Tony said, staring down at his phone. “They do.”

“Photo ops?” Steve asked.
Tony glanced up. “Photo ops,” he said, reaching for the mask in Steve's hand. “Lean over.” Steve bent forward, just a bit, and Tony slipped the mask over his head, tucking the elastic in place behind Steve's ears. Steve's eyes fluttered shut, his lips falling open as Tony's fingers smoothed his hair down. “There.”

Steve looked up, and Tony was grinning at him, his eyes brilliant in the hollows of his masks. “What do you think?” he asked, giving Tony a lopsided smile. “Can I pull it off?”

Tony pressed a finger to his pursed lips, his eyes narrowing. “You make it work,” he said at last, his face softening. He held Steve's eyes for a second longer, then turned away. “Come on. I haven't had my picture taken in at least ten hours; much longer and I'm going to go into withdrawal.”

Steve grinned. “Well, when you put it like that, I guess we've got no choice.”

* * *

“Let's go punch Doctor Doom.”

“No,” Steve said, but Tony was pretty sure there was wiggle room there. He was grinning as he took a bite of the flatbread stuffed with sausages and a mix of pickled vegetables. The wax paper wrapping it crackled as he tried to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand without dropping his drink.

Laughing, Tony fished a napkin out of his pocket. “You'd think as a native New Yorker, you'd be better at eating on the move,” he said, wiping Steve's chin.

Steve fended him off with one hand, his eyes bright and his cheeks pink beneath the curves of his mask. “We could stop, you know,” he said, rebalancing his load so he could take the napkin from Tony. “Eat like civilized people.”

“Waste of time,” Tony said. Someone nearby was selling something fried, he could smell the crisp, heavy smell of melting sugar and hot oil. Tony followed his nose, leaving Steve to trail along behind him. “The line for punching Doctor Doom is short. Just saying. We could get that done now-”

Steve leaned over his shoulder. “I've had enough bad propaganda pictures of me punching world leaders in circulation,” he said. “I'm not faking it with a cardboard cutout.”

Tony grinned back at him, feeling happier than he had in a long time. He was pretty sure at least part of that was the drink he'd picked up at one of the stands lining the main square. He wasn't sure what was in it, but it was definitely alcoholic. Like a hot toddy, but stronger, and full of spices he wasn't used to. But it was definitely very, very alcoholic.

“Don't be gauche,” he said. “They've got a guy dressed up in a very bad costume, so-”

“No,” Steve told him, but he was smiling. He offered Tony his sandwich. Tony picked a sausage out of it, popping it into his mouth. Steve did the same, licking his fingers clean. “I did the one with the King's office, or maybe it's the Prime Minister's, I don't even know-”

“I choose to think that it was the local variation on the Oval Office,” Tony said. “You make a good King slash president.” He stopped short, his eyes going wide. “We should-”

“No,” Steve told him.

Tony gave him a look. “You don't even know what I'm going to say.”
I don't, and I'm still comfortable with my 'no,'” Steve said. He took the cup out of Tony's hand, stealing a sip of it before Tony could get it back. His eyebrows arched. “How drunk are you right now?”

Tony took the cup back. “Not drunk,” he said, his tone arch. “Just comfortably relaxed.” A pack of dancing women went by, signs decorated with peacock plumes held high, and beyond them, Tony spotted a battered panel van with a fryer set up by its back bumper. Elated, Tony made a sharp right, drawn by the promise of something desperately unhealthy.

The women running the stand were dishing out paper plates of heavy, dense fried dough, dusted with powdered sugar and cinnamon, and piled high with syrup drenched fruit. They were apparently well used to tourists; it took only a few gestures for him to collect a plate of steaming dough and rough chunks of apple. The woman handed him his change and stuck a fork in the fruit with a practiced gesture.

Tony collected his drink and turned, expecting to find Steve right behind him. Instead, he came face to face with two young women. “Hi,” he said, because they were staring at him, eyes wide behind their masks. The two looked at each other, whispering to one another. Amused, Tony took a sip of his drink. “Can I help you two?”

One of the girls, a tall, lanky teenager in a pair of heavy military style boots and a flowing dress, caught his hand. The other, a shorter girl with long black curls and round pink cheeks, grabbed his other arm. Together, they pulled him forward.

“Hey, now, what-” Before he could lose something, he tossed back the rest of his drink, swallowing it in two quick gulps. The warmth hit him almost immediately, curling through him as he threw the cup at a nearby trash can. “Okay. What are you doing?” he asked one of the girls. She pointed at him, and plucked at the cuff of his tux jacket. “Oh, you like my clothes? Great. Me, too, but-”

Either they didn't understand English or they were pretending they didn't so they could avoid talking to him. It wouldn't be the first time. But as they ducked past a display made to look like the bow of the Titanic and ran across the floor of a New York disco, circa 1975, he found himself laughing. “I don't know where we're going, but can we go back to the Titanic, because that, that was amazing, seriously, I don't even know what's happening here, but that was an amazing work of engineering considering that it's plywood and canvas and a lot of duct tape, so-”

The two girls came to a stop, and Tony nearly lost his fried dough. He bobbled the plate, trying to keep the apple filling in place, looking around in confusion.

In front of them was a small raised dais, almost lost in the midst of larger, louder setpieces. On it was a small table piled with stacks of paper and folders, a small metal goblet, and a couple of candles. An elderly man, wizened and bent with age, was perched on a rough wooden stool, a bible in his lap and his thin, gnarled hands folded over the grip of his cane. He looked up as the girls finagled Tony up the single step onto the platform, a smile creasing his cheeks. Unlike just about everyone else around, he wasn't wearing a mask, but his thick, round glasses gave him a wise, quizzical appearance, and white hair was dusted with confetti. He was in a robe of some sort, heavy and possibly as old as he was.

He reached out, touching Tony gently on the breast, a few soft words spilling from his lips. Tony didn't understand them, but somehow, he didn't have to. Even he knew a blessing when he heard one, and to his surprise, his eyes burned. He nodded, just a little. “Thank you,” he said, and the man smiled up at him, kindness writ large on his face.

“Tony?”
Tony twisted around as Steve slipped through the crowd, relief washing over his face. He hopped up onto the stage. “I lost you.”

Tony grinned at him. “Not for long.” He looked back at the old man, who was struggling to his feet now, setting his cane against the side of his stool. “No, you don't have to—”

The old man opened the bible, his fingers smoothing the delicate pages. He smiled first at Tony, then at Steve, and Tony was suddenly very, very sober.

“No,” he said, holding up his hands. “No, we're not—”

There was the sound of applause from behind them, and he twisted around. The two girls who had brought him here were both watching, their hands clasped together, wearing identical grins. An older woman leaned her folded arms on the top of a sign, her long gray braids wrapped around her head like a wreath. Two men, wearing the olive drab outfits of soldiers, stood nearby, one with his arms looped around the other from behind.

Tony gave them his best smile and a wave. “I know we're dressed for a wedding, but a man's got a right to expect a proposal, so—”

“Marry me.”

Tony’s stomach turned over, his skin icing over in an instant. Almost as quickly as it had hit, it was gone, his face going hot as he turned to stare at Steve. “What?” he managed.

Steve took the plate of fried dough out of his hand, setting it on the small wooden table nearby. “Marry me,” he repeated, and when he looked up, his face was full of joy. He leaned in, his face boyish in its brilliance. “Unless you want a better proposal?”

The image of Steve down in front of him on one knee morphed into one of just Steve on his knees, and both of those were unacceptable, both of those would haunt his dreams in ways he didn't even want to contemplate. Tony squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to breathe. “No, that's fine, that's—” He was not a child. He'd been in love before, and it hadn't worked out then, either. He could handle this. He had been handling this, for weeks, for months, for years.

He didn't want to think about how long he'd been in love with Steve Rogers. If he allowed himself to dwell on that, he would lose what was left of his mind.

Tony opened his eyes, and Steve was right there, right in front of him, still smiling, bright and full of light and warmth, and Tony wanted to scream at him, wanting to shake him. “Listen, buddy,” he said, and he was shocked at how steady his voice was. “I'm not the kind of guy who gets married on the first goddamn date, what the hell?”

He tried not to see the crowd they'd attracted, people piling up around the edges of the platform. He was used to being a spectacle, but trust Steve to take 'making a scene' to an entirely new level. Because Steve was still smiling at him, and if he was concerned, or embarrassed, it didn't show on his face. Tony supposed not everyone had the extensive experience to cultivate a 'complete disaster' sense the way he had.

“Marry me, and I'll go punch the faux Doom,” Steve said, and it was such a goddamn Steve Rogers thing to say that Tony felt something inside him snap.

“These two photo ops are not at all the same thing,” Tony said, but it wasn't a no. He knew it wasn't a no, and judging by the way Steve's smile turned just a tiny bit smug, he knew it, too. Tony wondered when he'd lost the upper hand in this conversation. He'd never had the moral high ground,
but for an instant, he'd had the upper hand. “Not at all.”

“Fine.” Steve leaned in. “I'll punch Doom twice and buy you breakfast.”

Tony stared at him, his heart in his throat. “We tag-team Doom and I want lunch next week, too.” Steve was laughing now, his face alive with it, and Tony knew this would be the ruin of him. He wasn't sure he cared.

“Done,” Steve said, and he looked at the priest, giving him a smile and a nod. The old man adjusted his glasses, nodding back. Steve fished his phone out of his pocket. “One second.” He turned, grabbing Tony's arm to pull him in next to him. “Smile.”

“Are we really selfieing this?” Tony asked him, but he smiled anyway. Then he took the phone out of Steve's hand, turning to the girls who'd gotten him into this mess. “Picture?” he asked, holding it up, and the tall one took it with a pleased smile and an enthusiastic nod.

“Ready?” Steve asked.

Tony reached out, adjusting Steve's bow tie. “How are you still wearing this?”

Steve tipped his chin up, letting him do it. “I didn't want to lose anything. It's a rental.” Tony stopped giving him an incredulous look, and Steve grinned at him. “Ready?”

No. Not at all. Tony smiled back. “Sure,” he said.

The 'ceremony' was mercifully short. The 'priest' said a few words, pressed a gentle palm to Steve's forehead, then Tony's. Tony resisted the urge to lunge for the edge of the stage as the priest gestured at Steve. Steve, grinning, said, “I do.”

The old man looked at Tony, and Tony was pretty sure he could see eternity in the depths of his eyes, in the dark shadows behind his glasses. The world spun on its axis, and he wasn't sure if it was the exhaustion or the alcohol or the situation itself, but he heard himself say “I do,” the voice echoing as if from a great distance.

The crowd cheered, and it was over. Feeling relieved and foolish and elated in equal parts, he turned to smile at the crowd. He gave a little wave as someone threw confetti into the air. It fluttered down around them, and he laughed. "Thank you, much appreciated, who's next, because-"

Fingers, warm and firm, slipped under his chin, holding him still, and then Steve's lips brushed across his cheek. Startled, he turned, and Steve was right there, eyes bright and gleaming in the shadows of his mask. Tony felt his face heat, an embarrassing response for a man of his age, but Steve's fingers were still cradling his jaw, and his lips, lips that Tony had absolutely not had filthy, filthy thoughts about during more than one Avengers team meeting, were right there, right-

The fact that Tony leaned in and kissed him was probably to be expected.

It was quick, almost chaste, his lips ghosting over Steve's, both of them unnaturally still, as if they knew it wasn't going to last. It shouldn't last, after all. It wasn't real.

But when Tony pulled away, he was breathing hard, his pulse throbbing in his ears like he'd just done ten rounds in the suit. Steve blinked at him, his long lashes fluttering, and Tony caught himself grinning. "Sorry,” he said, the words almost lost in the cheering of the crowd. "I've got a reputation to maintain."

The slow, incremental dawning of Steve's smile was still one of the most beautiful things he'd ever
seen. “I'd heard things,” he said.

“Don't believe them,” Tony told him. “I'm a paragon of virtue.”

“Wow. That's disappointing.” The old priest was holding out a page to them, and Tony watched, his head spinning, as Steve filled out the empty spots on the form and signed with a flourish. He held the pen out to Tony. “So am I. This is going to be one hell of a boring marriage.”

“Right.” Tony didn't even look, he just scribbled something like a signature on the page. “Boring.”

He needed a drink. A very strong one.

*

"Wake up."

Ellen pushed her face deeper into her pillow. "Go away."

"Wake up."

She gritted her teeth. "Go. Away."

There was a beat of silence. Ellen squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the way her head was pounding. It was an impossible task. “Ellen.”

“I will have you fired and replace you with a pretty boy who can use a telephoto lens properly,” Ellen said. “You're the worst photographer. I hate you.”

Another moment of stillness, and then something crashed down on her bed, almost sending her flying. Shriking, Ellen grabbed for the blankets, clutching them to her chest. Jesse was sitting in the middle of the mattress, clad in battered cargo shorts and an olive drab tank top, her booted feet hanging off the edge of the mattress. “Bitch, do not insult my art,” she said, her eyes narrowed at Ellen. Despite what they'd drunk last night and the painfully early hour, she seemed completely awake and healthy, her dark brown skin clear and her eyes bright beneath the fringe of pink curls that crowned her head.

In comparison, Ellen was pretty sure she looked like she'd been dead a week or so. Of gangrene.

“Please go away,” she said. “Let me die in peace.”

Jesse gave her a look that was distinctly unimpressed. "Shouldn't've drunk so much," she sang-songed, her head bouncing from side to side with each word. The visual effect was enough to turn Ellen's stomach, and she slapped her pillow over her face. "Your hangover is unimportant to me, wake up and smell the news."

"I filed my story last night. It's over. It's done," Ellen muttered into her pillow. "I don't care about anything, because I filed my damn story."

“Yeah.” Jesse pulled her phone out of the pocket of her cargo shorts. ““Statutory Surprise in Symkaria,”” she read aloud. She gave Ellen a look. “Really, you had to go for the alliteration?”

Ellen held up her hands. ““Statutory Surprise in Symkaria: Same Sex Marriage Made Legal Overnight,”” she said, still pleased with that.

“You missed your calling, you should've been writing headlines during the 1800's,” Jesse said, flopping out on Ellen's bed. Ellen considered kicking her. “Article's good, though.”
Ellen reconsidered the kicking. “Of course it is,” she said, rolling over. “Considering we got here six hours after King Stefan signed the damn bill with absolutely no warning.” She punched a fist into her pillow. “No. Warning.”

“Lame Duck Prime Minister looking to get himself into the history books,” Jesse said. She patted Ellen's hip. “It's fine. Everyone else was caught just as off guard. We got here, right?”

“We got here,” Ellen said. It had nearly killed her, but they'd made it in time to do some interviews, take some pictures, file the first Western dispatch from the celebration. Then she'd had a little too much to drink and way too little sleep. She pulled her pillow over her face. “There is- There is nothing happening, there is no news, there's nothing at all, there is nothing you could tell me that could get me out of this bed.”

Something fluttered against her stomach, and she fumbled for it. ”Don't know. This might,” Jesse said.

She sounded smug. Which was, really, kind of unusual. Ellen pushed the pillow away from her face, holding up the photo in front of her. It took her eyes a very long time to focus.

It was a very well composed shot. If she hadn't been in the middle of the same mess as Jesse had been last night, she would've thought it was staged. But there was no chance that was the case, and that meant, Jesse had gotten very, very lucky.

The shot was framed on all sides with a fall of glittering, multicolored confetti, the individual pieces forming an out-of-focus swirl. It gave the image a sense of motion, like a wave, or an explosion. Caught in the center were two well-built men, both dressed in tuxedos and masks, one tall and broad and blonde, the other more compact and lithe, with a dark goatee and black hair.

They'd been caught in profile, the blonde's fingers cradling the brunette's chin. He was smiling, his body canted forward, his head tipped to the side. The dark haired man was turned away from him, as if the blonde had caught him off guard. Beneath the edge of his glittering red mask, his cheeks were flushed, his lips parted.

There was something intimate about their posture, about the way that the black edges of their formal clothes seemed to bleed into each other, like there not fully separate entities. In the middle of a party, of a celebration, they were still, they were seeing only each other.

Ellen yawned, holding the photo back out to her. ”Nice work. Good. You should submit it somewhere.”

Jesse didn't take it from her. “After you passed out last night-”

“Fuck you,” Ellen said, flopping back on her bed. “Fuck you specifically, I-”

“After you passed out last night,” Jesse repeated, unconcerned, “I ended up talking to a couple of the guys down in the hotel bar.” She tucked a leg up under her. There was a sort of wired energy to her posture that Ellen had learned to respect. “Practiced my Russian.”

Ellen wadded up a pillow behind her. “How'd that go?”

Jesse shrugged. “So, know what they were financing with donations last night?” she asked. Ellen just stared at her. “Marriage licenses.” She shoved a hand through her hair. “It's one of the main stumbling blocks to actually, you know, getting married. Symkaria doesn't have a waiting period, or even blood tests, but they make sure people think hard about getting married by making it really expensive.”
Ellen blinked at her. “How expensive?”

“Prohibitively expensive,” Jesse told her. “And even though the parliament approved the bill and the King signed it into law, like, in six hourse, the locals are worried, as you might imagine, about legal challenges. So a lot of people who've been together for years wanted to get the deed done before someone tried to turn back the clock.”

Something clicked in Ellen's head. “Wait, were people really getting married last night?” She grabbed the photo. “Is this-” She realized she was grinning. “They got married?”

Jesse nodded. “We were late-”

“Yeah, fuck layovers,” Ellen said.

“But the guy I talked to last night said they'd managed to pay for the marriage licenses for eighty-nine couples yesterday, and yeah.” She flopped over to the side to point at the picture. “If you look in the background, you can see the priest? So these two got married. I mean. Pretty sure they did. The licenses that the couples signed will be official record today, so we'd have to check with the town hall to check and see.”

Ellen stared at her. “Why... Would we do that?” she asked at last.

Jesse took the picture out of her hand and held it out in front of her. "Look closer," she said. She braced a hand on the edge of the bed, her short hair falling forward over her forehead. "Look at the goatee."

Ellen squinted down at the picture. The man on the right, the dark haired one with the facial hair, had been caught in profile, his head tipped up to give a perfect view of his jawline. Her eyes narrowed, a vague sense of familiarity hovering in the back of her mind. "It's... A goatee," she said, but she didn't sound certain, even to her own ears.

Jesse stared at her. Ellen stared back. “What?” she asked at last. “What are you seeing that I'm not-”

Jesse took the picture from her and dug into one of her pockets, coming up with a blue marker. She snagged the cap in her teeth and yanked it off, leaning over the picture. For a second, she scribbled at it, then held it back up. She’d drawn a blue mask and cowl on the blonde man. “How about now?”

Ellen stared. “Is that-” Her head snapped up, so fast that she ended up swaying in place, her head spinning. “Is that STEVE ROGERS?”

Jesse looked around the edge of the picture, nodding and smiling. “And that makes this one-” She tapped the brunette, and Ellen recognized that jawline at last.

“Holy fuck,” she breathed. “It's-” She couldn't even get the words out. She might've been hyperventilating. She might've been having a stroke. “It's-”

“Tony Stark,” Jesse filled in for her. She pointed to the background of the photo. “And THAT'S a priest.”

Ellen stared at nothing in particular. “You're telling me that Captain America and Iron Man flew to a foreign country and got married. To-” She clutched her forehead, and wondered if this was how God was punishing her for drinking too much, for getting too wrapped up in the story she was supposed to be covering. “To EACH OTHER.”

Jesse threw her hands in the air. "Yeah. I think they did."
Ellen sucked in a breath. "Oh, my god, you are so rich. This is-" She held it up. "This is the holy grail, this is-"

Jesse leaned in. "Only if it's true. Only if we can prove it." Her dark eyes were alight. "Wanna help me prove it?"

Ellen grabbed her arms. “I love you,” she said, and she meant it, more than she'd ever meant anything she'd ever said in her life.

Jesse's eyes rolled towards the ceiling. “Right,” she said, but she was smiling. “Get your hungover ass out of bed, and let's go pound on the door of city hall.”
Chapter 2

“Steve?”

Steve made an inarticulate sound, pressing his face deeper into his pillow. Whatever it was, someone else could handle it. All he wanted to do was sleep.

“Steve.”

He was starving, but the very thought of food made his stomach turn over. He breathed through his nose, his teeth clamped together as he struggled against an unexpected wave of nausea.

“Steven.”

His mouth felt dry and spongy, and he wondered if he could stagger to the bathroom without opening his eyes. He was pretty sure he could. He wasn't sure if he wanted to.

“Captain Rogers, wake up.”

Steve's eyes snapped open. He sucked in a breath so fast that he inhaled a corner of his pillowcase and came up coughing. “Jarvis?” He tried to lever himself upright, and failed. “Jarvis, what's-” He blinked at the unfamiliar room, his brain struggling to catch up. White ceiling. White walls. White carpets. Sheer white curtains layered over massive, floor to ceiling windows, letting the sunlight spill over the massive white bed piled high with piles of white linens.

In the monochrome emptiness of the room, the dark hair on the pillow next to his came as a shock.

Steve pushed himself upright, his breath leaving him in a rush. Tony was sprawled out next to him, the blankets pulled up almost over his head. Only the dark tumble of his hair, tangled with dark red rose petals, one perfect cheekbone, and a tawny, golden arm was visible. His fingers were lax against the pillow, the line of his jaw rough with stubble.

Looking at him hurt in a way that Steve didn't really want to think about, and he scraped a hand over his face. “Jarvis?”

“I do apologize, but SHIELD reports that the repairs on the quinjet are nearly complete, and your presence is requested.” The familiar voice, he now realized, was coming from the phone on the bedside table. Tony's phone. Steve picked it up.

“Right.” He took a breath. His head ached with the dull, vaguely remembered pain of a hangover. He might not get them anymore, but sometimes, he could swear he felt it, the pain like a phantom limb that he refused to give up.

He had a feeling he'd earned it this time.

“Right,” he repeated, scrubbing a hand over his face. “How long?”

“An hour,” Jarvis said. “But we may need that long to wake your companion.”

Steve looked over at Tony, who was doing his best to ignore them both. But he was clearly awake, his fingers flexing against his pillow. Steve smiled down at him. “Come on, Sleeping Beauty,” he said, affection and love curling through him like a physical warmth. “Duty calls.”
“Can't. Dead," Tony mumbled into his pillow.

“Well, get over it, I'm not handling the debrief alone," Steve told him. He relaxed back against the pillows, stacking his hands on his stomach.

Tony groaned. "How drunk was I? Because, I have to say, I am very hungover right now."

Steve grinned at the ceiling. "I'd say you were enthusiastically inebriated," he said. Tony groaned again, longer and deeper this time, and Steve reached out to pat him lightly on the shoulder. "Pretty sure we were drinking drain cleaner."

Another soft, pained moan. "I think that was rocket fuel, actually." Very carefully, Tony moved his head, just far enough to peek at Steve with one bloodshot eye. "Where are we?"

"Honeymoon suite," Steve told him, because he was not a nice person sometimes.

Tony seemed to be struggling to focus on him. "Why?" he said at last.

"Well, it appears that assumptions were made about our mode of dress and our participating in the local festivities," Steve mused. He stacked his hands behind his neck. "And while I was trying to unravel the situation and get us a room with, you know, two beds, you found the hot tub and decided you were going to live there. Then proceeded to climb in fully dressed." Steve paused. "At that point, moving you seemed like more trouble than it was really worth."

Tony's eye narrowed. "You lie," he said.

Steve reached for his phone, still in easy reach on the bedside table. "Now, Mr. Stark, I think we all know that I stand for truth, justice, and the American-" Tony snatched the phone out of his fingers, leaving Steve grinning down at his empty hand. "Now, that was just uncalled for."

"Shut up, you corporate shill," Tony said, but he was grinning when he said it, as he rolled onto his back, poking at the phone. "What kind of hellish blackmail did you-"

The video was the last thing he'd done on the phone, so it was still sitting there, ready to go. The sound wasn't the best, but the footage was clear enough.

Tony was sprawled out in the mammoth bath tub slash hot tub, still fully dressed in his tux, his arms braced on the rim. He was soaked to the skin, his bow tie hanging loose around his neck and his jacket unbuttoned. Beneath it, the fine white fabric of his dress shirt was transparent, and through it, both his skin and the soft, cool glow of the arc reactor was completely visible. His eyes were closed, his long dark lashes in wet spikes against his cheekbones and his hair a damp tangle on his forehead.

From off camera, Steve's voice came, clearly amused. "Comfortable?"

Tony made a sound that still made Steve blush even now, low and raw and full of pleasure. His eyes opened, just a little, and he was laughing, his cheeks flushed. "I live here now," he said.

"You can't live in the bath tub," Steve told him.

Tony slipped a little lower in the water, the ends of his tie floating along the surface. "That's quitter talk, Rogers." One languid hand fumbled next to the tub, coming up at last with a bottle of mineral water. "So much quitter talk." He stared at the camera, his eyes glinting with the sort of intent that twisted Steve's stomach into knots, and tipped the bottle to his lips.

"How long does this go on?" the significantly more hung-over Tony holding the phone asked. He
sounded resigned.

"Long enough for you to get your tongue stuck in the neck of the bottle, and then laugh yourself almost to tears about that once you got yourself free," Steve said, grinning. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "Alcoholic battery acid, Tony."

"Pure liquid malice. Hate in a semi-solid state," Tony agreed, stopping the video with a flick of his wrist. He dropped the phone to the bed. "Sorry."

Steve let his eyes drift shut, strangely at peace here, despite his aching head, despite the things that he wanted that he was never going to have. "As drunks go, you're a pretty harmless one."

"Lies. I'm a menace to myself and others," Tony said, pressing his hands to his eyes. "And then you wrapped yourself in every towel in the room and tried to climb into the only bed soaking wet."

Tony winced. "Was I charming, though?"

Steve couldn't hold back a smile. "Charming enough that I didn't kick your ass out into the hall," he admitted.

"Right," Tony said, and he sounded resigned. Steve bit his lip to keep from laughing. "Wait." His eyes slid in Steve’s direction. "I got into the bath tub in my tux."

"You sure did," Steve agreed.

Tony's eyes squeezed shut. "Tell me I'm not naked right now."

Steve stared at him, and then reached for the hem of the blanket. Tony grabbed for it, and Steve collapsed back onto the pillows, laughing out loud. "The front desk sent up a pair of shorts from the spa," he said, "and I think you stole my shirt."

There was a moment of silence, then the rustle of fabric as Tony lifted the sheets. "Well, this is going to look good when we try to leave," he said, his voice resigned.

"A SHIELD agent has been dispatched from the airport with your luggage," Jarvis said. He sounded bored. As if trying to find Tony clothes before he walked out in public was a task that had fallen to him far too often and now he was just resigned to it.

"Excellent!" Tony said. He paused, and dug under the pillow, his face scrunching up as he made a grab for something. A moment later, he dragged Steve's wrinkled dress shirt out. It dangled limply from his hand. "I was quite drunk, wasn’t I?"

"I’ve seen worse," Steve said. "But that stuff was starting to wear down my tolerance, so I’m surprised you could still stand up by the time we made it here."

"I might’ve been drop dead drunk, but I pride myself in staying upright through it," Tony said,
tossing the shirt aside. He shifted, reaching for the phone, and stopped halfway there, clutching his head. “Oh, God.”

Steve rolled to the edge of the bed, doing his best not to jostle Tony any more than was absolutely necessary. “Stay here,” he said. “I’ll get the coffee going.”

Tony collapsed back onto the bed, mumbling something under his breath, and it sounded almost like “I love you,” and Steve did his best to ignore that. Certain things, after all, just weren’t good for his mental health.

The bedroom opened into a larger sitting room beyond, with white furniture arranged artfully on a gleaming black tile floor. One exterior wall was made up of massive windows, letting the sunlight spill in over the comfortable looking couch and chairs and the elegant glass and metal fixtures. The gleaming white sideboard held an artistic arrangement of lilies and white roses, a variety of liquor bottles, and a coffee pot.

He started the coffee brewing before opening the minibar. There were a variety of unfamiliar tins and packages lined up on the shelves, small packets of cheese and crackers, fancy chocolates and local delicacies. He was actively considering opening the mixed nuts when the coffee pot beeped, the last of the coffee hissing into the pot.

Steve poured two cups, downing half of his as he headed back to the bedroom. He paused in the doorway. “I have coffee.”

“You are a saint,” Tony said into his pillow. One arm emerged from the blankets, his fingers making grabbing motions at the air.

Steve grinned at him. “If I give this to you, what’re the chances that you’ll actually manage to drink it without spilling it everywhere?”

“The odds aren't good,” Tony said. “I want it anyway.”

“Right, but that’s-”

There was a polite, subdued tap at the door, just loud enough to bring Steve's head up. Before he could say anything, Jarvis said, "I took the liberty of ordering room service for a... Late breakfast."

“Thanks, but... You could've told me not to bother making coffee,” Steve said.

“I estimated that sir would require both pots to be moderately functional.

"That was pretty judgey, Jay," Tony said from under the cover of his pillow.

"Forgive me, sir, as it appears a certain amount of judging is in order, based on the situation."

"Jarvis's mad at you," Steve said, pushing away from the bedroom doorway. He crossed to the bed, setting the cup of coffee down on the bedside table within Tony's reach. "Now you're in trouble."

"You think you're kidding," Tony mumbled. “But I know. I know I'm doomed. He'll make my life a living hell. He can do that. He will do that.”

“Sir, you do need to get up at some point,” Jarvis said.

Laughing, Steve headed to the door. He paused, hand on the doorknob, staring down at himself for just a second. Barefoot, wearing what was clearly yesterday's pants and a white undershirt, he was
wasn't exactly presentable, but he was pretty sure the room service waiter had seen worse.

He gave a cursory look out the peephole before opening the door. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said, as the steward rolled the cart in. “Just—” He waved at the coffee table. “Put it there, please?” He reached for his back pocket, remembering too late that his wallet was in the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket.

As the steward unloaded the tray from the room service cart, Steve cast around the room, trying to remember where his jacket had fallen last night. He retraced his steps, heading through the bedroom towards the bathroom. “Tony, have you seen—”

He froze, his heart in his throat. At the sink, Tony straightened up, water dripping down his face and neck, running down his bare chest. He blinked, his lips parted, his eyelashes dark against his skin. “Seen- What?” he asked. He reached up, pushing a hand through his hair and he was all lean, corded muscle and tawny skin, the too-big shorts sliding low on his hips.

Steve realized, far too late, that he was staring. “Jacket,” he said, and the word burst out of him like an obscenity. Tony blinked at him, and Steve shook his head, trying to get some of his blood back into it. “My jacket, have you- I need my wallet.”

Tony's face cleared. “Saw something hanging on the back of the door,” he said, waving an idle hand in that direction. “Seems more your speed than mine.” He cupped his hands beneath the graceful arch of the faucet, letting the water fill the hollows of his palms. He splashed the water against his face, and Steve shivered.

Turning away with a force of will, he looked around the edge of the door. A black tuxedo jacket was hanging there, and he grabbed it, relief sweeping over him. “You can take a shower, you know,” he said.

“After last night's bath adventure, I think I'm clean enough,” Tony said, turning off the water and reaching for a towel.

Anything Steve could've said to that would've come out wrong, and he beat a hasty retreat, the fabric of his jacket balled tight between his fingers. He stalked through the bedroom, trying not to look at the tumbled blankets of he bed and the discarded clothes on the floor. He didn't need any more fodder for his fevered dreams.

The waiter was just finishing setting out the coffee service as Steve returned to the main room of the suite, already digging through the pockets of his tuxedo jacket, looking for his wallet among the various things he'd picked up at the party the night before. He found it in an inner pocket, between a folded piece of paper and a half dozen condoms that had been pressed into his hands yesterday.

“Thank you,” Steve said, pulling a few bills from his wallet. A condom came with them, fluttering to the floor between them, and Steve pretended that didn't happen. The waiter, clearly used to such things, took the tip with a smooth, professional smile, and headed for the door.

Steve shut it behind him and set the lock just for good measure, then turned to glare at the condom that was lying in the middle of the floor. “Great,” he muttered under his breath. “That's classy.” He picked it up with a sigh. It was cherry flavored, which seemed all sorts of wrong to Steve, but what did he know?

Very little, as it turned out.

He tossed it onto the table, then started emptying the pockets of his jacket and his pants. Small coins
and a dozen condom packets, a folded receipt and a scattering of metallic confetti. A few crumpled fliers, ones he'd kept despite not being able to read them, simply because he liked the design work.

The folded piece of paper from his inner jacket pocket was different, a higher quality of paper, heavy and stiff. He unfolded it, awareness sweeping over him as he smoothed it flat again. Their 'marriage license.'

In the bright light of day, it looked almost real, the state seal of Symkaria affixed in the bottom right next to their signatures. His looked rushed, small, almost embarrassed. Tony had signed with his usual aplomb, the stroke sweeping across the full length of the line. Steve's thumb swept over Tony's name, his signature, a faint, unmistakable warmth curling in the pit of his stomach.

It was the sort of think a schoolboy would do, wasn't it? Scribbling the name of a crush in a notebook or the wall of an alley. Making some small claim on that name, on that person.

“Breakfast?” Tony called from the bedroom, and Steve folded the paper back up, shoving it into his pants pocket.

“Scones, pastries, coffee, and fruit,” Steve called back. “Want something else?”

“I heard coffee on the list, so I'm fine.”

Chuckling, Steve reached for a cup, but stopped, his hand just resting on the pot. Through the windows, he could see a balcony, a small glass and metal table and a couple of chairs warming in the sunshine between planters of ivy and flowers. Curious, he moved the draperies, finding the door tucked away behind them.

Steve gave the handle an experimental tug. To his surprise, the door opened easily, and a gust of wind tossed the curtains around his legs as he pushed it open. Stopping only long enough to scoop up the tray, he stepped out onto the balcony.

The sun felt amazing on his face, and a few breaths of cool, clean air cleared away the last of the mental cobwebs. He set the tray down on the table, and moved to the railing. The suite might've been on the top floor of the hotel, but it wasn't a particularly tall building. Even from here, he had a clear, unimpeded view of the city's main square below.

It looked like cleanup was underway, but there were still remnants of the previous night's celebration. He folded his arms on the railing, smiling down at the city. It was stupid, it was so stupid, but he felt lighter than he had in a long time. Happier.

He shifted his weight and the 'marriage license' in his pocket crinkled against the railing. He reached down, his fingers smoothing over the fabric, making sure it was still safe. He wasn't sure why. He should throw the damn thing out before anyone else saw it. It was childish. Foolish. Pathetic.

But it made him happy. It was just a stupid joke, just a pointless fantasy, but God, it made him happy anyway.

“This is just asking for paparazzi photos,” Tony said from the doorway, and Steve tipped his head back, squinting against the sunlight.

Tony was wearing his shirt again, a little too large for him, hanging around his muscular thighs. It was half buttoned, the light of the arc reactor peeking out over his folded arms. The gray fabric of his borrowed shorts were just visible beneath the white fabric.

There were still a few rose petals stuck in his hair, and Steve beckoned him closer. “I booked the
room with the passport and credit cards from a cover identity,” he said, as Tony stepped up next to him. Steve slid his fingers through Tony's hair, coaxing the bruised petals free. “No one cares about Roger Grant and his inebriated spouse.”

“Rude,” Tony said. He squinted at the petals Steve was pulling out his hair. “Why-”

“Rose fight,” Steve explained. Tony's eyes slid shut. Grinning, Steve took a seat, stretching out one leg and pushed the other chair away from the table. “Sit down. Have a croissant.”

“This is against my better judgment,” Tony said, but he braced a hand on the table, lowering himself down into the chair. He made a sound that was rather obscene, and Steve grinned at him. “Shut up. I'm old.”

“I think that's my line,” Steve said. He raised his hand, opening his fingers to let the wind catch the petals. They swirled around the table, disappearing over the edge of the into the sunlit sky beyond the wrought iron fence.

Tony reached over, refilling Steve's cup from the pot before his own. “Any idea what happened to my sunglasses?”

Steve grinned into his coffee cup. “Did you check the bath tub?”

* 

“You're out of your mind.”

Ellen gritted her teeth, struggling against the need to say something that would probably get her fired. On her computer screen, her boss chuckled into his coffee cup. “Watching you try to be diplomatic is a hell of a thing,” he said, flipping through the stack of pages in front of him with an idle hand. “You haven't had much practice, have you?”

Ellen managed a tight smile. “Duck-”

He reached for a red pen. “You haven't got the charm to pull this off, Ning. Just let it die.”

“Did you look at what I sent?” she asked, frustration making her voice tight.

The pen slashed across the page, and Duck leaned forward, the lenses of his glasses catching the light and going flat and white for a moment. “Ning.”

She rocked back in her chair. “Duck.”

“It's not happening.”

Her index finger tapped an uneven rhythm against the desktop. “You're really going to sit on this?”

“On your completely fake story?” He let out a sharp snort. “Yes.”

“How-” Ellen took a deep breath. “We know that Rogers and Stark left the US; they're listed on a government envoy release. We know that there's a flight plan filed that shows them en route to Latveria. We know that as of last night, Latveria's borders are closed, though no one knows why-”

“Von Doom's a nutball?” Duck suggested, before taking another sip of his coffee. “Ellen-”

“They were definitely headed to part of the world, and there's no indication that they've returned to the US, and we know they're not in Latveria.” She leaned in. “So where are they?”
“I guess they decided to get married?” Duck asked, his salt and pepper eyebrows arched. “Are you really implying that this is all a cover for making their way to a country halfway around the world to get married in secret?” He shook his head, his pen working its way across the page in front of him. “Except it wasn't secret, was it?” He looked up. “You're saying they flew halfway around the world to get married in the middle of a Pride celebration.”

“I'm not saying that they traveled halfway around the world to get married at a Pride celebration,” Ellen said, doggedly determined. “I'm saying that once they WERE halfway around the world, they DID get married at a Pride Celebration.”

“Which is nice, but I'm not publishing it.”

“You've got the photo, and a copy of the license, and-”

Duck pulled off his glasses. “Ellen.” He leaned forward. “You're a good reporter. You've got good instincts, and good sense, but for this-”

“Don't,” Ellen said.

“But for this,” he said, not put off in the least, “you're looking for something that isn't there.”

She glared at him. “So, because I'm a lesbian, I see queer people everywhere?” she asked.

Duck braced his jaw on one hand, leaning into it as if he was too tired to hold his head up. “Ellen.”

“No, pretty sure that's what you just said,” she pointed out, her voice sharp. “That I'm a good reporter, but that my gaydar needs some re-calibration.”

His lips kicked up in a tired smile. “Gaydar?”

“Stark's bi, you know he is,” Ellen said. “He's had relationships with other men before, not as public, not as-”

“But Rogers hasn't.” Duck said. He considered her, his brown eyes sharp. “Look, I might not be on the same websites you are-”

“That's a mistake, Buck naked baking is a wild trip,” Ellen said.

“I'll... Bookmark that.” He shook his head. “But we both know that there's always been rumors about those two, Ning. I mean, there's always rumors about all of them, you get that many people together under one roof and the public's sure someone's doing the deed.”

“Mostly, the public wishes that they were in on it,” Ellen said.

Duck nodded. “They could make a mint with a reality tv show,” he agreed. He straightened up, his narrow shoulders going straight beneath the rumpled fabric of his shirt, and set his pen down, the movement strangely final. “But the answer's no. You've got circumstantial evidence and a lot of supposition, and it might be true, but we're not going to be the ones to put our neck out there and publish it first.”

Ellen's fingers rattled against the edge of her laptop. “You're a fucking coward, you know that?”

Duck reached for his coffee. “And that's why I'm still the editor, even after all these years.” He took a sip from his cup. “I'm sorry, Ning. If you want a byline, you need more proof than a single photo and a blurry photocopy of a license that could've been signed by anyone with an asshole sense of
humor.”


A hand clapped down on her shoulder. “Check your email, Duck.” Jesse leaned over, peering into the camera, her head next to Ellen's. “And run the story.”


“Wait,” Jesse mouthed back. And handed her a print.

There was no mistaking it this time. Tony Stark and Steve Rogers, half dressed in the same clothes they'd had on the night before, side by side at a graceful wrought iron banister. Beneath Tony's half-buttoned shirt, Ellen could see the faint, cool glow of the arc reactor. One of Steve's hands was buried in Tony's hair, his fingers sliding through the locks.

Tony's eyes were scrunched closed, his nose wrinkled, and Steve was smiling at him, just a slight, soft smile that creased his cheeks. It was the most intimate picture Ellen had seen in a long time.

Her head snapped up. Duck was staring at his phone, one hand cupped over his mouth.

Jesse leaned forward. “Run it, Duck.”

He picked up his pen, tapping the tip of it against the desktop. “You got any more of this?”

“That's the best one.”

“Doesn't answer the question.”

Jesse's chin dipped in a small nod. “Yes. I've got a dozen or more.” Her head tipped to the side. “Are you running it? Or are we shopping it around to someone who will?”

Ellen's heart skipped a beat, but Duck didn't even look up. “You're under contract.”

“Starting to not care, honestly,” Jesse said. “We running it? Or-”


Jesse did not seem impressed. “Are we-”

“Yes, we're running it. Give me the rest of the photos so we've got something for the lawyers to cling to when the libel suits start rolling in.” Duck glared at them. “Nice knowing you both, ladies, because you realize that if this blows up, it's going to ruin us all?”

“I'm cool with that,” Jesse said.

He sighed, but he was smiling. “Of course you are.” He reached for his keyboard. “Get your asses back here. Now.” And he cut the connection.

For a moment neither of them said a thing. Ellen stared at Jesse. “How the hell...?”

Jesse yawned. “I got lucky.”

Ellen gave her a look. Jesse grinned and took a seat on the end of the bed, crossing her legs under her. “So after we finished at town hall and you came back here to write your story, I went down to
talk to my source at the airport.”

Ellen frowned at her. “Your... Source.”

“Yes,” Jesse said.

Ellen waited. It was futile, and she knew it, because Jesse could outstare a stone statue. But she hated giving in so quickly. “Since when do you have a source at the fucking Symkaria airport?”

“Since I found a guy who would answer the question 'is the weird American plane still here?' if I gave him fifty bucks.”

Ellen opened her mouth. Closed it. “You got ripped off so bad.” Jesse raised one shoulder in a half shrug.

“Probably,” she said. She didn't seem overly bothered by that. “So I knew they were still in the city. And I took their picture late. Chances are, they stayed here rather than bunking down at the airport. And Stark isn't likely to head for the local equivalent of a Motel 6, you know?”

She paused, as if waiting for a reply. “Right,” Ellen said.

“So there were four high end hotels in the capitol and one's barely in the city limits. I started with the closest one to the square and moved out.”

“You just, what? Called and asked them if Tony Stark was there?”

Jesse yawned again. “No, I called and asked them if they had a honeymoon suite, and if they said no, I asked if they had a high end suite. If I got a yes to either of them, I told 'em I'd just gotten married and my baby deserved the best so money was no object, but we wanted to check in immediately.” She paused. “I implied I was super horny.”

“I'm sure that went well,” Ellen said.

“Strangely, yes, it did.” Jesse's booted foot bobbed up and down. “So one place didn't have a fancy suite or penthouse, one was too far out, one was available immediately, so clearly no one was using it right now.”

“Leaving one,” Ellen said, a little awed by that.

“Leaving one,” Jesse agreed. “The biggest. The fanciest. And, by chance, the closest to the center of town. The one that informed me their suite was currently booked, and they couldn't promise me it would be available tomorrow, either.”

“So you went down there.”

“Actually, I went to the building across the street, to see if I could seen anything. With my camera,” Jesse said. She was smiling now, just a little, a small, smug smile. Ellen was pretty sure she'd earned it. “I like my camera.” She flopped back on the bed, her arms thrown out to the sides. “But I'd like to point out that I out reported you.”

“Fuck you,” Ellen told her, because yeah, that was kind of true. But she didn't have to admit it.

“You were here making words and swearing at your computer under your breath, and I was out there.” Jesse waved an idle hand in the air. “Investigating. Reporting. Investigative reporting.”

“You sound like an idiot, you know that, right?”
“Next time, you can just take the pictures,” Jesse said. “Oh. Wait. You're bad at that, too.”

“I hate you so much, you know that?” Ellen said, and Jesse flipped her off with both hands.

“Typing's hard, too, I know, I know,” she said. There was a faint buzz from her hip pocket, and she fumbled at her pants, finally coming up with her phone. “Huh.”

“Huh?” Ellen asked.

Jesse's hand fell back to the bed. “That's my source. From the airport. The weird American plane just requested clearance to leave.”

Ellen sighed. “I take it back. That was fifty bucks well spent.”

“I know, right? I'm a fucking genius.”

*

His phone was beeping.

Tony opened one eye, peering at it. “Jay, take a message and make that stop,” he mumbled, pulling the sweatshirt he'd been using as a blanket up over his shoulders. “Thanks.” His head fell to the side, trying to find a comfortable place to rest in this damn seat.

“You should go lie down,” Steve called from the cockpit.

“No. You crash planes into the ocean. You're famous for it,” Tony told him.

“Only ones made by Nazis, I think yours is safe,” Steve said, with an easy going smile. Tony caught himself smiling back, despite his headache. “But your phone is starting to annoy me, so I might be tempted.”

“Jay, can you please make it stop?” Tony asked, just as the phone started its incessant, insistant litany again. Tony glared at it.

“You could answer it,” Steve pointed out.

“Or Jarvis could do his damn job,” Tony shot back. “Which seems like a much better idea to me, so—”

“This particular caller is on the 'do not send to voice mail or you will regret it' list,” Jarvis said. He sounded tired. “Pick up the phone, sir.”

Tony winced and pushed himself upright. “Rhodey, Pepper or Coulson?” he asked, shoving a hand through his hair.

“Ms. Potts, sir.”

“Well, this should go well,” Tony said, bouncing the phone against his palm. “How far are we from home, Steve?”

Steve's head tipped back as he checked the instruments. “An hour, Jarvis?”

“At the limited speeds that the quinjet is currently capable of reaching, this is an accurate estimate,” Jarvis said. The phone buzzed again, and he added a pointed, “Ms. Potts is unlikely to give up, sir.”
“Just trying to figure out why she's not waiting til we get home.” He picked up the call with a flick of his thumb. “Did you miss me this much, or are you just bored?”

"Are congratulations in order? Or am I murdering you?"

Tony paused. "Well, if those are my only choices..." He rocked back in his seat. "What'd I do?"

"That's kind of what we're trying to figure out," Pepper said. "In that Marcy Pearson, you remember Marcy, don't you?"

This felt like a trap. Tony gave a mental shrug and went for it anyway. “She's the one currently dating Rhodey, right?”

“Yes, but more importantly for this conversation, she's also currently the VP of PR and Marketing for StarkIndustries.”

“Also that,” Tony agreed. “How's Marcy doing?"

“A little stressed, because she's currently fielding multiple inquiries about your marriage.”

Tony grinned. "Aw, did I get married? That's nice. That's very nice." Up in the cockpit, Steve's head snapped around, his eyes huge as he looked back at Tony. Tony shook his head, giving him a reassuring smile. "Really, I get murder threats for a marriage rumor? Because you should be used to those." He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to relax the tense muscles there. "Hell, you used to be part of them."

He stopped, worry sweeping over him. "Wait. Did I marry you?"

"No, you didn't-" Pepper stopped, and he could almost see her take a deep breath, trying to compose herself. "Tony. About an hour ago, New York Now put a story up on their website about you getting married."

"Wonderful. I'm not married, who am I supposed to be married to this time?" Tony asked. "I haven't even been on a second date for more than six months, so who-"

"Steve."

Tony stopped. "You... Want to talk to Steve?" he asked, confused. “Because this is Tony. Remember me? I'm the one with the dark hair and the bad attitude? Shorter and less... Heroic than Steve, but much shinier?"

"They are saying," she said, the words thin and tight, as if they were being forced out from between clenched teeth, "that you, Tony Stark, married Steve Rogers last night."

"Oh, fuck." It burst out of him, a little too loud, a little too sharp, and in the silence that followed, he let his head fall forward. "Oh, my fucking God."

Pepper was silent for another moment. "Is that a 'good fuck' or a 'bad fuck'?" she asked at last. "And be aware that Marcy is staring at me as I'm forced to ask that question, Tony."

"I'm always a-"

"Not in the mood," she said, and Tony switched gears with the speed and precision of a Formula One driver.

"Right, no, that's a 'oh, well, that's a relief,' fuck," he said. "In that there was a thing."
"A thing," Pepper repeated.

"A thing," Tony confirmed. "A, like, a thing, Steve?" Steve was still staring at him, his face oddly pale. "They think we got married. What would you call the thing last night?"

Steve's tongue swept out, wetting his lips. He was strangely pale. "A protest?"


He heard her sigh. "I can't believe you're choosing the murder option here, Tony, but-"

"There was a fake thing," Tony said. "A ridiculous fake thing, and we were wearing formal clothes, it was-" He didn't know how to explain this without it sounding insane, but he suspected there was no good way to do it, other than to do it. "We did a photo op."

The silence stretched a very long time. Tony cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"Please tell me you're fucking kidding."

Tony winced. Pepper swearing was not a good sign. "It's not that big of a deal, it's not like we really got-"

Steve was suddenly in front of him, and Tony looked up, startled. Steve's mouth opened, then closed. Wordlessly, he held out a sheet of paper. Never breaking eye contact, Tony took it from him. Steve's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Tony."

Tony looked down at the page, and everything went sideways. "Pepper?"

"I do not like that tone."

Tony took a deep breath and tried not to throw up. "I'm going to need a link to that story."

* * *

"You got married."

"Yeah, well, we know that NOW," Tony said, pinching the bridge of his nose. His head was throbbing, despite a cup of coffee that threatened to melt both the cup and his molars, or maybe because of it. He risked another sip. He'd prefer to die caffeinated. "Surprise."

He glanced up. Pepper was staring at him, her eyebrows arched, her mouth hanging open. He spread his hands in a 'I don't know' gesture, and her head fell back. "You got married," she said, to the ceiling. Or perhaps God. He'd driven women to prayer before.

"Yeah," Tony said. He gave up and fumbled in his pocket for the bottle of aspirin. "We got married. That's... That's a thing that happened, so can we move on?"

That was met with stony silence. He looked up. Pepper, Maria Hill, and Marcy Pearson, Stark Industries VP of Public Relations, stared back at him, their faces indicating that they would not be moving on any time soon. Next to him, Steve was sitting just as still, his shoulders squared, his face unreadable. He'd barely said two words since the meeting from hell had started, not that Tony blamed him.

He was pretty sure Steve was in shock.

"They got married," Pepper said to Maria. "They really got married."
“They one hundred percent got married,” Maria agreed. “Legal and binding.” She gave the room a tight smile. “And since Symkaria is a very valuable partner in our attempts to keep Von Doom and his waves of deathbots under control, the US Government is absolutely not going to risk an international incident with them right now by claiming otherwise.”

“Why are you here?” Tony asked her.

“Because Coulson is surprisingly susceptible to your bullshit, and Director Fury hasn't stopped laughing since he heard the news,” Maria said with a pleasant smile. “And despite my best efforts, the American public still associates you with SHIELD.” Her smile got very thin. “So that makes you, and this, my problem.”

“Which is why I called her,” Marcy said. “We need to get our ducks in a row before things get even more out of control than they already are.” She leaned forward. “Captain Rogers, I apologize for this, I know we've just met, but I'm going to need to be very blunt.”

Steve nodded. “I'd... Prefer that, actually.”

Marcy's lips twitched. “Good. That makes things a lot easier.” She took a deep breath, her shoulders rising beneath the sleek, well-tailored fabric of her suitjacket. “I'm here because this will affect StarkIndustries. This is absolutely something that needs the intervention of a PR team, because if we don't want this to blow up in everyone's face, then we're going to need to start spinning it, and we need to do it now.”

She glanced at Maria. “I'm honestly surprised the Avengers doing have their own PR team.”

Maria's head tipped to the side. “Would you take the job?”

“Absolutely not.”

“And that's the response that we've gotten from anyone competent, and anyone incompetent would just make the situations they get themselves into about twenty times worse,” Maria said with a faint smile. “Luckily, for the most part, they are decent people.”

“We do try to keep the kicking of puppies and shoving of old ladies on the down low,” Tony said. “I don't know how much spin we can really do here-”

“Spin is just a matter of making sure that the story that's told in the press is the story we want told,” Marcy said. “Because you got married. To another man. In another country. It looks like you eloped, Tony. It looks like the two of you were trying to do this in secret and you got caught, and that is not the story we want.”

“It's my fault,” Steve said, his voice quiet. “I'm the one who-”

“It was between a diorama where you could pretend to punch a Doctor Doom cosplayer and a reproduction of the UN's original Declaration of Universal Human Rights, which you could sign with a dry erase marker,” Tony said, his voice cutting. “It was-” He cupped a hand over his forehead. “It was behind a guy making BALLOON ANIMALS from CONDOMS.”

“That seems both excessive and also difficult,” Pepper said, a hand covering her mouth. Everyone looked at her, and she shrugged. “I mean, how complicated was he-”

“The POINT,” Tony said, “is that, honestly, we had reason to think that it was just another photo spot that they'd set up, and-”
“And you did it as a joke.” Marcy tapped the end of her pen against the table. It hit once, twice, three times, the click seeming to echo in the silent room. Her head tipped to the side, her eyes wide. “Is that it? Let’s get married, bro, but hey, no homo?”

Tony rocked back in his seat. “That’s not-

“That’s how it’s going to be spun by the media,” she said, her voice calm and firm. “That’s the message that’s going to go out.” She leaned back, cradling her pen between her fingers. She rotated it, slow and controlled. “That’s what you’re going to face. Which isn’t a problem.” Her eyes slid from Tony to Steve and back. “You both have the political currency to weather this storm. It’ll end up on a few highlight reels a few years from now, it’ll be the go-to joke of a lot of bad stand up comedians.” She arched an eyebrow, her voice sardonic. “Remember that time that Iron Man and Captain America got hitched?”

She stood, setting her pen down on the table, her manicured fingertips resting there for a moment. “But there are large swaths of this country, let alone the world, where the rights and privileges of same sex couples and queer people in general are still very much in flux. And there are still quite a few people who will seize on anything and everything that weakens the standing of a group who are still very, very vulnerable.”

Marcy looked up. “So yes. We can put out a press release right now that says that you were just caught up with the moment, that you didn’t realize that the ’ceremony’ was legally binding, that you didn’t intend to get married, and that while you meant no disrespect, you’re going to get this rectified as quickly as possible.”

Steve was staring at the table, his face unreadable. “You don’t think we should, though.”

Her eyes cut in his direction. “No. I don’t. I think we still have time to spin this in a direction that both makes you seem sympathetic, even romantic, and minimize the damage this causes in the wider political sphere.

“I think you should hit up some sympathetic voices for an interview or two where you ask for privacy in this time of transition, do a few social events together,” Marcy said, brisk and efficient. “You’ll have a nice photo op or two where you act the way you always do, but now it all seems very romantic. You keep running the Avengers, you keep things together, and then in six months, after you’re yesterday’s news and everyone’s moved on to the next hot Hollywood scandal, get a quiet, no-contest divorce.”

Tony could hear doom in every word. “This isn’t going to play well,” he said, his voice quiet.

“No matter what you do right now,” Marcy said, “it’s not going to play well with someone. The question you have to ask yourself is what side you’re going to come down on, Tony. The bigots are going to vilify you and boycott you if you stay married, if you legitimize this—”

“Fuck ’em,” Tony said cheerfully, and across the table, Steve choked on a laugh. Tony glanced at him, and Steve had his hand over his mouth, hiding his smile. But his eyes were dancing. Tony grinned at him.

“And if you end this now, say it was a mistake, even an innocent mistake, then there’s no amount of donations that you can make to LGBTQ causes that can erase that,” Marcy said. She spread her hands. “You are absolutely going to piss off someone.”

“I vote bigots,” Steve said, and he looked a little less like the living dead now. A little less traumatized. Tony was glad.
Marcy studied him. “Even if we announce it was a bad joke,” she said, and her voice was gentle, “there’s no putting the genie back in the bottle. Even if we said it was an accident, even if started divorce proceedings today, there are always going to be those who will say that you’re closeted, that you’re repressed, and you thought you could pull off a secret marriage. There will always be rumors from today forward, that you’re gay, or bisexual.”

Steve smiled at her, a slight twitch of his lips. “They've been saying I'm heterosexual all this time. So people seem to have no problems with assigning labels to me without bothering to ask me. I don't see how this is any different.”

Tony stared at him, his stomach sinking. “Okay.” He pushed himself upright. “If you could give us a few minutes to discuss this?”

“We don't have much time,” Pepper said, her voice quiet. “If we want to counter this-”

“I know.” Tony met her eyes without flinching. “Marry in haste, repent in leisure, Pep. But we need to talk this over.”

He turned back to Steve. “Just us.”

*

He wasn't sure what he was feeling. Numb, mostly. Like none of this was happening, or if it was, that none of it mattered. Which was wrong, of course, it was happening. And it definitely mattered. He knew that, on some level. But that level seemed far off, a purely intellectual exercise of knowing. Of realizing.

He knew what was happening. He just didn't know what he felt about it. And that seemed more important.

Tony's hand came down on his shoulder, shaking Steve out of his thoughts with a jolt. His head snapped up, and he found Tony staring at him, his face worried. "Steve?"

Steve smiled at him, and it didn't feel as fake as he'd thought it would. "Still here," he said. They were alone in the conference room, and he didn't know when that had happened, exactly. When the others had left.

Tony smiled back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Wasn't sure, you look kind of-" His head tipped to the side. "Stunned."

Steve thought about that. "Aren't you?" he asked at last, and Tony's face relaxed.

"Like a deer in the headlights," he admitted. He took a seat opposite Steve, his hands folded on the gleaming wood of the conference table. "So. Hi." He gave a little wave. "We're married."

Steve nodded. "Yeah." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

Tony made a show of rolling his eyes. "Yes, agreed, this is all your fault."

"You told me it wasn't a good idea." It wasn't. It absolutely wasn't. He had to keep reminding himself of that. "A couple of times."

"I'm good at recognizing disaster coming, but not actually stopping it," Tony agreed, his lips twitching.
Steve took a deep breath. "But I should've-

"Seen this coming?" Tony asked, bracing his cheek on one hand. "Wanda'd be upset if you start muscling in on her territory."

"We could trade. She could pull of my outfit," Steve said, and despite everything, this was easy, this was right. Or wrong. He didn't know any more. He knew what he wanted, but that was one sided, that was just him. That was his problem.

But God, things were easier when Tony was there. It was enough, when Tony was there. Steve could deal. As long as Tony was there.

"Yeah, but you can't pull off hers." There was a pause, then, "You okay?" Tony asked, his voice soft, and Steve looked up at him.

"Yes," he said. It was the truth. Which seemed odd. He'd expected panic, or fear, or anger, but... Tony was there, smiling that tired, lopsided smile of his, and that changed things. "Actually, yes. I'm okay."

Tony studied him, his eyes sharp. "Okay," he said at last.

Steve felt his lips twitch. "You don't sound convinced," he said.

"Well, I'm not okay, but you were always more resilient than me," Tony pointed out. Steve opened his mouth, and Tony waved him off. "We don't have to do this."

They didn't. In many ways, Steve knew they shouldn't. "I think we do," he said, then shook his head. "No. We don't have to do this." He looked up. "But I think we should."

Tony scraped a hand over his face. "There's going to be consequences to this, Steve. It's not like we get divorced-" Steve flinched, his body going tense in an instant. Tony smiled at him. "Sorry."

Steve shook his head. "No, it's just..." It hurt. The thought of it hurt. He managed a smile, though. "You're still friends with Pepper, even though the two of you broke up. We can still be friends."

Tony was silent, and Steve fought against an unreasoning spike of panic. "Right?"

Tony's eyebrows arched. "I promise, even when we get divorced, we can still be friends," he said, his lips twitching.

"Are you mocking me right now?" Steve asked, smiling despite himself, and Tony held up one hand, his finger and thumb an inch or so apart. Steve took a deep breath, trying to ignore the nausea that still churned low in his stomach. "Listen, buddy, this is my first marriage and my first divorce, I've got concerns."

Tony let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh. "Jesus, what a mess." His head fell back. "What an absolute mess, Steve, how the fuck did we end up doing this to ourselves?"

Steve thought about that. "I'm willing to blame the post flight adrenaline if you are," he said, and Tony stared to laugh out loud, great, uneven bursts of laughter that bent him double. Steve grinned at him, fear melting away in the face of that. "Or Doom. It's not fair, but it's very practical, and he probably won't even bother to deny it."

Tony was slumped low in his chair, his eyes wet as he held up his hands. "'Marriage necessary to escape clutches of evil dictator,'" he said. "Great headline. Let's run with it." His head rolled to the side, his eyes locking on Steve's. "We're both idiots, you know that, right?"
"Maybe," Steve said. He crossed his arms. "I think I prefer being an idiot with you than being smart on my own, though."

"Misery loves company," Tony agreed. He took a deep breath. "I know you think this is the right thing to do."

"You don't?"

"I know it is, but my bisexual outing came a long time ago, Steve," Tony said. "I'm old news. I'm not going to be the one they focus on here."

"I've been the poster boy for things before," Steve said. "It's not so bad."

"Marcy's right, Steve. This changes everything," Tony said, and there was a sharp edge to the words. "It shouldn't. You're still you and you're still-" He stopped, flapping a hand in Steve's direction. Steve hid a smile behind his hand, but wasn't fast enough. Tony gave him a look, his lips twitching. "You're still you," he repeated, and Steve didn't know what he meant, but he nodded anyway.

Steve realized he was smiling. "It really doesn't. It changes..." He shook his head, the movement slow. "It changes nothing."

Tony rocked back on his heels, his hands tucked in his pants pockets, his shoulders pushed back. "It shouldn't, but for a lot of people, it will. People will look at you differently, treat you differently, see you differently."

Steve tried to smile, but it felt odd on his face. "Tony. Everyone always looked at me differently. Before the serum. And after. What I was, who I was, for some people, that changed. For me, it didn't." He took a breath. "For the people who mattered, it didn't."

"This doesn't go away," Tony said. "This goes in your Smithsonian exhibit. This changes how historians view your relationship with the Commandos. With Barnes." He stopped. "With Peggy."

Peggy'd known, he was pretty sure. He was certain Bucky had. The others, if they'd suspected, they'd never said a word. Which was the best he could've expected back then. That the people who loved him had known, had accepted, had kept his secrets and protected him.

The world was different now, though. He could have more.

Not what he wanted. But more.

"Peggy loved me, and I loved her," Steve said. "And Bucky could do better than me, anyway." He shifted in his chair. "I can't hurt the dead, Tony. And Marcy was right about something else. The damage is done. Even if I wanted to deny it, that's-" He shrugged. "That's out there. There's no getting it back, no changing people's minds. The ones who want to believe it are going to, the ones that don't, well, they'll have to deal with it."

"So will you," Tony shot back. "The press, the innuendos, the internet-"

"How old were you?" Steve asked, and Tony fell silent. Steve's fingers jerked into fists against the plane of his thighs, and he forced them flat. "When you had to handle that?"

Tony's lips twitched. "It's not the same. I'm not Captain America."

"No, but Howard had been marching you in front of the press and the public since you were born, so..." Steve stared at him, unsure why the answer mattered as much as it did. "How old?"
"I was in college, and it was the least of my scandals at the time," Tony said. He pushed himself upright. "I was used to it. Like you said. Lots of experience."

"You always say 'in college' as if you don't think I'll remember that you started college at fourteen and finished it at, what, nineteen?" Steve asked.

Tony wandered around the table. "Well, that's what I get for trying to be subtle," he said, his voice flippant. Steve started to say something else and Tony cut him off, leaning his hips back against the table. "Do you really want to do this?"

"I think we should," Steve said. "But this isn't my decision to make. At least, not alone."

Tony nodded. "Stand up."

Steve arched an eyebrow at him, but did as he was told. Tony moved in, his expression unreadable, his dark eyes fathomless. His hand came up, his fingers trailing across Steve's chest, the touch whisper light against the fabric. Steve's breath hitched in his throat, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. It took everything he had to hold still, to hold himself in check, to not do something stupid, something embarrassing, something that would give everything away.

Tony's fingers flexed against his chest, the tips sliding across the fabric, and the skin beneath, and it was barely a touch, barely contact. But the intimacy of it, the way Tony leaned in, the way his head tipped to the side, his lips open, his breath warm on the angle of Steve's jaw, on his cheek, and he was losing his mind.

Tony took a step back, his hand falling away, and Steve swayed on his feet, chasing the contact like he needed it to live. His head snapped up, his eyes meeting Tony's. "Right," Tony said. His head bobbed in a slight nod, his lips kicking up in a wry, sharp smile. "Right. This isn't going to work."

It was amazing how much that hurt, it was a verbal gut punch that he hadn't been expecting. Just like that, the haze of arousal was washed away, his skin going from flushed to icy cold in an instant. "Tony-"

Tony was already turning away, still shaking his head. "It's not going to work," he said, and the smile on his face looked like a mask. His eyes canted up to meet Steve's. "You tense up every time I get near you, there's no way anyone's going to be convinced that we're actually intimate, Steve." His eyes closed. "It's not going to-"

Steve's hand snapped out, his fingers slipping under Tony's chin, tipping it up. He saw Tony's eyes go wide, saw his lips part, and then Steve was kissing him.

He'd never been a natural at this, maybe because he never made a move until he was half-desperate and frustrated out of his mind. Or maybe it was just that he hadn't gotten enough practice. Bucky'd always said that he needed to kiss more people he didn't love, maybe even didn't particularly like, because that was easier.

Steve had never seen the point of that. Which probably explained why he'd never gotten any better. Because every kiss seemed like life and death, every time he tried, it was with every bit of his heart, and desperation never looked good on anyone.

And Tony's mouth was still against his, his body frozen and stiff, as if Steve truly had surprised him. That wasn't something he should take pride in, but he couldn't help it. There was a thrill in outsmarting Tony, in catching him off guard, in getting even a half step ahead of that amazing brain of his.
Not many people managed to surprise Tony Stark.

But Tony was quick on the uptake, his mouth softening against Steve's, and Steve was pretty sure he was smiling into the kiss, because if that was possible, Tony could do it. His hands smoothed up Steve's chest, and Steve shivered, pushing closer, crowding him back against the table. His hand was still cradling Tony's jaw, his cheek, and he didn't know what to do with the other one. He hadn't felt this awkward and out of place in his own skin since the serum, and kissing Tony wasn't that different than crashing through a plate glass window, anyway.

It was a disaster, it was chaos, it was something he had no idea he'd be able to survive until he did it.

When they broke apart, Tony was breathing hard, and Steve's heart was pounding in his ears. Tony's fingers flexed against the fabric of his shirt, his knuckles white with the force of his grip. Neither of them moved away, staying too close, their bodies almost touching, their breath mingling in bare inches between their mouths.

Tony started to shake, and Steve grabbed for his shoulders, the move pure instinct. But Tony's head tipped up, and he was grinning, he was laughing, his face flushed and his eyes bright. “So, what?” he asked, and everything cold and still had been washed out of his voice. He sounded so happy that Steve couldn't even take offense at the laughter.

“So, what?” Steve parroted back at him, and his voice was so much steadier than he'd thought it would be.

“So, that's all I have to do?” Tony asked, his fingers relaxing, his hands going flat against Steve's chest. “Dare you? Tell you that you can't do something, and you've got to prove me wrong?”

It took him a second to connect the dots. Steve grinned at him, despite the way his body was in chaos. “Sometimes you've got to double dare me,” he managed, and Tony was laughing, his forehead braced against Steve's chest, and Steve could smell his hair, could feel his breath through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. His eyes drifted shut, warmth curling through him, part arousal, part affection, all trouble.

Tony's head came up. “This is going to be a disaster, but fuck it,” he said. He leaned up, and his lips ghosted against Steve's cheek. “If you had to have a disastrous, short, regrettable first marriage, I'm glad you picked me.” He stepped back. “So, you going to move in?”

Reality came crashing down on Steve like an ocean wave. This wasn't real. This wasn't ever going to be real.

And he was going to have to pretend for the next six months.

He was never going to survive.

*
Chapter 3

In which we meet this verse's version of the Avengers.

The following characters have not appeared in the MCU (or are present only in the Netflix series so far):

Jessica Jones (Referred to as Jessica here) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessica_Jones
Carol Danvers https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_Danvers
Abigail Brand https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abigail_Brand

“You asked him to MOVE IN WITH YOU?”

“I don't know where that came from, honestly. I panicked. I was acting on instinct, and as we all know, most of my instincts involve weapons, and firing them wildly at the threat. Lacking missiles, I find all sorts of other ways to destroy my life,” Tony said. “Also, did you miss the part where we're married?” He shoved a hand through his hair, disordering the strands. “Because that's the important part. Right? The part where I MARRIED HIM?”

“Yeah, I got that, I'm sitting on that because otherwise I think I'm going to have a stroke,” Rhodey said. He was pacing back and forth across the living room, clutching his head. Just watching him made Tony feel tired. “I'm focusing on other things.”

“I think the marriage, I think that's the main thing,” Tony said, slumped back against the couch. He had alcohol. It helped. It was a temporary way of coping and not a good way of coping, but he'd take it for the moment.

“I compartmentalize the chaos,” Rhodey said, dropping down into the chair opposite him. “That's how I survive. If I think of the whole situation at once, I-” He shook his head, his expression haunted. “Besides, you already married him, there's no going back on that, there's only damage control, and instead of doing damage control, you...” He waved a hand at Tony, his face dismayed.

Tony took a long sip from his scotch. Rhodey, used to his stalling tactics, just waited, his hand hanging in the air between them. Tony gave up. “I might've asked him to move in,” he admitted at last.

“You might've,” Rhodey repeated.

“It's possible,” Tony said. “I might've implied that would be okay.”

“Okay, or-”

“Yeah, I asked him.” Rhodey stared at him, pained. Tony raised one shoulder in a half shrug. “Seemed like a good idea at the time?”
“It wasn’t,” Rhodey said.

Tony buried his face behind his tumbler. “Yes, but it SEEMED like it would be, and-”

Pepper reached over, taking the glass out of his hand. “All right,” she said, her voice brisk. She set the glass down on the end table, just out of Tony’s reach. “We’re going in circles, and that’s not helping anyone.”

“I love that she thinks anything is going to help at this point,” Tony said to Rhodey, who cupped a hand over his mouth, trying to hide a smile. But Tony knew him too well by this point to fall for it. He flopped out on the couch, not caring about his shoes on the upholstery, and rubbed the bridge of his nose with stiff fingers. “Pep. Nothing other than an extended coma is going to help.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Rhodey said. He stabbed a finger in Tony’s direction. “You try it, and I’m going to prop you up in a congressional hearing and let them have at you.”

“Right. Can we stop focusing on things we should have and could have done?” Pepper said, one hand propped on her hip. Her gaze snapped from Tony to Rhodey and back. “And instead, start focusing on the things that we need to do?”

Tony’s fingers rattled against the crystal front of the arc reactor. “Where’s ‘have a nervous breakdown’ on that list?” he asked, his head tipping in her direction. “First? Because I’d put that first on the list.”

She gave him a look that was 85% exasperation and 15% affection. “Not on the list.”

Tony nodded. “Let’s work that in. I’m going to need that.”

Pepper leaned over him, just far enough so she could run a hand over his hair, pushing it away from his face and then smoothing it back down. “Sorry,” she said, with a smile. “We’re working with a very tight schedule, and I’m afraid that there’s no way I can work that in, Mr. Stark.”

Tony made a face. “Cancel some things.” He paused. “Like, everything.”

“Everything,” she repeated.

“I’d appreciate it if you could just-” Tony spread his hands. “Clear my schedule. Of everything.”

She was trying not to smile. He could tell. “For how long, exactly?”

“Six months?” he asked, with a winning smile. “A year, max. Just enough time for me to hide in the workshop, have a nervous breakdown, and channel a great deal of sexual tension into revolutionizing at least one American industry.”

“No,” Pepper said.

“Fine, two, I will revolutionize two American industries, but you drive a hard bargain and I want it known that I expect at least six months of complete isolation for this.” He gave the glass of scotch a morose look, but he knew better than to reach for it. He did sit up, though. Small steps. “I do not want to talk to the press, the politicians and anyone I know for at least that long.”

“I think your plan for total isolation may hit a snag,” Pepper said. “In that you just asked Steve to move in with you.”

Tony winced. “Right. Right.” He took a deep breath. “That might’ve been a mistake.” His head fell
back. “Not my first. Won't be my last. But it may well be my most impressive. You know. For this week.”

“The marriage might beat it, honestly,” Rhodey said.

“You think?” Tony asked.

“Probably.”

“The two of you look like you've been to war, and you haven't even had to deal with the press yet,” Pepper said, her voice tart. She picked up her tablet from the side table, her fingers sliding over the shining surface. “I'm going to need you to pull yourselves together, the press release has gone out and the internet is losing its collective mind.”

Tony made a face. “Bad?”

One of Pepper's shoulders rose in a half-shrug. “Split on expected lines. The religious right and the conservative sites are treating it like the downfall of Western civilization.”

“Western civilization is surprisingly fragile,” Tony pointed out. “I've destroyed it at least six times.”

“Seven if you count that time in Siberia,” Rhodey said.

“I absolutely did not, that was Banner and Brand and Barton and I was not involved,” Tony said. He held up three fingers. “The Bastard Band of Bs.”

“The space ship had your name on the side, so you might consider yourself uninvolved, but that was definitely a minority opinion,” Pepper said, still studying the tablet. “The liberal press and the LGBTQ community have, to no one's surprise, come out with tentative approval.”

“Tentative?” Rhodey asked, sounding put out on Tony's behalf. Tony appreciated that.

“There's some concern that this is a temporary situation,” Pepper said.

“It's like they know me,” Tony said. “How're the fansites handling it?”

“I outsource that. Jarvis?” Pepper asked.

“Inarticulate keyboard smashes and there's been a distinct uptick in photo edits,” Jarvis said. “Your portmanteau is under serious discussion-”

“Your what now?” Rhodey asked.

“Portmanteau,” Tony explained, rubbing his forehead. “When the public or press smashes two names together. Like, you know, Bennifer.”

“Ours was Pepperony,” Pepper told Rhodey, who made a face.

“I'm so sorry,” Rhodey said.

“The preferred name appears to be Stony, which is currently trending on Twitter,” Jarvis said.

“Do us all a favor and take some selfies,” Pepper said to Tony. Tony stared at her. “Something... Affectionate.”

“I'm going to leave that to my husband,” Tony said, waving a hand in her general direction. “He's...
Getting right into the spirit of this thing. The public display of affection thing.” And that wasn't going to end well for Tony. He considered despairing, but he doubted that would help.

“He started using 'husband' a lot sooner than I thought he would,” Rhodey said to Pepper.

“I'm working on not flinching every time anyone says it, including me,” Tony said. He pressed both hands to his face. “Steve's taking this as a challenge. He's... He's going to really do this thing. Every time we're in public. He's going to be my husband.”

He dropped his hands just in time to see Rhodey and Pepper exchange a glance. “I think he IS your husband,” Pepper said.

“I mean, he's going to act like that's, like it's a real thing,” Tony said. “With the touching and the smiles and the-” He flapped a hand at the room at large. “He's going to kiss me, Pep, I know he is, and this is going to be hell.”

“Probably,” she said, because she was bad at sugar coating things. Her brow furrowed. “Don't kiss him back.”

“Jesus, I'm not going to-” Tony felt his face heat, and Rhodey straightened up in his chair, his eyes narrowing. Tony ignored him. “I'm not going to kiss him back. I've had enough fake publicity dates to know how this works.”

“I deliberately did not let any of those dates move in with you,” Pepper said. Her phone buzzed, vibrating its way across the table, and she reached for it. She glanced down at it, her lips going tight. “It's Marcy, I need to take this.”

“Do me a favor,” Tony said. “Tell her I died.”

“She would drag your corpse out on the stage, so I'd recommend against going that route,” she said, moving towards the door. “Behave yourselves, boys. Don't do anything stupid in the five minutes while I'm gone.”

“Wanna get married?” Tony asked Rhodey.

Rhodey gave him a look. “Are you really going to compound this problem with bigamy?”

“Go big or go home,” Tony said.

Rhodey stood. “Once. Just once. Can we go small?” He crossed the room and lowered himself down onto the couch next to Tony. “How're we doing?”

“I'm about to share my living space with a man that I've been having very dirty dreams about since the age of thirteen,” Tony said. He rolled his head in Rhodey's direction. “A man I am now married to.”

“A man you are absolutely not going to kiss back,” Rhodey said.

“Not making that mistake again,” Tony agreed.

“Wait, again?”

Tony ignored him. “Steve's... Going to sell this. I just have to remember that it's an act. That it's not real, that it's not-” He stopped, and took a deep breath. “He's moving in. I'll be spending the next couple of months in the workshop.”
“Avoidance is probably not going to work, long run.”

“I'm concerned about short term survival.” Tony gave up and reached for his scotch. “I'll worry about the long run later.”

Rhodey considered him. “When is later?”

Tony tossed back the alcohol in one gulp. “Not now. And that's all that matters.”

Rhodey looked like he wanted to say something about that. Instead, he leaned back, his arms crossed over his chest. “How'd the team take the news?”

Tony pushed himself to his feet. “I'll let you know after we tell them.”

Rhodey's mouth fell open. “You haven't told-”

“Oh, like you'd be throwing yourself into that shark pit,” Tony said. He rolled his shoulders, then his neck, flexing his fingers as he did. “I want the suit.”

“You can't wear the suit to go tell-” Rhodey shook his head. “No.”

“It's my goddamn suit and I'll wear it if I want to,” Tony said. “I can get one of the lightweight ones, light on weapons systems and-”

“Right, because wearing a mask will go over well,” Rhodey said, his lips twitching. He braced his hands on his knees, broad fingers flexing against the planes of his legs. “Besides, Tone, pretty sure they've heard.”

“I can only hope.” Tony glanced at him. “Can I let Steve do all the talking?”

“I would.”

*

"Any questions?"

There was a long moment of silence. "How badly did they fuck up the pool?" Carol asked, and the room erupted in jeers. "Serious question!" she said, fending off a wad of paper that someone threw at her head. "Are we accepting this? Are we accepting this for the 'Who's going to get married in Vegas' pool?"

"I told you specifying a location would make a mess of it," Tony said. "You should've just gone with 'surprise marriage.'"

Steve braced his hands on the tabletop, leaning into them. "Side hustles aside-

"No, wait, did anyone have Steve in the pool?" Jan leaned back in her chair. "Natasha? Did anyone really-" Natasha held up one finger, and everyone groaned. Jan gave up on sitting like an adult, hopping up to kneel on the chair, her arms folded on the back. "Who?"

"Jones," Natasha said, and Jessica held up both her hands, giving a double 'v for victory' sign. Carol threw the wad of paper at her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Peter said from the ceiling. "You've. Got. To be kidding me."

Jessica leaned back in her chair, her chin up, one booted foot braced on the edge of the table.
"Nope," she said, her teeth flashing in a grin. "I like the longshots."

"How long was the longshot?" Bruce asked. Tony gave him a look, and he gave a shrug, his face flushing. "Just asking. For science."

"You can't use 'for science' to excuse everything," Jessica told him.

"I really can," Bruce said. "It's, uh, it's remarkably effective."

"This group likes science," Tony said, grinning despite himself. "And plausible deniability."

"Well, pretty much everyone picked the obvious suspect," Natasha said, hooking a thumb in Clint's direction. Clint stood, and gave a low, sweeping bow, to a mixed response of clapping and boos. Natasha glared at him. "Including, despite rules to the contrary, him."

"Let's be honest, we all know it was gonna happen," Clint said, unconcerned. He sat back down, straddling his chair and folding his arms on the back. "It was less the money and more owning it."

"Are you drunk right now?" Luke asked him, his arms crossed over his chest.

Clint shrugged. "Honestly, your guess is as good as mine," he said.

Luke grinned at him. "Yeah, somehow, I'm not surprised."

"So Jessica had Steve, did anyone have Tony?" Peter asked. "No one had Tony, right? Steve's one thing, but Tony's another thing entirely."

Tony gave Steve a sympathetic look, but since Steve was sitting with his head buried in his hands, he probably missed it. Amused, Tony went back to playing with his phone and waiting for this to be over.

"All would agree, there were none less likely," Thor said, swinging Mjolnir idly from hand to hand. Everyone scooted their chairs away from him. He didn't seem to notice.

"Can we move on?" Steve asked, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Every woman in this room had Tony in the poll," Natasha said, and she seemed to relish saying that aloud.

There was a beat of silence. "You're fucking kidding me," Clint said.

"I'm going to remind you," Natasha said, her voice bored, "once again, that you know absolutely nothing about women."

"We all had you, too," Jess said, her long black hair sweeping over her shoulder as she leaned forward.

"I didn't," Carol said.

"All the normal girls had you," Jess said without missing a beat. Carol kicked her chair. "But you're one thing. Tony's altogether another."

"I'm... Honored?" Tony said, his chin braced on one fist. "It's a compliment, darling," Jan told him, considering her nails. "You might have the men bamboozled, but every woman in the room knows you're a romantic."
"Yes, and nothing says romance like a surprise marriage," Tony said, saluting her with his coffee cup and a wry smile.

"You're also a little impetuous," Jan said. He glared at her, and she gave him a gamine smile, holding up her hand, her finger and thumb a bare inch apart. "Tiny bit."

"I-" He stopped, his mouth open, then subsided back into the chair. "Okay, that's fair." He sipped his coffee. He paused. "Before or after Pepper?"

"Only one person put you in the pool after you split with Pepper," Natasha said.

"I think we have more important things to talk about," Steve said, his voice stern. Natasha arched an eyebrow at him, but she didn't say anything further. Steve took a deep breath. "So that's the situation," he said. "I'm not asking anyone in this room to lie for us."

"I am," Tony said.

Steve's eyes slid in his direction. "Tony."

"No, I'm serious, they owe me a few lies, they owe me more than a few lies," Tony said, giving them all a threatening look. He was pretty sure it didn't work, but he felt better having made the effort. "I expect everyone in this room to lie enthusiastically each and every time-"

Steve braced one hand on the table, leaning into it. "Tony."

Tony tried his best to stare him down. He was not successful. Heaving a sigh, he waved a languid hand at the room. "Fine. Truth. Honesty. All that jazz."

"Question," Clint said, his chin leaning on the back of his chair. "Does anyone in this room feel the need to be in any way truthful with the press?"

Everyone, as one, looked up at Peter. It took him a second to realize it, and then he stared down at him, his head snapping from one side to the other. "What? Why is everyone looking at me? I hate the press."

Jess leaned her chair back on two legs, her toes ghosting against the floor. "Aren't you the press? Technically?"

"And the paper I work for has a headline that reads, 'Spider-Man Destroys Public Art,'" Peter said.

"Well, that's pretty rude," Luke said. He was struggling not to grin. "Don't do that."

"The Rhino threw me through a WALL. That had a mural on it," Peter said, his voice dark. "The 'destruction' was a side effect. So yeah." He spread his hands. "I got zero problems with lying to the press."

"And the rest of us have zero problems with lying to him," Clint said.

Peter's mouth dropped open. "Hey!"

Jan raised her hand, prim and proper as a school girl. After a beat of silence, Steve nodded at her. She gave him a bright grin. "So, now that we've agreed that we're united in our desire to stonewall people we don't like-"
“People we don't like and also Peter-” Jan amended.

Peter threw his hands up. “Thank you!”

“When's the reception?” Jan asked, and Tony looked up, alarm bells going off in his head just a few minutes too late.

"The what?” Steve asked, his voice blank.

She blinked at him. "The reception.” Tony and Steve just stared at her, and she frowned at them. "You are having a reception, aren't you?"

"No,” Tony said, unimpressed. She turned traumatized eyes on Steve, and Tony straightened up in his seat. "Steve. Do not fall for it. Do not-"

"I think that it would be an important statement of support from your friends and family,” Jan said, emphasizing the two words with all the zeal of a revivalist preacher. "And lacking a public show of-"

"No,” Tony said, trying to sound bored.

It didn't even slow Jan down. "Support from everyone involved-"

"You're not involved," Tony told her. He spread his hands wide. "You're not- You're not involved, Jan.”

"Yes, they are." Everyone turned, as one, to look at Steve. He stood, his hands braced on the table. "They are involved. Because we're asking them to lie for us."

Jan's shoulders slumped, just a tiny bit. "Well, it's not a lie, Cap,” she said. "In that, well, you ARE married."

He looked up, a wry smile twitching at the corners of his lips. "And it's not real, and you all know it."

“Truth is subjective,” Natasha said, her arms crossed over her chest. Carol glanced at her, and she gave a slight, one shouldered shrug.

“And many a lie has been made more palatable by a gathering of friends and kin,” Thor agreed. "Also booze,” Jess said. “Just saying. It makes things easier.”

“I am not bartending.” Luke held up his hands. ‘I'm telling you all this now. Not. Bartending.”

“Don't be ridiculous, why would you? We will hire a bartender,” Jan told him.

Tony groaned into his coffee cup. “No. We won't. Because we aren't having a reception, Jan.”

“You're going to bartend,” Jessica told Luke. “Because someone will start making a drink that hurts your soul, and you will physically toss them out from behind the bar and take over.”

He glared at her. “Don't you even-”

“Wanna know what's in a mai tai?” Jessica asked Jess.

Luke's mouth went tight, his eyes narrowing into slits. “Do not.”
Jess considered him. “Sure,” she said to Jessica, a grin sweeping over her face.

“If you say pineapple juice-” Luke said.

“Pineapple juice,” Jessica said without missing a beat, and Luke's eyes squeezed shut.

“I want a divorce,” he said.

“Oh, we're going to need one of those, too,” Tony said, toasting Luke with his coffee cup. “Do you have a lawyer lined up?”

“We might know a guy,” Luke said.

“He's a complete tire fire of a human being, but a decent lawyer,” Jessica said.

“Guys. Guys,” Peter said, waving one hand over his head. “I can-”

“No,” everyone in the room said at once.

“Hey, you don't even know what I'm going to say!” Peter said.

“Is it about bartending?” Jessica asked him.


“Technically, I was-”

“No,” everyone said, and Steve buried his head in his hands. Tony reached out, patting him gently on the back.

“Sorry, Cap, they're all horrible,” he said, sympathetic. “Parker, you're like twelve. You're not allowed to drink, let alone serve anyone else. And I know a few lawyers, so you can skip that Wikipedia search. Everyone else, we appreciate your promises of dishonesty when it counts. Jessica, collect your winnings, and question your life choices.”

“This is the least of my bad life choices,” Jessica said.

“That is troubling,” Tony told her. “And Jan, no, we are not having a reception.” Jan stared at him, her eyes huge, her lower lip stuck out in a distinct pout. Tony struggled not to laugh. “I've known you since you were nine, Van Dyne, that does not work on me.”

Jan's eyes narrowed. She stood up, drawing herself to her rather insubstantial height. “Everyone,” she said, her chin up, “I shall be throwing a gala in a month's time.”

Tony groaned. “No,” he told her.

Her eyelashes fluttered in his direction. “I'm sorry,” she said, her voice sugary sweet, “but this has nothing to do with you.” She pressed her fingers delicately against her breast. “I am throwing a party. A large, lovely party. I'll be inviting all of my friends. Who happen to be your friends as well.” Her teeth flashed in a sharp, dangerous sort of smile. “Show up. Or you will regret it.”

And with that, she walked out of the meeting room. Everyone watched her go. Carol started to clap, slow and deliberate. “So, that just happened,” Bruce said, his eyes blinking rapidly behind the lenses of his glasses.

“It certainly did,” Tony said. He considered throwing his coffee cup over his shoulder into the wall.
“It abso-fucking-lutely did.”

Steve gave him a look. “That was not your best work, Stark.”

“Yes, well, story of my life this week,” Tony said. He stood up. “Anyone else got something to say?” The team looked at him with varying degrees of amusement and pity. He chose to ignore the latter for now. He could have them all murdered later. “Good. Get out.”

He didn't wait to see if anyone followed his order. He got up and got out first. He was out the door and halfway up the hall before he heard the soft click of boot heels behind him. “Please tell me you're here to put me out of my misery,” he said, clutching his empty coffee cup like a lifeline.

Natasha slipped into step beside him. “Where would be the fun in that?” she asked. Her eyes slid in his direction, half hidden beneath the sweep of her lashes. “So.”

“I've been yelled at by all and sundry already today,” Tony said, his teeth clicking around each word. “So if you've got opinions on this situation that I won't particularly like, I can pencil you in for Tuesday, or Thursday if you want to do a pre-breakfast meeting.”

“Since when do you do pre-breakfast meetings?” she asked.

“Since I'm planning on canceling on you with no warning,” Tony said. “No matter when we schedule it for. So more than happy to-”

Natasha's hand caught his elbow, tugging him to a stop. “You all right?” she asked, her gaze sharp. Tony opened his mouth and her fingers tightened. “Are you all right?” she repeated, and he subsided.

“It's six months,” he said, with a lopsided smile. “I'm trying to think of it as rehab.” He waved his coffee cup through the air. “A way to make up for my dissipated life.”

She studied him. “Clint is very enthusiastic about getting you an annulment,” she said, and Tony groaned, his head falling back. Natasha's lips twitched. “I'll try to rein him in.”

“And this is why you're my favorite,” Tony told her. She gave him a slight wave, turning back up the hall. Tony took one step towards the elevator, and then paused. “Nat?” She looked back at him. “Who's the one who put my name in the pool? You know? After Pepper?”

Her lips twitched up. “I wouldn't worry about that,” she said. “He can't collect.”

Tony blinked. “Why not?”

She gave him a look. “Like I told Clint. If you're part of the marriage? You can't collect.” And with that, she walked around the corner and was gone.

Tony stared after her, turning that over in his head. “Right,” he said, trying to take a sip from his still-empty coffee cup. He stared down it. “Right. We're going to think about that later. Much later.”

Preferably after a lot of coffee.

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“Hey, Cap.”

Steve didn't slow down. “Oh, now you're talking?” he said, shifting his gym bag higher on his shoulder. “You didn't say a word through that entire meeting, and now you've got something to
Sam fell into step beside him, a towel thrown over his shoulder, and his running shoes dangling from one hand. "Figured there were enough people talking over each other in that room, you didn't need to hear it from one more smartass."

"No, you like to be the only smartass in the room," Steve said.

"And that's not possible when I'm talking to you, now is it?" Sam shot back with a wide grin. He reached past Steve, pushing the door to the locker room open. "Steve. Can you slow down?"

"No," Steve bit out.

The locker room was empty, and he was grateful for that small mercy. Sam ducked around him, and Steve jerked to a stop. He took a deep breath, and let it out from between clenched teeth. "Sam. I'm about to go hit something, as hard as I possibly can, and if you don't want it to be you, I'd suggest you back the hell off."

Sam studied him, his face unreadable. "How's your love life, Steve?"

"Oh, great, you want to talk about love lives?" Steve tossed his bag at the bench with a bit more force than was strictly necessary. It skimmed off the top of the well-worn wood and slammed into the wall of lockers with a bang. Steve sucked in a breath, and let it out, trying to get himself under control. "Fantastic. How's yours going?"

Sam didn't break eye contact with Steve, even as he set his running shoes down on the edge of the bench. "Pretty good. You know. Secret Agent love lives, never a dull moment." He paused, one eyebrow arching. "In that Abby's a secret agent."

Steve stared at him, his stomach churning. "No," he said. "Really."

"Also, she lives in space." The other eyebrow went up. "Did you know that? She lives in space."

Steve's lips kicked up in a reluctant smile, some of the tension going out of his shoulders. "You've mentioned that. Once or twice."

"Not as cool," Sam said. He took a seat next to Steve, bracing his elbows on his knees. "Hey, if your significant other lived in space, you'd bring it up."

Steve sank down onto the bench, exhaustion sweeping over him like a wave. "My significant other goes to space," he said, scraping a hand over his face. "Does that count?"

"Can we not?" Steve said, his head falling back. He gripped the bench, wishing he was in the gym with the punching bag already. Wishing that he could stop thinking, even for a few minutes.

Steve's fingers flexed on the edge of the bench, his knuckles going white with the pressure. "I might've gotten married."

Sam nodded. "Steve?" He glanced at Steve, his mouth drawn up in a lopsided smile. "I think you did get married."

"I guess I did." Steve sucked in a breath, and it hurt, his chest hurt, his back hurt, his shoulders hurt, everything ached like he'd just done ten rounds with the Hulk. He looked at Sam, feeling helpless. "I
“I think I did.”

"I think you did, too." Sam's fingers wove together, one index finger tapping against the back of his other hand. "Wanna talk about this?"

Steve pushed himself upright. "All due respect, Sam, I've got a therapist. I don't need another one." He managed a smile, and it felt tight on his face, it felt fake. But he was used to that, by now. "It's not fair to you, or, really, to me."

Sam spread his hands, his head tipped forward so he could look up at Steve from beneath the arch of his brows. "Not your therapist. Just your friend."

"What the hell's the difference?" Steve asked, and the moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Sorry. Sorry, I'm-"

"The difference is," Sam said, cutting him off, "is that a therapist gets paid, and a friend's seen your sketchbooks."

Steve froze, his chest contracting with the force of it. Something, something eerily like fear swept over him, and he struggled to find something to say to that.

Sam leaned forward, his head tipped to the side. "Steve, I'm never going to tell someone who they are, or what they feel. What I think about the situation-" He shook his head. "It means nothing. The only one that matters here is you. You're the only one who gets to determine who you are or how you live your life." He rocked back on the bench, his hands cupping his knees. "But I have seen your sketchbooks, and-" He smiled, just a little. "If I was drawing conclusions, I could draw conclusions from those."

He couldn't breathe. He kept trying to suck air in, between tight lips and set teeth, and it stuck in his throat, hot and burning. He closed his eyes, concentrating on trying to make his lungs work. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

"Breathe."

His eyes snapped open, and he found Sam right in front of him, his hands held out, almost, but not quite touching his shoulders. Sam gave him a reassuring smile. "I need you to breathe, Steve," he said, his voice gentle. "Because if you pass out on me, I'm going to have to either let you faceplant or try to catch you, and you're out of my weight class, man. We do this, you're going to end up on the ground."

Steve sucked in a breath, and it shuddered through him. "You do okay when you're flying," he managed. His voice was shaky on the edges of the words, unsteady in between them. But he was breathing. He could breathe. His legs felt unsteady, and he lowered himself back down onto the bench while he still had something resembling control.

Sam grinned. "You might not notice, what with the whole 'throwing yourself off of tall objects' thing," he said, settling down in a loose crouch in front of Steve, "but I'm usually cursing at you when I catch you."

Steve nodded. "I notice."

Sam gave him a look. "And you keep doing it." Steve nodded again. Sam's head fell forward in a nod. "Right, right." He glanced up. "Next time, I'm letting you fall."

It was such an idle threat, but it was strangely comforting. Steve dropped his head, staring down at
his hands. They were shaking, and he let his eyes close. "I might've done this on purpose."

The silence stretched out, and Steve forced his head up, forced his eyes open. "Sam. I think-" His
breath seized in his throat, panic clawing at his breastbone as he forced the words out. "I think I did
this on purpose."

"Why do you think that?" Sam asked, and there was no censure there, no judgment. Just a calm,
curious question. "Steve. Why do you think that?"

Steve stared at him. "Because I... Wanted it. So badly. And now-" He ran his hands through his hair,
pressing his palms against his scalp. "I did it, and it's-" His breath caught on something
uncomfortably like a sob. "It's all wrong, Sam, and it's my fault."

There was a beat of silence, and then Sam settled down next to him on the bench, close enough that
they were almost touching. When Steve took a breath, his shoulder flexed against Sam's. "Did you
know that the man was a real priest?" Sam asked. Steve shook his head. "Or that it was a real
license?"

It took him two tries, but he managed to force out a "No."

"Were you aware of what was being celebrated?"

"In retrospect, it's pretty clear." "Not in retrospect." Sam gave him a look. "At the time. Were you aware that Symkaria had legalized
gay marriage?"

Steve exhaled. "No."

Sam nodded. "Sometimes we want things, very badly. Things that are unlikely, or downright
impossible." His head bobbed to the side. "That kind of fantasy is natural, and even healthy, provided we can separate it from reality, and acknowledge that it is just that. A fantasy."

He swayed, just an inch or two, his shoulder brushing against Steve's. "No amount of wanting it is
going to make it reality, Steve. Just because you fantasized about a thing, or a situation, or-" He
shrugged. "Or a person."

"I didn't-" Steve's face felt like it was on fire. "I mean, not like-" Sam didn't say a thing, and he burst
out, "I did not have sexual fantasies about Tony." Which sounded like a lie, even to him. He pressed
a hand to his face.

Sam nodded. "Steve, two thirds of the tri-state area has had sexual fantasies about Tony. So if you
haven't, you're in the minority on that." He leaned forward. "Now, if I WAS your therapist-"

"I will punch you," Steve said, and Sam grinned.

"Okay, as your friend. I'm going to say, you do have some tendencies that could be labeled slightly

Steve sucked in a breath, his head hanging down. "Don't know what you're talking about," he said,
and Sam laughed.

"Oh, really? You don't know what I'm talking about?" Sam made a humming sound under his
breath, his body rocking backwards as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe the 'jumping out
of a plane without a parachute' thing? Or the 'trying to stop a car with your body' thing? Or the
'trying to punch a demi-god' thing?"

Steve realized he was smiling down at his shoes. "It was ONE TIME," he managed, and Sam punched him in the shoulder.

"One time? One time, my fine ass." He raised his hands as if in prayer. "Please. One day. One day without you running face first into something trying to kill you, or starting a public pissing match with injustice, or trying to-

"Why do I talk to you?" Steve asked, and it was okay. It was okay. For the first time in what felt like forever, he was pretty sure that he was okay. Or that he was going to be okay. He sucked in a breath, and another, and it no longer burned, the sharp, cutting burn of the ice. "Why do I-

"Because I'm the only person who'll put up with your maudlin self for more than a few hours at a time," Sam said, and he was grinning as he said it. He bumped his shoulder against Steve's. "And even though you are a little self-destructive-

"Tiny, tiny bit," Steve admitted.

Sam ignored him. "You're still my friend." He smiled at Steve. "And your love life is a disaster, but no. I don't think you did this on purpose."

Steve tried to smile back. "You've got more faith in me than I do." He let his head fall back, staring up at the clean, white ceiling until it blurred. “I…” His eyes closed. “I think about it. Sometimes. About-” He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to massage away the tension there. “About not being me. About being someone who can just-

He didn't know how to say this. His leg jerked, his heel rattling against the floor. Next to him, Sam was still and quiet. Waiting with his usual patience.

“If I wasn't me, I could just tell him,” Steve burst out. He looked up at Sam. “I could just-

Sam's eyebrows arched, just a slight flicker of movement. “Ask your boy out?” he said, and just like that, it was fine. Everything was fine.

“Ask him out,” Steve parroted. “Make a move. Tell him that I-” He stopped, and struggled to smile. “I might be in love with him.”

“Makes sense,” Sam said.

Steve stood up. “Instead, I married him.”

“Yeah, that's where I get confused here,” Sam admitted. “You skipped a few steps, Steve.”

Steve choked on a laugh. “It wasn't-” He turned, looking down at Sam. “I just- I think about it sometimes. About what it would be like to be ordinary, to be nobody in particular.” He spread his hands. “To be normal and be able to get married to whoever I wanted, without it being a damn thing, Sam.”

Sam nodded. “And now you are married.”

“And it's a damn THING,” Steve said, frustration twisting through him. “And in six months, I won't be, and it's-” His shoulders slumped. “It's what I wanted, and it's all wrong, all at the same time.”

Sam glanced at him. “Way I see it,” he said, his voice quiet, “you've got two choices. You can
accept the situation and ride this out.”

Steve's stomach churned. “Right. That's... What I need to do.”

“Or...” Sam smiled at him. “Or you can spend the next six months doing your best to win Tony's heart.”

Steve stared at him. Sam's smile stretched. “Turn on the charm, Steve. Show him what you've got to offer. Be the best husband you can manage.” He kicked his legs out in front of him. “Get out there and woo the fuck out of that man.”

Steve's heart was pounding in his ears. “That's not-” He stopped. “I can't.”

“Why not?” Sam shrugged. “Why the fuck not, Rogers?”

“Isn't that...” Steve sank down onto the bench. “Isn't that putting pressure on him? We have to do this. We agreed. I can't just manipulate things like that.”

Sam shrugged. “Look, I'll be honest, as your friend, I don't think you should sleep with him until you get this whole thing straightened out.” He stopped. “So to speak.”

Steve felt his face heat. “Yeah, that's...” He let out a wry laugh. “That's not going to happen, Sam, I'm not-” He stopped, and held up a hand. “We're not discussing this.”

“No, we're not.” Sam stood. “Steve. Look. Six months from now, what will you regret? Taking the chance, or not taking it?”

Steve swallowed. “Isn't this-” He stopped. “It's not fair, it's not right. Just because I feel this way, isn't this-” He shook his head. “It's not right. To use this to my advantage like this, it's not right. We have to do this in public, Sam, I can't pressure him into something he might not...” His throat hurt. “Into something he doesn't want.”

“Steve. If in six months, he looks at you and says, 'I don't want to be in a romantic relationship with you, we're friends, and that's all I can give you,' how will you feel?” Sam asked.

It hurt, an ache that settled low in his chest, and his shoulders hunched. “Relieved,” he said, and he it caught him off guard. He looked up, surprise sweeping over him, and something like peace settling over him in its wake. “Relieved,” he repeated.

Sam smiled. “So, you're not the 'friendzoned' asshole,” he said, his voice gentle. “You value Tony's friendship. It's not something you're using to get him in bed. You're not manipulating him, not trying to pressure him. You're just... Showing him that he can't do any better, honestly.”

“He can do better,” Steve said.

“You're adorable, Rogers, you really are.” Sam held out a hand. “It's up to you. I'll support you, no matter what. But if you can't make him see you as a romantic possibility now, Steve, it's never going to happen, you know that, right?”

Steve took his hand, and let Sam haul him to his feet. “Woo the fuck out of that man?” he asked, his lips twitching.

“Woo it up,” Sam agreed, his fingers squeezing Steve's. “Flowers, chocolates, breakfast in bed, romantic movies, sappy text messages.”
“I don't see that working,” Steve said. It sounded nice, though. It sounded... Very nice.

“Fine, go take your shirt off and drape yourself on a car hood,” Sam said, throwing his hands in the air, “and excuse me for being a traditionalist.”

Steve choked on a laugh. “I'm- No.”

“It would work,” Sam said. “Don't you doubt me, you haven't had a date in what, seventy years?”

“Your girlfriend lives in SPACE,” Steve pointed out. “She moved to SPACE to get away from you, what do you think-”

“She lived in space before we started dating, she comes back to earth for me,” Sam said. He grinned at Steve. “You okay?”

Steve nodded. “I'm no good at wooing,” he admitted.

“It's okay, I don't think Tony's very good at being wooed,” Sam told him. “Matched set. And hey, you've already got a foot in the door.”

“Literally,” Steve said. He rubbed his eyes. “Moving in tomorrow.”

“You're out of your mind,” Sam told him. “Out of your ever loving mind, Cap.”

Steve grinned. “Probably.” He braced his hands on the bench, leaning back. “Just so you know, I have sketchbooks of you, too.”

“Huh,” Sam said, eyes narrowing. “I'm skeptical. 'Cause I've never seen them. Or heard of them. Before now.”

“Too embarrassing to show you,” Steve said with a straight face.

“How many of them are full of naked pictures?” Sam asked.

Steve's mouth dropped open. “What? Why would you-”

“Yeah.” Sam braced his hands on his hips. “Steve? Remember after you took that life drawing class? And you were working on your anatomy? You had a sketchbook full of nudes?”

Steve stared at him. “Yes?” he said, because Sam seemed to be waiting for a response.

“They all looked like Tony,” Sam said, his voice blunt.

Steve blinked. “No, they didn't,” he said, because of course they didn't. They couldn't. He wouldn't have done that.

Sam gave him a slight smile. “Yes. Yes, they really, really did.” He leaned forward. “You have a book of naked pictures of Tony Stark. That you drew. Over. And over.” His smile stretched. “And judging by the look of horror on your face right now, you had no idea you were doing it.”

“I didn't do that,” Steve said, immediate. Instinctive. Desperate.

“Cap.” Sam reached out, one hand clasping Steve's shoulder. “You've got about fifty pictures of a naked man with black hair and a goatee and even if it's not an exact match, yes. You did that.”

Steve let out a sound of pain. “Is that why-”
“I told you that showing it to anyone else would probably be a bad idea? Yeah,” Sam said, grinning.

“You told me it was a sexual harassment issue!” Steve didn't know why he felt so betrayed, but he did. “You said SHIELD HR would get involved!”

“Would you have preferred I told you that it made it look like you had a thing for one of our teammates?” Sam asked, his voice flat.

“God, no,” Steve burst out, and Sam gave him a 'that's right' look. Steve squeezed his eyes shut. “I can't believe I showed you.”

“Yeah, I figured you had no idea what was going on,” Sam said. “Or you would've kept it more...” His eyebrows arched. “Private.”

“Look, I just don't show you the... The naked pictures I drew of you,” Steve said, and he didn't know what he was saying, but maybe it was better to be thought of as the pervert who drew all his friends naked rather than the lovesick idiot who was drawing private porn that he didn't even know enough to keep private. “Because I have them. Naked pictures. Of you.”

Sam stared at him. Steve did his best to keep a straight face. It wasn't easy. Sam pulled out his phone. Steve blinked. “What're you doing?”

“Telling Abby that you've drawn naked pictures of me and you're not sharing,” Sam said, and Steve lunged for his phone. Laughing, Sam twisted around, keeping it out of reach with a force of will. “No! The truth will be known, Rogers!”

“Don't.” Steve grabbed for the phone, and Sam backpedaled out of reach, his arms held over his head. “Sam, don't-”

“Too000 late,” Sam sing-songed. There was a ping, and he grinned down at his phone. “Aw, look, she added 'naked pictures of Sam' to her Amazon wishlist, now you'll know what to get her for Christmas!”

“I hate you so much, Wilson,” Steve said, and Sam was laughing at him, even as he planted a hand on Steve's face and pushed him away.

“That better not affect how you draw my six-pack,” Sam said. He hooked a foot into the strap of Steve's bag. “Wanna go hit something?”

Steve picked up Sam's shoes, tossing them in Sam's general direction. “I think you've got the better idea. Run?”

“I'll give you a head start.”

*

“Are you up?”

Tony paused in the act of tying his tie. “Would I be talking to you if I wasn't?”

“Oh, please, I've held entire conversations with you while you've been unconscious,” Pepper said. “Your medical files points out that just because you're talking doesn't mean that you have a pulse.”

Tony grinned. “I do have a gift,” he said.

“That's one way of putting it. Are you up?”
“Up and dressed and heading out now. I will be on time,” he said, before she could bring that up. Because she would bring that up. He smoothed a hand over his hair, giving himself a critical look in the mirror. Not bad. He’d pass muster. It certainly did not look like he’d gotten less than ten hours of sleep in the last three or four days.

Or maybe he did, and he was just used to seeing himself look half dead.

He grabbed his jacket. “You have the files?”

“And the prototypes. I’ll meet you in the lobby”

Tony rolled his eyes. “No. I’ll meet you at the meeting, why-”

“Absolutely not,” Pepper said, her voice tight. “Lobby. Ten minutes.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Tony pointed out. He glanced at his watch. They 100 percent did not have time for these games. “Seriously. Pep. Can I just-”

“No. In that you can’t be trusted,” Pepper said, her voice saccharine. “I’m already in the car on my way over, Tony, so let’s skip to the part where you agree with something close to grace.”

“Not really my style,” Tony said, slipping his jacket on and smoothing it into place, his shoulders flexing beneath the perfect fit of the fabric. He checked the cuffs, adjusted his tie, and headed for the elevator. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just go pick out one of my many cars and-”

“How much did you sleep last night?” Pepper said, cutting him off with ruthless efficiency. Tony fell silent, and she waited, the empty air stretching out between them. “We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

His eyes flicked up towards the ceiling. “Fine,” he said, and Pepper exhaled, a sigh of relief that made him smile. “Sorry, Pep.”

“You are not,” she said instantly, and Tony laughed. “Ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes,” he agreed. Which was fine. Time for him to grab a cup of coffee.

He was still in the coffee shop in the lobby when Pepper strode through the front door. He drained the last of his espresso, sticking another twenty in the tip jar on his way to throw out the cup. The barista behind the register stopped wiping down the counter long enough to give him a nod and a smile. “Thanks, Mr. Stark,” she said, and he gave her an idle wave.

“Mr. Stark?”

He paused, looking back over his shoulder at the kid at the espresso machine. She smiled, her cheeks almost as red as her head scarf. “Congratulations,” she said, and he stared at her confused. She gave him a nervous smile. “On your marriage?”

“Oh!” He choked on a laugh. “Thank you. That’s-” His head fell forward. “Thank you, that’s very nice of you.” She smiled, her shoulders relaxing, and Tony smiled back. “That’s very nice of you,” he repeated, right as the door to the coffee shop opened and Pepper poked her head in.

“Ready?” she asked, giving a smile and a nod to the young women behind the counter.

“They’re cutting me off, so yes, time to move on to someplace that doesn’t know I’ve already hit my caffeine consumption for the day,” Tony said. “If you ever schedule a meeting for this obscene hour again, Potts, I’ll have you deposed.”
“Life is tough when you have a teleconference with four different time zones,” Pepper agreed, her lips twitching. Her head tipped towards the lobby. “Come on. Happy's double parked.”

“It's oh-god-o'clock,” Tony pointed out, glancing out the front windows towards the street. “How is-” He stopped, his attention caught by something far more interesting than the sleek black sedan idling at the curb.

Steve was running up the street, lit from behind by the first rays of the morning sun, gilding his hair and his skin. He was wearing a pair of running shorts and a too tight white t-shirt, an outfit that should not have been half as attractive as it was.

There was a huge, lopsided bundle of brown paper tied to his back with a sling of rope.

Tony slowed to a stop, his head tipping to the side as Steve darted through the front doors, his sneakers squeaking on the marble floor. “One sec!” he called, and before Tony could say anything, he ducked into the coffee shop.

Through the glass, Tony saw him stop in front of the counter, wriggling out of the rope sling, swinging the paper cone around into his arms. He ripped open the paper, revealing a brilliant mass of flowers, roses and mini sunflowers and bright gerbera daisies in what seemed like dozens of colors.

Through the glass door, Tony watched as Steve handed each of the baristas a bunch of daisies and sunflowers, his face bright with laughter. “Oh, my God,” Tony said, ignoring the way that his chest ached. “He is painfully perfect, isn't he?”

Next to him, Pepper was laughing. “You don't have to sound quite so morose about that,” she pointed out.

“Easy for you to say, you're not married to him,” Tony pointed out as Steve exited the coffee shop, pausing only long enough to hand a final miniature sunflower over to the security guard at the front door. The man grinned down at it before tucking the flower into his shirt pocket.

“He moved in yet?” Pepper asked.

“Tonight,” Tony said. “Or today.” He hadn't gotten an exact plan from Steve yesterday. Mostly for his own sanity. “I'm letting him handle it.”

“That's... Probably not the best idea,” Pepper said.

“I've had a lot of those recently,” Tony said, as Steve glanced in their direction.

His face flushed, his hair damp, and his eyes dancing, Steve crossed the lobby at an easy lope. “Hi,” he said, his arms still full of flowers. Before Tony could realize what Steve was up to, he'd leaned over, pressing a gentle kiss to the corner of Tony's lips. It was intimate and casual, all at once, a public display of affection that Tony hadn't been expecting.

Tony ignored the warmth curling in the pit of his stomach as Steve took a step back. “You're up early,” he said, arching an eyebrow at Steve

“I think that's my line. After all,” Steve said, “I'm always up this early. You're the one usually heading to bed around now.” Steve juggled the massive cone of brown paper, pulling a bouquet of roses in a variety of pink shades from the depths He offered it to Pepper with a bright grin. “Good morning, Ms. Potts.”

She took it, her cheeks going pink as she buried her face in the velvety petals. “Thank you, Steve,
they're lovely.”

“You're flirting with my ex. Right in front of me,” Tony said, tucking his hands in his pockets. “The gall of you, Rogers. The absolute gall.”

Steve gave him a look, his lips twitching. “Rude of me,” he agreed, and he peeled away the rest of the brown paper. It fell to the polished marble of the lobby floor in broad, heavy swaths, leaving Steve with an armload of roses, beautifully formed blooms of golden yellow with red bleeding along the tips of every petal.

Steve held them out to him, and Tony stared at them, caught off guard. “I saw them in the flower market,” Steve said, and he was grinning, his eyes the color of the morning sky, dark blue with a faint glow of gold in its depths. “And thought of you.” He looked down at the blooms, dark green leaves slipping between his fingers. He glanced back up, and he was grinning, so bright and happy and alive that Tony's chest ached.

Tony reached out, separating one stem from the bunch. “For obvious reasons,” Tony said. He rolled the stem between his fingertips, letting the light of the lobby skylights play over the bloom. “How many did you buy?”

“All that they had,” Steve said, tipping them into Tony's arms.

The bundle came apart, the stems spilling over Steve's fingers, and Tony's hands came up instinctively. There was a rustle of leaves, a shower of petals, and then Tony found himself holding what seemed to be four or five dozen roses, the blooms brilliant against the dark fabric of his coat.

Tony stared down at the flowers in his arms. “What am I supposed to do with these?” he asked, despite the smile that he couldn't quite repress.

“What do you ever do with flowers?” Steve shot back, his voice full of laughter.

“Give them to other people,” Tony said. “I don't ever have to deal with them on the long term, Steve, I buy them and then foist them off on someone else. Let someone else find a vase or, I don't know, this is like having a child that's going to die in three days, this is horrible, you've done a horrible thing.”

Steve was laughing out loud now. “Yeah. And it was fun, so I'm probably going to do it again,” he said. He leaned in, and Tony caught the scent of his skin, sweat and soap and sunshine, mingled with the damp, sweet smell of the roses. This kiss was just as soft, just as gentle, but Steve's lips found his full on this time, and Tony's eyes slid shut.

He felt Steve's hand cup his cheek, felt his thumb slide across the line of his cheekbone. “Knock 'em dead, Stark,” Steve whispered, and Tony felt his face heat.

He opened his eyes, and Steve was right there, looking at him with an expression that Tony couldn't quite read. It took him two tries to manage to get words out from lips that seemed to have gone numb. “Don't I always?” he said, and he was pleased, he was relieved, because he sounded as glib and easy as he always did.

Steve backed off, one step, then another. “Yes,” he said, and he bent over to collect the remains of the paper. “You always do.” With a grin and a wink, he was jogging across the lobby, strips of paper trailing from his hand like streamers in his wake.

“What am I supposed to do with these?” Tony yelled after him, and Steve bounced around to face him, still moving towards the elevators.
“I thought you were a problem solver!” he called back, spreading his arms wide. “Give them away! Make people happy! Bribe board members! Or, you know, find a vase, Stark!” And with that, he was to the elevators and gone.

Tony stared after him, his heart thudding in his throat. Pepper touched his arm. “Happy's here,” she said, and she steered him through the lobby doors and out to the car. Happy hopped out, opening the back door for them, his eyebrows arched and his mouth hanging open just a little. But he didn't say a word, just waited for them to both settle in the back seat.

The door slammed shut, and Tony found himself staring at nothing in particular. “Did you set me up?” he asked, from behind his armload of flowers.

Pepper buried her face in her own bouquet, her face flushed as she inhaled. “Well, Jarvis helped,” she said. “He said Steve asked if you were still in the building. We took that as a sign that maybe you should be.”

Tony thought about that. “So... You and Jarvis colluded to set me up.”

Pepper smiled. “Yes.”

“Well, at least you're honest about it,” Tony said. He shifted the flowers in his lap, the leaves rustling as he found a way to balance them without having them half in his face. His fingers smoothed over one of the velvety petals, a faint smile creasing his face as he considered the place where the red bled into the yellow. His colors. Steve had found roses in his colors. He looked up to find Pepper smiling at him, her eyes bright. “Is that a smirk?” he asked, his voice dire.

“I would never,” she said, and she sounded so smug that it was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud.

“Right,” he said. “Never”

“Never,” she agreed. She crossed her legs, her flowers settled easily in the crook of her elbow with all the grace of a beauty queen.

Tony shifted his again, and the scent of them, heady and sweet, flooded the air. “I don't know what I'm supposed to do with these,” Tony complained.

“I'll take them off your hands,” Pepper offered. She reached for them and Tony moved them out of reach.

“Back off, you harpy, you've got your own,” he said, and she laughed, settling back in her seat. Tony petted his roses with a careful hand. “It's all right, darlings, I won't let the greedy lady get her hands on you.”

“I wouldn't promise them anything,” Pepper said, her voice a purr. “You'll get distracted at some point, and then-” She wiggled her fingers in his direction.

Tony smiled down at the flowers. “You can try,” he said. He let his eyes closed. “Pep? I think I'm getting in over my head.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Pepper shifted, leaning up against his side, her head tucked against his shoulder. “Do you want out?” she asked, her voice quiet, and the thought was so shattering that for a long moment, he couldn't think, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe.

He shook his head. “I'm fine,” he said, and Pepper nodded against his shoulder.
“Tell me if that changes,” she said.

Tony wasn’t sure he’d know. But he also wasn’t sure cared anymore. “You want to help me?” he asked, and she nodded. “Good. Roll down the window so I can toss these.”

“I’m sensing you’re feeling a certain level of ambivalence towards this particular gift.”

“You want to psychoanalyze me, or help me?”

“I’ll get you a vase,” Pepper offered.

Tony huffed out a breath. “That works, too.”
"You know, if we ever end up not being able to make ends meet, we could probably fund all of our super hero antics by starting a part-time moving company."

“I like how you say 'we,'” Luke said. He hefted a massive box up, balancing it easily on one shoulder. “As if you're, you know, participating.”

Sam tapped the tablet in his hand with his knuckles. “Management,” he said.

Luke paused, giving Sam a narrow eyed look. “Really, man?”

Sam spread his hands. “Okay, everyone in this room who has super strength, bench press a piece of furniture with one hand.”

“Do we get to choose the piece of furniture?” Jessica asked, giving the couch a considering look.

“I call fridge!” Carol said.

“Do not bench press anything,” Steve said, moving a stack of books out of the way.

“My point being, most people here could carry me and any box I choose to pick up, so I'm just going to avoid that humiliation and stay here,” Sam said. “Keeping tabs. Keeping everything running.”

“Yeah, because Steve's got so much to keep tabs on,” Carol said. She paused in the act of stacking boxes to tighten the bandanna that was tied around her head. “Cap, you finish with the art stuff yet?”

“Working on it,” Steve said, shuffling a stack of canvases. “I don't think these need to go.”

“Ooo, I like this one,” Jess said, peeking over his shoulder. She reached past him, making grabby fingers at the painting, a simple landscape he'd done from turn of the century photos of Central Park. “Can I have it?”

Steve grinned, a flush of pleasure going over him. “Sure,” he said, handing it over.

“You're shameless, you know that?” Carol said to Jess, who hugged the painting to her chest.

“And I now I've got a pretty picture, so it seems like that's working out for me,” Jess said, her tone arch. She gave Carol a smirk. “Don't be jealous. Once I've got it properly displayed, I'll let you come and look at it.”

“By 'properly displayed,' you mean, 'when you prop it up against a wall,' right?” Carol said. She pushed a box towards Steve, who started filling it with sketchbooks. “How many of those do you have?”

“I have a problem,” Steve admitted.

“Too many sketchbooks?” Carol asked.

“No artist ever has too many sketchbooks.” Steve dragged another crate of the damn things out from under the table. “At least, that's what my brain keeps telling me every time I'm in an art supply store, looking at a display of sketchbooks.”

“Hey, can I have a soda?” Clint called from the kitchen.
“Sure,” Steve called back. “Bring some for everyone.”

Clint leaned out of the kitchen. “Can I have some chips?” he asked.

“Yes,” Steve said. “Take whatever you want.”

“Can I have-”

“He's MOVING,” Jessica said. “If you eat it, he doesn't have to throw it out or move it.”

Clint pointed a finger at her. “Right. I accept this mission.” He disappeared back into the kitchen.

“If it's moldy, don't eat it!” Jess called after him.

“Setting the bar low there, aren't you?” Sam asked.

Jess arched an eyebrow. “We used to date.”

Sam winced. “Right. Gotcha.” He pulled a box away from Steve. “This one's done, get another one.”

Steve made a grab for it, but Sam could be fast when he wanted to be. “I still have paint to-”

“These paint tubes are empty, Cap,” Carol said, holding up one flat, rolled up tube. She gestured at it. “This... This is empty. There is no paint left in any of these. These are trash.”

“If you cut off the front of them, you can-” Steve started, and Carol reached for a trash bag. Before he could stop her, she swept the paint tubes off the table and into the bag. “That was mature,” he told her, and Carol leaned in, almost nose to nose with him.

“I'm not spending all day standing here, waiting for you to pry half an ounce of paint from a hundred different empty paint tubes,” she said, her voice dire. “Pack something else.”

“I can just take those back out-” Steve said, and Carol held the trash bag up. As everyone watched, she gave it a brief, violent shake.

“They're now mixed up with our lunch trash,” she said. “Go pack something else.”

“You realize I've dug through worse for less,” Steve said, and Luke walked past, snagging the bag from Carol.

“Okay, children, back to work,” he said, his voice amused. “Mr. Garbage Bag's going down the trash chute now. Sam, give them something to do before Steve realizes what Clint's doing to the kitchen.”


“I thought she was doing the bathroom,” Jessica said.

“I did the bathroom,” Jess said. “I wanted to snoop in his medicine cabinet.” Carol gave her a look, and Jess shrugged. “Once a spy, always a spy.”

“Damn it, Jan!” Steve yelled, his hands on his hips. “Get out of my closet!”

“So please don't tell me to can it,” Jess sang, grinning down at the bag of pillows.

“Stop this,” Carol told them.

Jess ignored her. “I've only one thing to say and that's-”

“Dammit, Janet! I love you!” Clint yelled from the kitchen. Carol looked like she was in pain. Sam patted her on the shoulder.

“Shouldn't have let them show Rocky Horror on movie night,” he said.

“I love having my own theme song,” Jan said, darting into the living room, her arms full of clothes. “Be right back, just running these down to the laundry room or the trash chute, which ever one I reach first.”

“Jan!” Steve made a grab for her, and she danced around him staying just out of reach. “Give me-There's nothing wrong with my clothes!”

“That's... That's not at all true,” Jess said. She sounded sad. “Your clothes are horrible.”

“They're fine!” Steve managed to grab the trailing leg of a pair of pants and used it to drag Jan to a stop. “Give me my clothes,” he said, trying not to laugh.

“Please let me dress you,” she said, her eyes huge and liquid. “I'm begging you.” Her lower lip poked out. “At least for the next few months.”

Steve smiled down at her. “No,” he said, and leaned forward to press a kiss on her forehead. “Stay out of my closet, Jan.”

“Why do you hate me so much much?” Jan said, her voice rising to a dramatic pitch. She slumped forward, resting her forehead on Steve's breastbone, half of his wardrobe pinned between them. “Why?”

“I'm just going to let you deal with that,” Carol said. Jan made a whining noise. “C'mon, Jess, let's put what's left of his shirts into some boxes before Jan finds some lighter fluid.”

“Fire fixes a lot of problems,” Jessica said. She paused. “Makes some other problems, but still.” Her teeth flashed in a grin. “Fun.”

“No lighting anything on fire,” Steve said, patting Jan's head. “Please.”

“Well, I was gonna, but then you said please,” Jessica said. “What're you even doing here, Jan? You don't live here.”

Jan pulled away from Steve, letting him take his clothes from her arms. He shoved them in the nearest box before she could decide to make another try for them. “No, I don't live here, which means my only chance to judge people's living spaces if is they move.”

“Right,” Jessica said. “I was going to ask 'why' you didn't live here, but that answers it pretty clearly, thank you.”

“I don't live here because Hank and Tony have two modes,” Jan said. She held up one finger. “One, BFF's forever and ever, lets make friendship bracelets or perhaps a doomsday ray.”

“Oh my God,” Luke said. He took the box from Steve. There was a pantleg trailing out of it.
“And two-” She held up a second finger. “Mortal enemies, you are the reason for every bad thing that's ever happened to me and I will burn your works to the ground and then pee on the ashes.”

“Right,” Steve said. A muscle twitched beside his eye, and he pressed a finger there. “I mean. Right.”

“There's really no middle ground,” Jan said. “That's why I live with Hank. On the other side of the city. And bring him for carefully supervised visits so he and Tony don't unleash tactical nuclear weapons on each other.” She paused. “Or get into a slap fight.”

“Why is Tony's relationship with every other scientific genius in this city so bad?” Steve asked.

“Mostly because when one of them starts pulling stupid shit, most of us don't know what they're up to until too late,” Luke said. “The others act as whistleblowers so we at least have time to prepare before the latest 'best idea ever' levels a couple of city blocks or brings someone back from the dead.”

“I'll loop you in on the text alerts Sue Storm and I have going,” Jan said cheerfully. “You can help us with the playdates!”

“Does Tony know you call them playdates?” Steve asked.

“He suggested it,” Jan said. She flapped a hand in his direction. “Shoo, shoo, go move things, I'll just be in your room helping Carol and Jess.”

“Jan-” Steve started, but she was already gone. He stared after her, stymied. “I don't suppose anyone would be willing-”

“Not it,” Jessica said, her finger on her nose.


Steve sighed. “Clint!”

Clint poked his head out of the kitchen, a carton of Chinese food in one hand and a beer bottle in the other. “Yo,” he said.

“Can you stop Jan, Carol and Jess from throwing out all my clothing?” Steve asked him.

Clint considered that. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “I absolutely can't.”

“I like a man who knows his limits,” Sam said, grinning.

“I can call Nat, though,” Clint said, tucking the bottle into the crook of his arm so he could grab the chopsticks out of the lo mein. “She can.”

“But will she?” Steve asked.

Clint shrugged, and took another bite of lo mein. “Probably,” he said. “She'll find it amusing to mess with Jan's plans.”

“Call her,” Steve said, giving up. “I'm going to bring some sketchbooks up to the penthouse.”

“ICan-” Jessica said, and Sam was already shaking his head.

“We'll... We'll handle the sketchbooks,” he said. He gave her a bright smile. “Grab the box of paint?”
She looked at him, her eyes narrowed. She looked at Steve. “I don't want to know,” she said, grabbing a couple of boxes and heading for the door. Resigned, Steve picked up a box of sketchbooks and followed her.

He'd been in the penthouse before; they all had. Most of it was open floor plan, the kitchen at the center, with dining room and living room space forming a half circle around it. Off of that were the media room, a library of sorts, a laundry room that looked unused, a few guest bedrooms, and the master suite.

Steve'd chosen the bedroom as far from the master suite as he could get. But every time he went back to the elevator, he found himself staring up that hallway. And half the time, he got off the elevator and forgot which way he was supposed to go. After six or so trips today, he still found himself going left instead of right. When it happened for the third time in as many trips, he stopped, wanting to beat his head against the uncaring door. At least this time he was alone when he found himself standing directly in front of the door to Tony's bedroom, his arms locked around a box, doing his best not to reach for the doorknob.

“Steve?”

He blinked. He hadn't even heard Sam come up behind him. “Sorry,” he said, setting the box down on the foyer table. “I was- I was just-” He didn't know how to finish that sentence, so he went with, “Were you saying something?”


Sam looked at the door. “That's Tony's room, right?”

“Right,” Steve said.

“You going in?” Sam asked.

“No,” Steve said.

Sam nodded. “You... Ever been in there?”

“No,” Steve repeated.

“Why not?”

Steve threw an arm around Sam's shoulders. "Sam?"

Sam tilted his head in Steve's direction. "Steve?"

"If you had a severe problem with alcohol, like, maybe not alcoholic levels, but you realized your relationship with alcohol was definitely not healthy and could lead you to make very poor decisions, up to and including public humiliation, would you choose to hang out in a bar?" Steve asked.

Sam blinked at him. "No."

"And THAT'S why I've never seen the inside of Tony's bedroom," Steve said with a painfully wide smile. "Because all evidence to the contrary, I do value my mental health. At least a little."

Sam opened his mouth. Closed it with a sigh. "You want me to-" He waved a hand at the door, his eyebrows arched. "Deal with this?"
Steve stared at the door, his jaw tight. "Only if you're going to continue dealing with this for the next six months or so."

"I love you, man, but I do not love you that much," Sam told him with a smile.

Steve nodded, a sharp dip of his chin. "We're no longer friends," he said, and Sam laughed.

"If this is going to be six months of you complaining of 'thirst,'" Sam said, making finger quotes around the words, "I think I'll be better off without you." He considered the door. "So, how are you going to deal with this?"

"I'm not," Steve said, before Sam was even finished with the sentence. Sam looked at him, and Steve gave a slight shrug. "It's... That's an invasion of privacy." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Isn't it?"

"You moved in," Sam said, his voice flat. "I think the ship has sailed on 'privacy.'"

"That's not-" Steve made a face. "He didn't invite me to live with him, just to move in with him." He stopped. "Or maybe he invited me to move in, but not-" He stopped. Sam was staring at him, his expression incredulous. Steve propped his hands on his hips. "You know what I mean."

"No. I can be absolutely honest and say I have no idea what the hell is coming out of your mouth right now," Sam said, his voice flat. "I understand the words, but I still have no idea what you're talking about." He hooked a thumb towards the door. "So, what? You're just going to avoid this whole area?"

"That seems like the right thing to do," Steve said. He was good at doing the right thing. He was also good at really hating having to do the right thing.

"If I may?" Jarvis said, and both of them looked up. "I apologize for eavesdropping, but perhaps my insight might be of use to you?"

"You're talking yourself in circles so much you're making Jarvis sad," Sam said to Steve. "That's an accomplishment right there."

"'Sad' is perhaps not the right word," Jarvis said, his voice brisk. "However, sometimes I possess information that would be to the benefit of others. In this case, I think it is fair to say that while his bedroom is a personal space in the most broad sense of the world, it is a space where very little of sir is present."

There was a long moment of silence. "I'm sorry, what?" Sam asked.

"No, I think I get what he's saying," Steve said. "I mean, most of the time, when you live in a small space, everything's semi public except for the bedroom. If you share space with other people, the bedroom's kind of the last line of defense for privacy. But that's not something Tony has to deal with."

"It is perhaps a holdover from his younger days, when some visitors were..." Jarvis paused. "Likely to see the bedroom first and foremost. Perhaps to the exclusion of all other spaces."

"Right," Steve said, because Jarvis seemed to be waiting for a response. "That's... Logical?"

"Now, he spends little time there. If he is awake, he is likely elsewhere, and if he is asleep, then the space matters very little. It remains largely unchanged since the decorators completed it." He was silent for a moment. "There is much more of sir in the workshop, than in his bedroom. That is the
space where he is most himself, most comfortable and most content. It is the place he guards most carefully, and you are welcome there, and always have been.”

Steve stared at the blank surface of the door, his chest aching. “That might be true,” he said at last. “But the bedroom’s where he’s naked, Jarvis.”

“If you believe that he has always been fully clothed while in the workshop, I fear that I must provide you with some information which you may find shocking,” Jarvis said. He sounded tired. Sam choked on a laugh, and Steve gave him a look.

“Honestly,” Steve said, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck, “I find not much can shock me any more.” It was a lie, but one he’d grown comfortable with. “Still... Let's not do this right now, okay?”

Sam patted him on the back. “C'mon, Cap, I'll help you salvage your art supplies.”

“Yeah.” Steve glanced at the door. This was the right choice. This was always going to be the right choice. He took a deep breath and told himself that he absolutely couldn't smell Tony in the air, that familiar mix of expensive cologne and machine oil.

This was going to be a very long six months.

“Why are we standing in the hallway?” Jan asked from behind them, and Steve nearly jumped out of his skin.

He twisted around and found Jan standing there, staring up at him, her arms full of fluffy white towels. He opened his mouth. Closed it. “Uh-” he managed.

Jan leaned to the side, looking around him. “Is that Tony's room?” Her face melted into a bright grin. “Oh, I have to see this.”

“No, wait-” Steve said, right before she slipped around him and threw the door open, stepping through it without even slowing down. “Damn it, Jan!” Behind him, Sam started humming, and Steve gave him a look. “Not funny.”

“Super funny, not my fault you can't appreciate it,” Sam said, wandering after Jan. “Come on, Pandora's opened the box, might as well see if we can't find some hope under the bed.”

“No, I-”

“Oh my God,” Jan said from inside. “It's like he's living in an IKEA catalog. It's- It's monochrome horribleness, and you know he paid some decorator a hundred grand to make his bedroom look like an IKEA catalog.” She popped back out. “Steve. Steve. You have to see this.” She grabbed his hand and dragged him forward.

“Jan, I-”

Steve stumbled over the threshold, and just like that, he was in Tony's bedroom. He blinked, his eyes darting around the room. It was shiny and chic, all smooth metal and polished dark surfaces. There were floor to ceiling windows circling around the majority of the space, revealing a stunning view of the city skyline. There were only a few pieces of furniture, other than the large bed, bedside tables and a chair placed facing the windows. The bed itself was piled with pillows and tumbled blankets. The lighting was recessed, throwing a warm glow over the gleaming glass topped desk and table.

It was very modern. Very sophisticated. But mostly the word that came to Steve's mind as he looked around was 'empty.'
Jan let go of his hand, shuffling her feet across the plush carpeting. “The walk in closet makes up for a lot,” she said, hands on her hips. “And the bed.” She threw herself on the bed, her legs kicking in the air. She bounced a few times, gradually coming to a stop, her hands folded over her stomach. “Steve?”

He realized he was walking in that direction. “Yes?”

She grinned at him, her hair in tousled curls around her face. “Let me redecorate.”

Steve caught himself grinning. “Not my room,” he said. “Talk to Tony.” He reached out, his fingers trailing over the soft surface of one of the pillows. “Preferably when I'm not there.”

“Oh my GOD,” Sam called. “You have to see the BATHROOM.”

“IS IT HORRIBLE?” Jan said, already scrambling to her feet, hitting the ground running. “Please tell me it's horrible!”

Steve trailed after her. In for a penny, in for a pound.

*

The lights in the kitchen were on.

Tony paused just outside the elevator, caught off guard. It had been a long time since there had been anyone else in the penthouse when he came home. Even when he'd been with Pepper, it had been a toss-up as to which of them would get there first. And neither of them had been much for cooking.

There was music playing, a jazz piece with a driving bass line and a bright, brassy horn section, and it echoed through the penthouse. Tony found himself moving in that direction, chasing the warmth and light, cajoled by the smell of tomatoes and garlic, and the swirl of someone else's music.

In the kitchen, Steve was standing at the stove, wearing a battered pair of blue SHIELD sweatpants and a white t-shirt that clung to his shoulders like a second skin. There was a simple white apron tied around his waist, and his feet were bare against the tile floor. As Tony watched, his heart in his throat, Steve lifted the lid of a pot, leaning over to take a cautious sniff of the steam that curled above the gleaming copper rim.

Tony leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, his hands tucked in his pockets. "Honey, I'm home," he said, and he didn't know he was going to say it until the words were already out, hanging in the air between them, the stupidest thing he'd ever said.

But Steve glanced back at him, a wooden spoon in one hand and the lid of the pot in the other, his face splitting in a grin. "Welcome home," he said, and Tony couldn't breathe for a second.

He wandered across the kitchen to peer over Steve's shoulder. "When you move in, you move all the way in," he said, making Steve laugh.

"Well, we left kind of a mess in the living room," Steve admitted. "Figured that dinner might help you ignore that for a few days."

"How big of a-" Tony started, as Steve gave the pasta sauce a stir. In an instant, the air was heavy with the smell of tomatoes and garlic, onion and olive oil, and Tony decided he did not care about the mess. Or anything other than food. "Know what?" he asked, reaching for the spoon. "You're right. Feed me, and I'll let you do whatever you want."
Steve batted his hand away, still grinning. "Good to know." He glanced over, his pale hair falling over his forehead. "Go set the table."

"'Set the table,'" Tony echoed. Steve arched an eyebrow at him. "'Why are we-'" Tony shook his head. "By 'set the table' do you mean, 'bring a plate over here so that we can put food on it and then eat it'?'"

Steve ducked his head over his pots, not quite fast enough to hide his smile. "No, I mean, 'take plates and bring them to that lonely looking kitchen table, and place them in front of chairs so that when I put the food in bowls and bring them to the table, we'll have plates to put that food on,'" he said. "Which is what most people mean when they say 'set the table,' Stark."

"Why are there bowls involved, do you like dirtying dishes, what purpose would-" Tony started, and Steve glanced at him, his face so full of affection that the words died unsaid in Tony's throat.

"Go set the table, Tony," Steve said, and Tony swayed on his feet, wondering how bad it would be if he just leaned forward and kissed him right now.

Probably pretty bad. He took a deep breath. "I want it known that I object to this," he said, and he was proud of himself for how steady his voice was. "This is inefficiency at its worst, and you're the one who-"

Steve held up the wooden spoon, his hand cradled under it to catch any drips. "Try this," he said, and Tony opened his mouth without even thinking about it.

The sauce was a perfect balance of salty and sweet, the rich taste of the oil cutting the acidic tang of the tomatoes. Tony let his eyes fall shut as he savored the taste, the notes of basil and oregano, garlic and onion. His eyes drifted open, and he found Steve staring at him, his cheeks pink from the heat of the stove. Tony licked his lips, and then, for good measure, reached out to run a finger along the back of the spoon. "I'll set the table," he said, and tucked his finger into his mouth, sucking it clean with a grin.

Steve's head jerked back towards the stove. "I... Appreciate that."

"Am I using the good china?" he asked, crossing to the cabinets.

"What's the difference?" Steve asked, ducking around him to open the fridge.

Tony paused. "I honestly don't know," he said, his hands propped on his hips. "I just know that there's china. And some of it is 'good.'" He looked at Steve. "That's what the caterers use when I'm throwing a sit down dinner party."

Steve leaned backwards to stare at him around the fridge door. "As opposed to?"

"The china we use for cocktail parties or buffet style dinners," Tony said.

Steve propped an arm on the fridge. "What do you use when you're eating alone?"

"A paper towel," Tony said, just to make him laugh. "Or, you know, a smoothie cup."

"You do not-"

a bitch to clean up, and no one takes you seriously if you show up to a crisis with gravy in your joints, you attract raccoons and it's just-

"Please stop," Steve said, and Tony stopped. "I'm going to choose to believe that you're making this up."

"You believe what you want to believe," Tony said, because bullshitting was so much more fun when it wasn't bullshit at all. "What plates?"

"Are the round white ones the good ones, or not?" Steve asked, ducking back into the fridge.

"They're the 'good enough for Christmas parties with children, but too good for sports parties with Clint," Tony said. Steve emerged from the fridge with a bowl of salad in one hand and a carton of refrigerated tortellini in the other. He gave Tony a look. "Do you know how many things got broken last Super Bowl?" Tony asked him.

"Round white plates," Steve said, handing him the salad and a carafe of dressing.

"I rechristen these, 'the dinner plates,'" Tony said, pulling one out of the cabinet. "Not the good china, not the Clint china, but the dinner china."

"Your urge to classify everything aside-"

"It's an engineer thing, you wouldn't understand," Tony told him.

"That aside," Steve said, hipchecking the fridge door shut, "I'll be happy if it's the clean china."

"Of course it's clean, why wouldn't it be-

"You just admitted to eating food using the armor as a plate."

"I wiped it down first," Tony said, just to make Steve wince. He balanced the salad on one hip as he pulled out plates and bowls. "You're awfully squeamish for a man who was fed by the US Army during wartime."

"The difference is," Steve said, with a grin, "I stopped eating MREs once that was no longer necessary." He ripped the package of pasta open, dumping the tortellini into the boiling water. "There's bread, too, over on the-" He waved a hand towards the counter. "If you want it?"

Tony spared the bakery bag a curious look. It looked like the real thing, good solid bread from a good solid Italian bakery. "Not going to turn that down," he said, laying out the table. "Did you grab a bottle of wine?"

“No," Steve said, stirring the pasta.

"Do you not want wine?" Tony said. “Because that's a mistake. I have an excellent wine collection. Amazing. World renowned. I know you Irish sorts stick with a good beer, but still-"

“At least I can figure out beer,” Steve said, waving the spoon through the air. “Your wine collection confuses me. Buy it. Drink it. Who makes a collection out of drink?"

“The French,” Tony said. “Most of Europe, actually, but mostly, yes, the French.”

Steve's eyes rolled up towards the ceiling. “Well, that says it all, doesn't it?"

Tony choked on a laugh. “You're a bad man, Captain Rogers, you know that?”
Steve gave him a look that Tony couldn't read. “I'm working on it.” He turned back to the stove. “I'll trust you to pick out a wine. Just... Don't tell me how much you paid for it.”

“I'll find a nice, affordable Chianti,” Tony said.

“Do you know what 'affordable' means?” Steve asked.

“Absolutely nothing over a thousand dollars,” Tony said, because Steve made the best faces when he was trying to repress a flinch. Tony grinned as he headed for the kitchen door. “Five thousand. Max.”

“Whatever you pick out, I'm going to google it!” Steve called after him as Tony slipped out of the kitchen.

“Goddamn Google takes the fun out of everything,” Tony muttered to himself. But he was smiling to himself, his steps light and quick as he headed for the wine room.

By the time he got back, the bread had been sliced into a basket, and there were wineglasses on the table next to the plates. Tony set the bottle of (really very reasonably priced) Chianti next to them and went for a corkscrew. “How's it going over there?”

Steve considered the pot. He poked at the water with his spoon. Tony watched him, affection curling through him. “I think we're almost ready to go,” Steve said, with his usual confidence. Tony wondered how much of that was faked.

“What can I do?” Tony asked, and Steve waved a hand at the table.

“Open the wine? I'll bring the rest of it over,” Steve said.

Tony nodded, heading for the table. As he was setting the wine bottle down, he noticed a box tucked next to one of the chairs, pushed up against the wall. He gave it a nudge with his foot, and it didn't budge. “What's this?” he asked. “Did you bring your own cooking utensils?” He gave it another push. Maybe cast iron? “I know I don't cook much, but I promise, I've got everything you need, and a wide variety of stupid gadgets that you're going to be disgusted by.”

Steve glanced over. “Yes, I found your collection of zesters,” he said, his voice dry. “But no, that's just some books. I left most of those in my-” He stopped. “Downstairs. It seemed like a lot of trouble to move everything, so I just brought the ones I'm reading right now, and some of the ones I like to reread. I thought I'd have time to put it away before you got home.”

Curious, Tony flipped up the lid. “Anything good?”

“Well, I think so,” Steve said, giving the pot another stir. “But I'm no literary critic.”

Tony picked up the book on top. “Didn't I give you an e-reader?” he asked, holding up the massive hardcover. “They're... More portable.”

Steven grinned. “Don't worry, you've slipped your tech into every single corner of my life,” he said, and Tony felt an irrational rush of pride at that. “I'm not opposed to it, it is nice to carry a whole library in my pocket.” He carried the pot to the sink and drained the pasta, the steam curling up around his arms. “But I like books. There's something comforting about them, you know? They're just the same as they used to be. And now I've got the money and the space for them.”

“More things to dust,” Tony said. He settled down on the chair. “Mind if I take a look?”
Steve smiled at him, and there was something almost shy about it. “Sure,” was all he said.

Steve had managed to fill the box to the very brim, with no space wasted. Battered paperbacks with dog eared pages and crisp, new hardcovers with bookmarks tucked between their pages. There were old library books wrapped in protective plastic, the branch names that had once been stamped along the pages crossed off with black marker, and there mass market paperbacks, their sale stickers still on the covers. There were classics with sharp, modern covers, and old hardcovers with yellowed, crumbling pages.

Tony sorted them out, making neat stacks on the table and on the floor next to his chair. 'The Greatest Ballpark Ever: Ebbets Field and the Story of the Brooklyn Dodgers.' 'Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.' 'City of Dreams: The 400-Year History of Immigrant New York.' Under that, he found half a dozen battered fantasy novels, JRR Tolkien and Terry Brooks and Robin Hobb, and a couple of faded spy novels, a Bond book missing half its cover and a Tom Clancy volume big enough to serve as a doorstop.

A gum wrapper stuck out of the pages of 'Cat's Eye,' and a torn pieces of sketchbook paper marked half a dozen spots in 'American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America.' The edge of a battered photograph was visible along the top of 'The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.'

Tony pulled out 'Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln.' “I didn't know you were interested in Lincoln,” he said, leafing through the volume. It smelled like coffee, and there were dark spots marking a spill on the last chunk of pages.

“'Wait Til Next Year' was really good,” Steve said, dishing the pasta sauce into a deep bowl. “So I figured I'd read some of her other stuff.” He set the bowl aside. “I liked the one she did on the Kennedys better, I think.”

“How many books do you have?” Tony asked, setting it down on the table. Under that was 'Stranger Than We Can Imagine: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century.' He grinned. Harder than it should've been, probably.

“I usually go to the library a couple of times a week,” Steve said, checking the oven. “And I don't need much sleep anymore. It's nice to have some options for passing the time.”

“I'm going to interpret that to mean 'a lot,'” Tony said. “A lot of books.” Tony held up a well-worn paperback. “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn?” he asked with a grin.

Steve set the bowls of pasta and sauce on the table. “It wasn't what I thought it was,” he admitted, with an easy smile. “Still a good book, though.” He wiped his hands on the apron, then untied it and slung it over the back of an unused chair. “I liked it.”

Tony flipped through the book, his fingers stroking over the edges of the pages. Steve hadn't been its first owner. There were pale, almost invisible pencil stroked marking passages here and there. They were hesitant, cautious, as if the person who'd made them had been afraid of getting caught doing it. A tiny heart, smaller than his pinkie fingernail, had been sketched against one margin, and he smiled down at it.

“What's your favorite?” he asked, as Steve took a seat next to him.

Steve stopped, his eyes narrowing as he considered the question. “I don't know,” he said at last, with an easy smile. “I had favorites when I was a kid. Adventure books, and science fiction. Books about cowboys and war reporters.” His smile stretched. “There was one, about a cabin boy who ended up
being captured by pirates? I don't remember the title, but I checked that out so often that the librarians just started putting my initials, rather than my full name on the card.”

He looked up, and he was smiling, his face relaxed, his eyes dancing. “If it went missing, everyone knew where to check.” He held the bowl of tortellini out to Tony. “What's yours?”


“Right,” Steve said, his head shaking from side to side. “Let me guess, you just read it for the plot?”

“The centerfolds, actually,” Tony said, dishing out a plate of pasta. His stomach grumbled, and he traded Steve for the bread basket. “God, this looks good.”

Steve gave them both a generous serving of sauce and reached for the Parmesan cheese. “It's bottled sauce and refrigerated pasta, Stark, it's not really anything special.”

When he was distracted with the wine, Tony reached over, spearing one of the tortellini off of his plate. Steve didn't even look in his direction, just swatted at his hand. “Eat your own, Mister.”

“Yours tastes better,” Tony said, popping it into his mouth with a smirk. Steve held the salad out to him, an affectionate smile on his face, and Tony took it. “We going to make this a thing?”

“Well, I can't promise every night,” Steve said. “But I get sick of take out. And I do all right with simple stuff.” He smiled at Tony, and Tony's stomach turned over. “You okay with that?”

Tony took a bite of pasta, because anything that would've come out of his mouth would've just humiliated him. He chewed carefully, and swallowed. “I can do breakfast,” he said. “Not so good with dinner. I can make a sandwich, or heat up soup. But not much more than that.”

Steve's smile stretched. “I like soup,” he said.

“Of course you do.” Tony was about to say something else, when his eye caught something on the bottom of the box of books. He leaned over, digging out the slim volume. “Steve?” Steve looked up. Tony straightened up, holding a copy of 'Ouran High Host Club,' volume 8. “Do we need to talk about this?”

Steve's cheeks went pink. “Look, I asked the girl in the bookstore for a popular comic, because-”

Tony just stared at him, his eyebrows arched. Steve leaned forward. “Give me that.”

Tony held it out of reach. “It has 'Host Club' in the title!” he said, trying not to laugh. “It- Steve! Did a pretty girl sell you on Japanese comic porn?”

“It's not porn, and I thought 'host club' was a, I don't know, a metaphor!” Steve said. He wadded up his napkin and threw it at Tony. Tony ducked.

“Is it?” he asked, flipping through the manga. He got the distinct impression that Steve was not the target market for this.

“It... Is not,” Steve said, and Tony burst out laughing. “Right.” Steve made another grab for it, and Tony scooted his chair out of reach. “Comics where everywhere when I was a kid! Everyone had comics! Now there's like half a page in the newspaper and no one knows what 'Terry and the Pirates' was, I just wanted to read comics, Stark!”

“I'm doing a dramatic reading of this,” Tony said. “Dinner entertainment. We're going to-” Steve
snatched the book out of his hand, and Tony rocked back in his chair, laughing so hard that his stomach hurt. “Oh my God, Steve!”

Steve tossed it back in the box. “Shut up and eat your dinner, Tony,” he said, his face still red. But he was laughing, too, his eyes bright.

“God, I lo-” The words were almost out before he realized it, and he choked on him, his throat closing up before he could completely humiliate himself. Steve looked up at him, his eyes bright, and Tony reached for his wineglass, trying to ignore the way his fingers were shaking.

He downed half the glass in a single gulp, swallowing a lot of other things down with the alcohol. But when he set down the glass, he was able to paste a smile on his face again. “So. Other than bringing your smut into my home, what'd you do today?”

It was going to be a very long six months.

*

"I really think I should be out there with you."

"And I really think that's a bad idea." Tony adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves, smoothing the fabric into place before reaching for his tie. "In that you look like you're about to be court martialed, and that's-" He glanced up, a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. "It's not a good look on you, darling."

One of these days, he'd get used to the pet names. It wasn't like Tony hadn't called him ridiculous things before they got married, but somehow, it was different now. It wasn't, he knew it wasn't, but it felt like it was. Steve paused. Apparently, he was losing his mind.

"I'm just saying-" he started, as the door to the conference room opened.

"I'm going to object to this again," Marcy said, bringing Tony's head around. "Strenuously object."

Right behind her, Pepper raised a hand. "I'm going to have to object, too."

"Strenuously?" Tony asked her.

She made a see-saw motion with her hand in the air. "I'm too exhausted for anything strenuous," she said with a wry smile. "But still. I object."

"Where were the two of you when we were getting married?" Tony asked, reaching for his jacket. "Day late and a dollar short, both of you." He shrugged into it, his shoulders rolling with the movement. It settled around him, perfectly tailored to every line of his body, and Steve wanted to take it right back off of him. He tucked his hands in his pockets, mostly to keep himself out of trouble.

"The 'dollar short' seems like a pay issue," Marcy said, her arms folded across her chest, her lips kicked up in a slight smile. "I'm more than happy to renegotiate my salary based on current events, but until then, I'm going to have to insist that you let me do my job and actually be the face of PR for this company."

"Why would you possibly take that job?" Tony asked her. "In all seriousness. What was wrong with your life at the moment that you decided to accept my offer of employment?"

"Temporary insanity." She did a quick walk around him, her head tipped to the side, then stopped in
front of him to adjust his tie, her long fingers sliding over the silk. Tony tipped his chin up, letting her do it. “Also, you did my interview at Disneyland.” She gave his tie a pat. “You rented out an entire restaurant in Disneyland to try to convince me to take this job.”

“So you should be used to my outsized style by now. Well?” he asked, when she stepped back. "Do I pass muster?"

Marcy ignored that. "You need to let us do this,” she said.

"No," Tony said.

"Tony-" Pepper started.

"No," he said, almost sing-song.

Steve shifted his weight, pushing away from the wall. "I think that I-"

"No," all three of them said at once, and he subsided back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Right," he gritted out.

Pepper gave him a sympathetic look. "Steve. You're not..." Her mouth went thin. "You tend to tell the truth in interviews. Which is an admirable quality, really, it is-"

"Very inconvenient, though," Tony muttered, and Pepper kicked at his ankle. He sidestepped her easily. "You are an HR complaint looking for a place to happen, woman."

Pepper gave him a look. To Steve, she said, "I know it's frustrating to be stuck on the sidelines, but right now?" She turned her full attention back to Steve. "The press is in a rather rabid state. In a few months, you'll be old news."

"In a few weeks, we'll sit the two of you down with a carefully selected exclusive," Marcy said, her arms crossed over her chest. Her head tipped to the side, and Steve had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being measured. "With someone who doesn't have an agenda."

"Or an ax to grind," Pepper added.

"Where-" Tony spread his hands. "Where are you going to find this mythical, unicorn like reporter?"

"We'll find one who hates you and loves him and it'll average out to a nice indifference," Marcy told him, her lips twitching, and Tony burst out laughing. Steve just gritted his teeth against the urge to say something rude.

"I'm not optimistic," Tony said, still chuckling.

"Yeah, but you are realistic," Pepper said.

"A lot of people hate me," Steve said, and all three of them turned to look at him with varying degrees of pity. He realized he had his arms crossed over his chest again and forced his hands back to his sides. "I'm hateable."

Tony grinned at him, his eyes dancing. "We're a good match, then." He made to step around Steve, towards the door, and Steve caught his elbow. Tony blinked at him.

"You don't have to do this," Steve said, and it wasn't enough. It was never enough.
One of Tony's eyebrows quirked upwards. "This? This is nothing." He reached up to pat Steve's hand. "If I get into trouble, I'll just tell everyone in attendance to imagine you naked. That'll give me enough time to escape."

"Right," Steve said, and Tony smiled at him.

"Fine, I'll yell for help if I get in over my head, you can come save me." He stepped back, tugging his arm out of Steve's fingers. "Think of yourself as backup, Cap."

"Getting sick of playing backup," Steve said, but he subsided back against the wall, watching Tony go, Marcy right beside him.

"You okay?" Pepper asked, bringing his head around. Pepper smiled at him. "He'll be okay."

Steve took a breath. "I know. I just-" His head fell forward, and he took a deep breath. "I hate it."

"I know." She gestured at the tv on the wall. "Do you want to watch the press conference?"

He stared at the blank monitor, not sure if he wanted to or not. Watching it would be an agony, but wondering what was happening would've been worse. "Yes. Please."

She reached for the remote. "He's going to be fine," she said, her voice kind. "He's good at this." She glanced back at him, smiling. "Even when I'm worried about him, this is... This is comforting."

He didn't know what she meant, but somehow, he did. "Aren't you going?"

"I'll let them get a few questions in, and then I'll cut them off," she said. "If I try to head it off now, it'll just get out of hand." She leaned against the wall next to him, her arms crossed over her chest. "Marcy knows what she's doing. If it gets out of hand, she'll handle it."

"I don't know her," Steve said.

"I know. But you know me, and you know Tony, and if both of us trust her..." Pepper said.

"Then that's good enough for me," Steve said, with a nod.

"I was hoping so." She bumped her shoulder against his. "You're going to need to trust us, Steve. If this is going to work, if we're all going to get through this?" She looked up at him, and they were so close that he could see the smattering of freckles that was scattered across the bridge of her nose. "You're going to need to trust us sometimes."

"I do," he said. He smiled. "Do you trust me?"

She shrugged. "You married Tony, and my first act was not to give you a shovel talk or try to buy you off," she said. "So. Yes."

Steve laughed. "That's... Not a glowing review," he said, as the press conference started on the tv. Marcy stepped up to the mike, and Steve's pulse was so loud in his ears that he couldn't quite make out what she was saying. He took a deep breath, and another, and Pepper touched his arm. He looked over.

"These are tech reporters," she said. "We did this deliberately. None of these people will risk alienating StarkIndustries by going out of bounds here. They want to keep their access to the company. They're going to ask some questions, there's no way they won't, but they will not attack him."
Steve nodded. “I know, it's just-”

“Can we get a confirmation on your marriage?”

Steve's head snapped around, looking up at the TV, where Tony was now at the microphone, smiling out at the audience and the camera. “Did you guys draw straws?” he asked, and the camera view switched to show the reporters, their chairs arranged in neat rows facing the podium. There were a few smiles, and a couple of them ducked their heads, clearly amused. “Seriously, how'd you decide Matteo would be the one to ask that?”

“I'm the least likely to get fired if you complain to my editor,” Matteo said. “Can we get a confirmation on-”

“Did you not get the press release?” Tony glanced back at Marcy, now standing just a few steps behind him. “Did you not send the press release?”

“I sent the press release,” she confirmed.

“TechWire didn't get it, he's asking-” Tony turned back to the mic. “Yes. I am married. I married Steven Grant Rogers in Symkaria, on our way back from an official trip to Latvaria.”

"Why did you do this in secret?” a feminine voice called.

Tony gave the reporter a serious amount of side-eye. "Number one, because everyone knows how deeply I treasure my privacy," he said, setting off a round of laughter from the room at large. Tony's lips kicked up on one side, a wry, lopsided smile. "And two, as much as we would've wanted to have everyone here come and celebrate our joyous day with us, there were a lot of people who we were not so eager to have join us." He braced an elbow on the podium. "Mostly people with tactical nukes and, you know-" He wobbled a hand in mid-air. "Homicidal robot underlings."

"You could've just left them off the guest list," a reporter in the front row opined.

"I mean, we could've, but actually checking invitations at the door is so gauche," Tony said. As everyone laughed again, he gave them a polished grin. "Easier to elope than deal with that."

"Is that what you're calling it? An elopement?" he asked, his recorder up and ready.

"It's the closest thing we've got to the concept, especially since English doesn't yet have a word for 'stumbled into an opportunity to get married and decided to take it,'" Tony said. "I'd suggest we call that 'pulling a Stark,' but according to Urban Dictionary, that phrase is already taken for a number of-" He made a face. "Less savory things."

"It does allow for multiple meanings," someone called from the back, amidst the laughter.

"It already HAS multiple meanings," Tony shot back. One eyebrow arched. "Most of them only borderline legal or moral."

"Are you surprised?" a woman asked from the front row, her head tipped forward.

"No, just disappointed that 'jury-rigging tech in a way that's both dangerous and ingenious' doesn't score higher on the list," he told her, setting off another round of laughter.

Steve caught himself smiling. "God, he's good," he said, and Pepper glanced at him.

"Yes," she said, a slight smile crossing her face. "He absolutely is." She crossed her arms over her
chest, shifting her weight to one foot. "We-" She stopped, her mouth going tight. "Not we, someone who- Who isn't with the company anymore, used to say that he's teflon. Nothing sticks." She studied the monitor, her head tipped to the side. "But the longer I know him, the more I think that's wrong."

She turned to Steve. "He's cast iron. Solid to the core. But the only reason they can't break him is because he's had the right seasoning." She patted Steve on the shoulder. "Go through the fire enough times, and they can't burn you any more." Her fingers slid free from his arm as she started forward. "No matter how much they try."

Steve watched her go, watched her walk out of the room with her back straight, chin up, her ponytail swinging behind her like a metronome. Perfect. Polished. Professional. The door shut behind her, and he turned his attention back to the television. Tony was still talking, smooth and polished and professional, but his smile was natural, his eyes bright.

"Do you love him?" someone asked, and Steve's heart stopped.

Tony paused, his smile fading, going thin for an instant. But it was just for an instant, and then his smile was back, just as wide and not nearly as real. "Everyone loves him," he said. "But yes. For the record. I love him."

It was everything he wanted and it was all wrong. Steve's stomach churned, and he sucked in a breath through his nose, struggling against the urge to throw up. In the babble of voices that followed, Pepper stepped into the camera's frame.

"Are we done with the gossip session?" she asked, stepping up beside Tony. A few laughing calls of 'no' came from the audience, and she gave them a bright smile. "Well, tough. Time to go back to being serious financial journalists."

"But we don't want to!" someone said, and everyone laughed.

Pepper's smile grew. "Glad to see that you've switched to the society pages, Gary, how's the paygrade on that at the London Times?"

"Pretty good," he said. "Who're you wearing today?"

"I paid for this suit, so I don't have to give anyone free advertising, thank you," she said without missing a beat. "I can tell you, however, that I am sporting the newest StarkWatch."

"Oh, so THAT gets free advertising," the man, who Steve assumed was Gary, said.

"I mean, that's why we're here, isn't it?" Pepper asked, her voice sweet. "So you all write about the wonderful products we have to offer."

"I'm wearing whatever was clean," Tony said, and she gave him a look. "What? It's true."

"So glad you managed a clean shirt for this," Pepper told him, her voice tart. But there was a smile on her face, her eyes dancing as she turned back to the reporters. "If no one has any other questions for Tony about our product line, I'm going to turn this back to Marcy Pearson. You all remember Marcy, right? Our VP of marketing?"

"You need more scandals," Tony said to Marcy.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said. "Now, unless anyone has any other questions, I can-" Hands shot up all over the room, and she pressed a hand to her chest. "Oh, now you all want to be
tech reporters?” To general laughter, she looked at Tony. "Ready for round two?"

He made a show of patting his pockets. "I was assured that speculation about my love life would distract everyone from my actual output for at least six months, so I didn't bother."

"So you still haven't fixed the memory leak with the OS of the StarkPhone 6?" a woman in the second row asked.

"Leslie, you wound me. You-" Tony leaned forward. "You. Personally. Wound me. I thought we were friends. I thought we had something, you and I, this can't just be on my side-"

"Yeah, yeah," the woman said, a smile creasing her cheeks. "Your charm is noted. Now, how do you plan to-"

Steve reached for the remote. With a flick of his thumb, he turned off the tv, and sank down into a chair at the conference table, his head falling into his hands.

At some point, someone was going to ask him that question, and they were going to do it in front of a tv camera. At some point, some point very, very soon, someone was going to ask him if he loved Tony Stark.

And he had no idea how to make that answer sound like a lie.

*

"You watching this?"

Ellen shifted her phone to her other shoulder. “Of course I'm watching this,” she said, because there was no point in asking what 'this' was. They both knew. Ellen worried her pen cap between her teeth. “What else would I be watching?”

“Judging by your Netflix queue, mostly bad 90's romantic comedies,” Jesse said. “How many Bridget Jones movies did they even make?”

“Get your own account, you mooch, or shut up about my queue.” Ellen shifted in her chair, drawing one leg up to brace her heel against the seat. She leaned forward and rewound the footage. “Yes. I'm watching it.”

She could hear the faint, tinny echo of the audio from the other end of the line. “We hear anything from Rogers yet?”

Ellen's teeth dug into the pen cap. “No,” she said. She forced her jaws to relax and tossed the pen onto her desk. “Not a peep. All we've gotten was the Avengers press release, and the one from SHIELD.”

“I tried reading the SHIELD one. Think I nodded off around page three,” Jess said. “What'd they do, just copy and paste their HR policy on inter-department relationships?”

“Dunno, I stopped reading after the title.” Ellen leaned forward to pick up the printout. “‘A listing of SHIELD personnel which have gotten married in the last six months.’ She stared at it for a long moment. “Fury does not give a shit, does he?”

“Number of fucks does seem to be very, very low,” Jesse agreed.

Ellen tossed it back in the general direction of her inbox. “But no. Nothing personal.” She glared at
her computer monitor, where Tony Stark was charming the pants off of a room full of reporters who really should've known better. “Just Mr. Razzle Dazzle doing his usual softshoe.”

“Have we gotten sued?” Jesse asked.

Ellen paused. “I think,” she said, very slowly and carefully, “that if we had gotten sued, then Duck would've called you to scream at you. A lot.”

“Sometimes he just screams at you,” Jesse pointed out. “He gets around to me eventually. But you're his favorite.”

“His favorite to scream at,” Ellen said.

“Yes.”

“Never thought I'd regret being anyone's favorite, but here we are,” Ellen said. She rubbed her forehead. “No. We haven't gotten sued. Or if we have, no one's told me.” She let her hand fall to her side, and stared up at the ceiling. “They'd tell me, right?”

“I would,” Jesse said.

“That's comforting, thank you,” Ellen said. “They're not denying it.”

“You had like, six articles defending our position ready to go, didn't you?” Jess asked. “You prepped for this argument and now no one's fighting you and you don't know what to do with yourself.”

“I wasted so much time,” Ellen said. Her voice rose to a whining pitch, and that was not very professional. She should probably try to be more professional. “So much fucking time, Jesse.”

“Maybe you should let someone pick a fight before you work yourself into a lather,” Jesse said.

“Yeah, how long have we known each other? You know that's not going to happen.” Ellen made a face. “I'm not going into a battle of wits with Tony Stark without a lot of cue cards, you know why?”

“Cause you'll lose?”

“Cause I absolutely, one hundred percent will lose,” Ellen agreed. She swiped a hand over her face. “You got anything?”

“Well, we live in one of the largest cities in the world, and everyone who lives here has a cell phone with a camera attached, so... Yeah, there's a lot flying around social media, but most of it's junk.” Ellen could hear her typing. Jesse attacked her keyboard like it was trying to escape, every time she used it. “There's one, here, I'll send it to you.”

Ellen clicked on her email icon. Nothing new popped up. “I didn't get it.”

Jesse sighed. “I haven't even clicked 'send' yet, Ellen.”

“Right,” Ellen said. She clicked her email again. Just to be sure.

“You have got to find some chill, girl.”

“You've got enough chill for both of us,” Ellen said, and this time when she clicked on her email, she was rewarded with a new, untitled email. She opened the attachment and waited with a great deal of patience for her graphics program to load.
She clicked it a few more times. Just to be certain that it was working.

“What is this thing?” she asked. “Since my computer is taking its sweet time about opening it.”

“Candid. Someone snapped a picture of him at the flower market, it's all over the place now. Amateur, but someone either got lucky, or has a natural sense of composition, cause it's pretty good.”

'Pretty good' was high praise from Jesse. Ellen clicked on the graphics icon again, and this time, she was rewarded with a half dozen error messages about how there was another version of the program already running, and a single picture.

Rogers was leaning over a plastic barrel of roses, his face creased in a smile. One hand was cradling a bud, his fingers careful against the petals, his other arm was filled with flowers. Next to him, a tiny woman in a simple canvas apron and a straw hat covered in fake flowers was pointing at her wares with one gnarled finger. Her face was animated behind the heavy lenses of her glasses, and Rogers had his head tipped towards her, clearly paying attention to what she was saying.

The early morning light was hazy, the hard edges of the city fading into the background, and he was there, the golden boy crowned with greenery and surrounded by blossums.

Ellen glared at it. "Is it possible to take a bad picture of this man?" she asked.

"It's really hard. You have to work at it. Like, you have to get a really awkward angle," Jesse said. "Right up his nose or something."

Ellen paused. "You've thought about this."

"I like a challenge," Jesse said. "Also, not much to go by. Usually, famous people, you have horrible papparazzi photos to mock. Him? Not so much."

"Which is weird. I mean, there's a lot of caped types that I would not mess with, but he doesn't seem the type to break your camera or your knees. How has he escaped the plague of photo locusts?"

"I think it's less 'he's a threat' and more 'his secret super power is making you feel bad about doing bad things,'" Jesse said.

"Papparazzi don't feel shame or guilt."

"Yeah. But for some reason, they also don't follow Steve Rogers, so make of that what you will." Jesse was silent for a moment. "Are you sure we're not being sued?"

Ellen leaned forward over her keyboard, pulling up her email with a couple of keystrokes. "Not yet," she said.

Another long pause. "Shouldn't you sound happier about that?"

Ellen lowered her feet back to the floor, fumbling under her desk for her shoes without looking. "No. I don't-" She stood. "We're still missing something."

"They confirmed they are married. They're not suing us, or denying it, or trying to-"

"Yeah," Ellen said, cutting her off. "I know."

"Doesn't that mean we won?"

Ellen stabbed at her keyboard, locking her computer. "There's something else happening here."
"We won."

"There's no-" Ellen shoved her hand through her hair, and immediately regretted it. "There's no winning! We're not in this to 'win,' Jesse. We're in this to tell the truth, and there's no winning or losing to that, there's only the hard facts and the reality of the situation, and we are obligated to report that accurately and impassively!" On the other side of her cube wall, Al stood up, giving her a narrow eyed look over the top of his bifocals. "I'm going!" she said.

"You're very loud," he said, with his usual precision.

"I know, I know, I'm GOING," Ellen said, grabbing her bag from the back of the chair. “And your bow tie is crooked.”

“No, it's not,” he said, with the surity of a man who would sooner appear naked in public than with a crooked bow tie. He sat back dow, rolling his chair back to his desk with his usual fussy series of minor adjustments.

Ellen gave up. "There's no winning," she said into the phone.

"I think there is winning, and I think you're really bad at it," Jesse told her.

Ellen threw her free hand in the air. "Well, I've got no experience with it! So yes! This is weird! And I don't trust it!" She shoved the strap of her bag up on her shoulder. "Meet me at the sandwich place, we need to plan."

"The good sandwich place or the cheap sandwich place?"

"Well, we haven't gotten sued, so lets go for the good one," Ellen said. "While we still can."
He knew it was raining before he was even fully awake.

Maybe it was the gray, pale light filtering through the blinds. Maybe it was the heavy, damp feel to the air, even here in his climate controlled bedroom. Maybe it was just the almost inaudible sound of raindrops hitting the windows.

Or maybe it was just that Tony woke up feeling distinctly melancholy.

Tony pried an eye open, staring without any real interest at the gray, dank Manhattan skyline. It looked cold and heavy and dark, and Tony wanted nothing more than to roll over and pull the blankets over his head. It felt like he hadn't slept well in days. Probably because he hadn't.

“Sir?”

Tony slapped both hands against his face. “I know. I'm getting up.” He took a deep breath, and pushed himself into a sitting position. His back ached, his shoulders ached, his head ached. “Under duress. I want it noted. Under extreme duress.”

“So noted, sir.” Jarvis sounded amused. Almost affectionate. “I have started coffee in the kitchen, sir.”

Tony paused. “The good stuff?” he asked, interest stirring.

“It seemed appropriate, sir.”

Tony nodded. “Good man, Jarvis.” He tossed the blankets back, his head tipped towards the windows, where sheets of water now washed over the panes. “Tell me Steve's not out in this.”

“Captain Rogers had already finished his run and returned to the building before the rain began,” Jarvis said. “He is on his way up now.”

Tony paused, halfway to the bedroom door. “Right,” he said, scraping a hand over his jaw. He needed a shave. And a shower. And a change of clothes. He huffed out a breath. “Fuck it. He's seen me looking worse. And I need coffee.”

“Very good, sir,” Jarvis said. “Perhaps a comb?”

“Bite your non-existent tongue, Jay,” Tony said. He wandered through the still, empty rooms of the penthouse, yawning as he slipped into the kitchen. Jarvis was, as always, as good as his word, and the coffee pot was steaming away on the counter.

Tony grabbed a coffee cup from the cabinet, knocking it shut with a bump of his elbow, and reached
for the coffee pot. But before he could pick it up, he stopped, his hand hanging in mid-air. He glanced up at the cabinet, his pulse suddenly loud in his ears.

A moment later, he set a second cup next to the first one. He could try a little cautious optimism.

He was filling the first cup when he heard footsteps pounding across the polished tile of the entryway. “Morning,” he said, looking back over his shoulder. “There's coffee if you—”

Steve went by so fast that he was just a streak, a blur of brilliant color in the cold, gray light. Tony blinked at the empty hall, confused. “Steve?”

“Be right back!” Steve's voice echoed back, and Tony grabbed his coffee cup, wandering after him.

He found Steve's shoes first, deserted on the floor of the living room. One was tumbled against the wall, the other a dozen feet away, the laces trailing behind it. The doors to the balcony was open, and Steve, dressed in a pair of running shorts and a white t-shirt, was outside, his arms spread wide and his face tipped up, letting the rain wash over his flushed skin.

Tony realized his mouth was hanging open, and made an effort to close it. “Did you just—” He looked over his shoulder. He hadn't heard the elevator. "Did you just run up the stairs?" He felt exhausted just saying the words. Steve was an exhausting person.

"Maybe," Steve said, his face still tipped up towards the sky. "Mighta run a few of 'em."

Tony paused in the doorway. “Why,” he said at last, and it sounded plaintive.

Steve grinned at him, water running along the planes of his face, down his neck, his arms, his legs, down EVERYTHING, and Tony was having trouble breathing all of a sudden. “Because one thing I learned growing up in this city, Tony? The rain feels better if you really need it,” he said.

“But... You don't need it,” Tony pointed out. He waved a hand behind him. "There's- There's a bathroom. You have your own bathroom. It's very nice, it's not as nice as mine, but still, there's a shower and everything.”

"Don't you like the rain, Tony?" Steve said, shoving a hand through his hair. The wet strands tangled around his fingers. "Come on out."

Tony stared at him, his coffee cup hovering in front of his lips. "No," he said at last.

Steve burst out laughing. "No, you don't like the rain?" he asked. “Or no, you're not coming out?"

He was soaked now, his shirt was plastered to every inch of his body. It was a torment and a tease, simultaneously hiding and calling attention to the breadth of his shoulders, the flex of his muscles, the hollow of his flat stomach. He shifted, and his shorts, sodden and heavy, slipped down the angle of his hipbones. Steve grabbed them with one hand, dragging them back up.

Tony sipped his coffee, trying not to think about how hot his face felt. "Yes," he said.


“Yes, but it's cold and I'm dry, and I'd like to keep it that way,” Tony said. Even if a cold shower was probably a good idea right now. He shifted his weight, glad he was wearing a heavy pair of pajama pants instead of just his shorts.

Steve raised his shirt, wiping his face with the bottom of it, and Tony wasn't sure what he was trying
to accomplish, because his shirt was just as wet as his face, but his stomach was a work of goddamn art, all firm muscle and pale, almost invisible hair peeking up above the waistband of his sagging shorts. Steve looked up, and Tony made a deliberate attempt to look him in the eye. Steve nodded. “I could make you.”

Tony gaped at him. “What?”

Steve's eyebrows arched. “Come out, or I'll come get you.”

Tony took an involuntary step back before he forced himself to hold his ground. His chin came up. "You wouldn't dare," he said.

Steve's teeth flashed in a very dangerous, very hot grin, and Tony's breath caught in his throat. "Actually, I think I would," he said, and he was moving forward now, towards Tony, each step deliberate. His bare foot came down in a puddle with a splash, and Tony shivered. Steve's head dipped forward. "Don't you want to come out?"

"I will have you murdered," Tony said, holding the coffee cup up like a ward between them. "Don't you-"

"Is that a no?" Steve asked, almost sing-song, his eyes bright beneath the heavy weight of his wet hair.

"It's an 'I will have you murdered,'" Tony said, because he was very close and very wet and very, very hot, "which I think implies a certain level of-"

Steve moved so fast that he barely had time to register it. One second, he was halfway across the roof, moving towards Tony with a measured, deliberate pace, and then Tony blinked. And just like that, Steve was right there, right in front of him, right on top of him, and he jerked backwards, his feet getting tangled up as his brain sent out a desperate, futile order to retreat.

He had half a second to consider his impending doom, and then Steve was grabbing him, lifting him off his feet. Tony let out a sound that was embarrassingly close to a shriek, but Steve was probably laughing too hard to hear it as he dragged them both out onto the balcony.

The rain was a shock.

Tony scrambled for the door, or he tried to, but Steve had his arms around Tony's waist now, holding him well off the ground. He was laughing, Tony could hear it, and feel it, his back plastered against Steve's chest, Steve's body warm even through the wet layers of their clothes. Steve hunched forward, his fingers slipping on Tony's stomach, making a grab for his shirt as Tony twisted in his grip. The rain was coming down hard now, and by the time Tony managed to get free, he was already soaked through.

He stood there, swaying on his bare feet. He was proud of himself. He was still holding his coffee cup. Steve was laughing so hard now that he was bent double, his arms wrapped around his stomach as he laughed himself sick. Tony glared at him, then lifted one bare foot and kicked at a puddle, splashing Steve's legs with a wave of water. It was childish, but damn if it didn't help.

Steve grinned at him, his eyes bright. "Feel better?"

Tony drew himself up with all the dignity that he could manage. Which wasn't much, in that he probably looked like a drowned rat that desperately needed a shave. "I'm soaking wet, I'm cold, and I've been betrayed by the man I'm married to," he said, because he was a drama queen at heart. "No. I don't feel better."
"Betrayed?" Steve asked, still grinning.

It did feel good. Now that the initial shock had worn off, it felt... Nice. Tony considered giving in, but Steve was smiling at him, his eyes bright, and Tony loved him so much it hurt. "Vile, base betrayal." He gave Steve a steely-eyed look, and took a deliberate sip of his coffee. He stopped, his nose wrinkling. "You ruined my coffee," he said.

Steve was still grinning at him as he took the cup out of Tony's hand. "I'll buy you another one," he said, taking a sip. He looked down at it, his face considering. "A little watery."

"Yeah." Tony stared at him, water dripping in his eyes. "Wonder how that happened."

Steve shrugged, and took another sip. "I blame Jarvis," he said.

Tony realized his mouth was hanging open. "You... Blame Jarvis," he repeated. Steve nodded. "You're shameless, you know that?"

"I'm working on it," Steve said. He looked at Tony, his expression full of happiness. "Mad at me?"

"I believe I mentioned the murder plan," Tony said.

"It's a good plan," Steve agreed. "Rock solid plan, that."

"I like it," Tony said, taking the cup out of his hand. "It's got merit."

"Of course, if you let me live, I'll make you breakfast," Steve said.

Tony paused, pretending to consider that. "Waffles?" he asked. Steve gave him a look, and Tony shrugged. "I aim high in all my dealings, Rogers, and I won't apologize for that."

Steve ducked his head, not quite fast enough to hide a smile. "Eggs," he said.

"A solid counter offer," Tony said. He grinned into his coffee cup. "I'll make the toast." His hair was dripping into his coffee, and he pushed it back with a sigh. "After I find a towel."

"Deal." Steve leaned in, and Tony saw it coming, plenty of time to move away, to stop him. Instead, he stood there, his heart stuttering to a halt as Steve brushed a kiss against his cheek.

Tony's eyes fluttered shut, just for a second, a second to savor the gentle pressure of Steve's lips, the heat of his body, so close, so familiar. A second to memorize the pressure of Steve's hand on his shoulder as he leaned in, the soft exhale of his breath as he straightened up again.

Tony took a breath, steadying the erratic beat of his heart. "Is that how you seal your deals, Rogers?" he asked, and he was proud of himself, the words were steady and calm. Almost amused. "With a kiss?"

Steve grinned at him. "I think it could catch on," he said.

"Looking forward to trying it at my next contract negotiation," Tony agreed. The rain was slowing now, the wind kicked up, and he shivered. "I still can't believe you dragged me out into this."

"You can't?" Steve asked, grinning.

"Okay, I can," Tony admitted, as Steve wandered past him towards the edge of the balcony. "The... Door's over here."
“I know,” Steve said, his face tipped up towards the sky, catching the last of the raindrops in the palm of his hand.

“Okay, I'll bite. What're you doing?” Tony asked.

Steve folded his arms on the railing, leaning forward to brace his chin on them. "Looking for a rainbow," he said.

Tony glanced up. The clouds had parted, here and there, fragments of sunbeams cutting through the dark sky. "Sorry, Cap, don't think that's going to happen today," He braced a hand on the railing next to Steve's elbow, leaning into it. Below them, the city was, if not scrubbed clean, than at least refreshed. The sunlight caught on glass and metal, reflecting the morning into the darkest corners. Tony smiled. Maybe a little rain could make things better.

“Sir,” Jarvis said, bringing Tony's head around. “You have a visitor. Ms. Van Dyne is on her way up, and has inquired if you are decent.”

“I love how she asks AFTER she's already punched the elevator button,” Tony said. He pushed away from the railing. “Tell her I'm as decent as I'm likely to get, if she's knocking on my door at this hour of the morning.”

“Very good, sir,” Jarvis said, ignoring the way that Steve was chuckling, his face buried in his folded arms. “I have informed her as to your location.”

"Knock, knock!” Jan poked her head out the door, her eyebrows arching. "Well, if isn't my favorite two people who are too dumb to come out of the rain."

"Morning, Jan," Steve said, unconcerned. He half turned to face her. "Come on out, it's great."

"I did not spend half an hour doing my hair so that I could let Mother Nature make a hash of it," she said, her voice tart. She held up the tablet in her hand. "Tony, darling, I need to borrow some tableware."

"No," Tony said.

"The good china, or the-" Steve started, because he was a little shit. Tony cut him off.

"No," he repeated, giving Steve a look. Steve just grinned at him. "Do not encourage her." To Jan, he said, "If you want plates, you can rent them."

She made a moue of displeasure. "Rude," she said. Her manicured fingers rattled against the front of the tablet. "Don't you want to know why I want them?"

"No," Tony said.

"Yes," Steve said, almost at the same time.

Tony turned on him, spreading his hands wide. “What did I say about encouraging her?”

Steve shrugged. "I'm curious."

“Traitor,” Tony said.

Jan ignored him. “I've been looking into venues for my soiree,” she said. She looked down at her tablet. “It's difficult finding something large enough, with the extras that I want.” Her nose wrinkled. “The best places are booked, of course, but there's still some options.”
She looked up. “My preference, of course, would be to rent the function space here in the building,” she said. “It’s big enough, there’s an excellent catering company on call, the security is already in place, and I’m familiar with the layout and the staff.” She huffed out a breath. “But when I contacted the building management, I was informed that it was already under contract.”

“Shame,” Tony said. Jan stared at him. He gave her a bright smile. “So, going to cancel your plans?”

“No, I had a friend with a wedding planning business call and imply she needed an emergency venue change for a society wedding,” Jan said, and Tony went still. Jan’s eyelashes fluttered. “She signed the contract this morning.”

“Fuck,” Tony said. Steve choked on a laugh.

“Right,” Jan said. “So next time that you try to block me, Stark, do a better job of covering your tracks, because that was dumb. That was-” Her head tipped to the side, big brown eyes considering him. “For you, that was unforgivably stupid.”

“Look, I had to try, you can't blame a guy for-”


Tony stared down at the fingertip doing its best to grind a hole right through what was left of his breastbone. "I'm busy that night," he said, because he never thought well on his feet in front of an angry woman.

She went on her tiptoes, her nose an inch or so from his. "Get un-busy," she said, her teeth flashing in the sort of smile that promised violence. She rocked back on her heels. "I'm taking your plates."

"Which ones?" Tony asked.

"All of them!" She headed back into the penthouse, her hips swaying like a pendulum. “Do not oppose me, Anthony, or I'll make you regret it.”

“I already regret it!” Tony called after her, because he wanted the last word, even if the last word made no sense. Jan gave him a little wave over her shoulder, and disappeared back through the door. Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “That could’ve gone better,” he said to Steve.

“Yes,” Steve said.

“It would've gone better if you had, you know, helped,” Tony said.

“You got yourself into that mess, Tony, don't know why you'd think that I was going to get you out of it,” Steve said, heading for the door. Tony heaved a sigh and plodded after him. “Come on, let’s see if we can steal back two of your plates, otherwise, we're eating eggs and toast off of paper towels.”

“I think eating off paper towels is safer at this point,” Tony said. “And that's probably the least of our problems.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I'm just starting to figure that out.”
The Avenger’s shared kitchen was a large, airy space, full of light and with plenty of room to move, cook and eat. At this hour, it was pretty empty, with only Jan and Natasha at the massive table. Jan had taken advantage of the extra space to spread out piles of paper, stacks of china and swathes of cloth. Nat had a tablet in her hand and a bowl of fruit salad balanced on a pile of restaurant menus.

Jan was flipping through a huge catalog of invitation samples, a pencil tucked behind her ear, and a piece of toast clamped between her teeth. As Steve walked in, she scribbled something on a legal pad and snagged the toast, tapping the crust against her plate. He knew the moment she spotted him, because her face split in a wide, warm grin. “Steve! Perfect! Now that you’re dry, come here and help me pick a font!”

“Please pick a font,” Natasha said, spearing a piece of cantaloupe.

“She's been no help,” Jan said, waving a hand in Natasha's direction.

“None at all,” Natasha agreed.

“Right, so-” Steve started, but Jan held up the catalog.

“I'm thinking a basic engraved one hundred pound linen stock,” she said. “I like the texture, and anything more just makes it look like you're trying too hard, honestly.”

Steve looked at Natasha. She gave a half shrug.

“That's-” Steve said.

“What do you think of this font?” she asked. She held it up in front of her, her big brown eyes peeking over the top. “It seems very... Fussy.”

Steve stared at it. “I don't think Tony would approve of anything with that many flourishes,” he said.

“That's why I'm not asking him, I'm asking you,” she said, wiggling the page back and forth. “Maybe something simpler? Maybe calligraphy?” Her eyes went wide. “Ooooh, we could hire a calligraphy firm and have them done by hand, it's more expensive, but it does pack a definite-”

“Jan.” He pushed the invitation to the side. “I have a problem.”

She tossed it back on the pile. “I have so many problems,” she said, waving a hand through the air. “I have two weeks to pull this together, and Tony's going to fight me the entire way, which was to be expected, but still I could do without his fussing so-”

Steve stared up at the ceiling, praying for patience. “I can't dance.”

Jan blinked at him over the rim of her tea cup. “What do you mean, you can't dance?” she asked, setting it down on its matching saucer. Next to her, Natasha didn't turn her attention away from her fruit salad, but Steve knew she was listening.

Steve studied Jan for a long moment, then held his hands out to his sides. “Hi,” he said.

She huffed out a breath. “Right. You're... You.” She leaned back in her chair, an index finger pressed to her pursed lips. “What are we talking about here?” she asked, her eyes narrowing. “Are we talking 'have limited experience with formal dance' or are we talking 'I'm not sure which foot is my left one?'”

Steve considered that. “I have feet?” he said at last.
Jan winced. “Okay,” she agreed. “Gotcha.” Her teeth worried at her lower lip, her eyes narrowed. “And this is a problem because you want to dance at the reception?”

“Thought this wasn't a reception,” Natasha said.

“It's only 'not a reception' when Tony is listening, I see no point in pretending otherwise,” Jan told her. To Steve, she said, “You don't HAVE to dance, I'm not going to force you into a first dance or anything like that, not unless you want to, honey.”

“It's less that I want to dance,” Steve admitted, “and more that Tony can dance, and dancing, in general, is expected, and I really would like to be able to dance with him, without making a fool of myself or creating an international incident.”

Natasha stirred her tea, one eyebrow arched. “Just how bad a dancer are you?” she asked.

“Bad enough,” Steve told her. He looked at Jan. “Not as good as Tony.”

Jan made a face, even as she spread marmalade on her toast with a heavy hand. “Yes, well, a childhood of etiquette lessons and dance classes will do that to a person.” She blew a lock of hair away from her forehead with a huff of breath. “Even if they weren't to his liking, Tony doesn't like to be bad at anything.” She took a dainty bite, her tongue flicking out to clean the marmalade off her lips. “So yes. He's going to be able to do a waltz.”

“And I can't,” Steve said.

Jan took another bite, her eyes never leaving Steve's. He could almost see the wheels turning behind those remarkable eyes, her quick mind making connections he wasn't sure he wanted her to make. She set the rest of the toast down and dusted off her fingers on a cloth napkin. “This is important to you.”

It wasn't a question, but he answered it anyway. “Yes. It is.”

Jan nodded. “Right.” She stood. “Natasha?”

Nat picked up her bowl. “On it,” she said. “Meet you in the gym?” Jan nodded. “Give me ten to get the equipment we need. It was a late night, I'm going to have trouble moving it.”

Jan made a face. “Let me know if you need help-” she started, but Natasha was already halfway out of the kitchen, sidestepping around Sam, who was on his way in.

“What's happening?” Steve asked, as Sam stumbled for the coffee pot, scratching idly at his head.

“Dance lessons,” Jan said, and Sam's head came around.

“Dance lessons,” Jan repeated, propping a hand on her hip. “Steve. Gym. What you're wearing will work. We're going to teach you how to dance.”

“Great!” Sam dumped a healthy measure of coffee into his cup. “I'll grab my shoes.”

“Who invited you?” Jan asked, but Sam was already sprinting out of the kitchen, leaving a trail of coffee on the floor behind him. Jan glared at the door. “I suppose he can be trusted.” Her eyes slid back to Steve as she collected her plate and cup from the table. “I take it Tony doesn't know you're down here asking about this?”
Steve shook his head. “No. And-” He took a deep breath. “I'd like to keep it that way.”

Jan put the dishes in the dishwasher, her fingers lingering on the counter. “I love Tony. You know that.”

Steve nodded. “Yes.”

Jan's eyes met his. “Do you?”

Steve's lips twitched. “I think that's a conversation I need to have with him, and not you. Don't you?”

Her eyebrows arched. “Well, are you planning to do that?” She hooked an arm through his. “Come on. We're going to go stretch.”

“I just ran a few miles,” Steve pointed out, as Jan dragged him towards the elevator. “I think I've stretched.”

“You're going to be using some different muscles,” Jan said, patting him lightly on the chest. “Let's go.”

Fifteen minutes later, Steve was stretched out on the gym floor, leaning over his legs with Jan's foot planted firmly in the middle of his back, pushing him forward. "I'm not sure this is correct stretching procedure," he muttered into his knees.

"Who's the dancer here?" she asked. Her heel dug into his shoulder blade. "Reach for your toes, Cap."

"Okay!" Steve tilted his head to the side in time to see Sam come striding in from the men's locker room, clad in shorts and a t-shirt. He clapped his hands together with a bright grin. "Let's get our dance on."

"No one invited you," Jan said. She lifted her foot off of Steve's spine, and Steve flopped onto his back in relief. Jan didn't seem to notice. She put her hands on her hips. "Natasha's getting the equipment, and then we can start. You-" She made a shooing motion with one hand. "Go."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Right. And who's going to teach him? Natasha's a terrifying Russian ballerina, and you're about three feet tall in heels."

Jan drew herself up as much as she could. It didn't help much. "And I can still dance," she said, her voice sugary sweet. "So I'm not sure what my height has to do with it?"

"Nothing, if he was going to be dancing with tiny, tiny women," Sam said. "But he's not."

"I might be," Steve said. He rolled to his feet. "I mean, I'd like to.” He smiled down at Jan. "Some of my best friends are tiny, tiny women."

"And we're going to be easier to dance with than TS is,” she said, patting him lightly on the arm. "We're used to dodging big ol' feet."

"And that's why I'm here," Sam said.

"Because... You've got big feet?" Jan asked.

"Because he needs to try this with another man," Sam said. He spread his hands. "Me."

"No," Jan said.
"But you need-"

"Natasha's bringing the equipment," Jan said.

"Got it," Natasha said, coming through the door, towing Clint behind her. He appeared to be half-asleep, still wearing a pair of faded purple pajama pants with a massive hole in one knee and a t-shirt that had been white once upon a time. Now, it was an indistinct sort of gray.

Everyone watched, with varying amounts of confusion, as Natasha pushed Clint forward, angling him for Steve. "Sorry we're late. We didn't get in until around three am, so he's running on about three hours of sleep at this point." She patted Clint on the back. "He's upright and he's pretty pliable for the moment, that's about all I can promise."

Clint stumbled forward, and Steve's hands snapped out, grabbing for Clint before he could end up on the floor. Clint swayed on his feet, his eyes squinting in Steve's general direction. "Why am I here?"

He asked, his voice plaintive.

"Because we're teaching Steve to dance," Natasha said, boosting herself onto the top of the pommel horse.

Clint nodded. "Why am I here?" he repeated. He sounded less confused and more resigned.

"You're the equipment," Jan said to him. Clint's mouth opened. Then closed. His head dipped in a slightly drunken nod, and held out a hand.

Steve stared at him, then at Jan. She gave him a 'what are you waiting for?' look, gesturing at Clint. "All right. One hand on his hip, the other, take that, and-"

"You got CLINT?" Sam asked, and Steve made a 'sorry' face at him. Sam waved him off. "Oh, no, don't you get involved, I know who is responsible for this."

"That would be me," Jan said, holding up one hand at shoulder level. Her eyes fluttered at a dangerous rate. "Do you have a problem with my choices, Mr. Wilson?"

"Damn right I do, you got CLINT," Sam said. "And I was right here. Me." He held his hands out. "Really?"

"You have all the grace of a landbound manatee in the midst of anaphylactic shock," Jan said, her voice flat, and Sam's mouth dropped open.

"Oh my God," Steve said, because he was standing ten feet from Sam and he was pretty sure he felt the backdraft from that burn.

"I know, RIGHT?" Sam asked him. His head swiveled back to Jan. "Is this because I stepped on your foot that one time?"

"My FOOT?" She leaned in, her eyes narrowed into slits. "You stepped on ME."

"I didn't know you'd shrunk down," Sam said. "And you're fine, so-"

"I got Clint," Jan said, cutting him off. "Because he can at least be trusted to-"

A rumble of sound from Steve's shoulder brought everyone's head around. Steve stared down, nonplussed, at Clint, who appeared to have fallen asleep standing up, his body propped up by Steve's. His head was twisted at an odd angle, his mouth hanging open against Steve's shoulder, and
in the stunned silence of the room, his next snore was obscenely loud.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Jan said, her hands on her hips.

“Don't worry,” Steve said, wrapping his arms around Clint's waist as he started his slow, inevitable descent towards the floor. “I've- This has actually happened to me before.” He heaved Clint up. “I'll just-”

Natasha patted the spot next to her. “Put him here,” she said. Steve heaved Clint over the pommel horse, face down. His hands and feet trailed down towards the ground, his head hanging limp. As they all watched, he started to snore. Natasha reached out and patted him on the butt. “Sorry. Equipment failure.”

Sam and Jan exchanged a look. “You want to-” Jan started, waving a hand towards Steve.

Sam took a deep breath. “Let's start with some basic steps,” he said.

Natasha leaned back, her hands braced on the pommel horse. “Just do exactly as you're told and you'll both be fine.”

“We can still run for it,” Sam said to Steve. “Wanna run for it?”

“God, you have no idea.” Steve straightened his shoulders. “But no. I've lived through worse.”

Natasha smiled. It was not a nice smile. “No. You haven't.” She clapped her hands. “Let's start.”

*Hold back on the perimeter,” Coulson said, his voice calm over the comm line, and Tony banked hard to the right. “Falcon's keeping an eye on the Hulk, and the mechanism is out of commission. SHEILD scientific is clearing the scene.”

“How's the Hulk?” Steve asked.

“Coming down off of a Code Green,” Sam said. “Looks like he's going to be taking the rest of the day off. SHIELD medical's got him; I'm on my way back in.”

“Man deserves a nap,” Tony said, even as his HUD lit up like a fireworks display. “We have movement at the warehouse, looks like they're trying to collect what's left of their tech. Captain Marvel?”

“I see it.” Carol shot past him, a flare of light and color, and Tony fell into place behind her, watching for anyone who might be trying to catch them from behind. “When we come in from the top, they're going to scatter like ants.”

“Spidey, you and Hawkeye take the North entrance,” Steve said, his voice brisk. “Spider-Woman, Power Man, head South. Wasp and Jewel-”

“Jesus,” Jessica said. “I regret that code name so much.”

Steve ignored her. “Watch the East side fire escape. Widow and I have the West windows.”

“We've got teams on the street behind you, ready for sweep up any stragglers,” Coulson said.

Carol pulled up, her hands in glowing fists at her sides. “Call it, Cap,” she said. The wind ruffled her short blonde hair, but her gaze never wavered from the top of the warehouse.
“Go,” Steve said, and Carol spun in mid-air, shooting downwards in a flat dive, her fists held out in front of her. Tony was right behind her, close enough to dodge the debris she kicked up when the roof of the warehouse exploded outwards from the force of her entry.

“You planning on helping?” she asked, and Tony grinned.

“You seem to have this pretty well in hand,” he said, even as he banked in a wide loop around her, firing the repulsors in short, controlled bursts. The techno-cult that had been trying to build a bomb in the middle of Manhattan scrambled in all directions, screaming as they went. “There. I helped.”

“Great,” Carol said, her voice sardonic, as she snagged a man with a machine gun from the catwalk just to their right, slamming him hard into the wall. “Is that thing in the middle of the room likely to go boom and splatter our DNA across several neighborhoods?”

“Well, you're pretty durable, so probably.” Tony started, and Steve cut him off.

“The rest of us aren't,” he said, and there was a grunt and a high pitched scream in the background. “So go take care of that, Iron Man.”

“Blow up the missile, Iron Man,” Tony said, wheeling his way down towards the warehouse floor. Someone shot at him, and he let off a repulsor blast without even looking in that direction. “Fix the hole in the fabric of space and time, Iron Man. Find out if that'll kill us, Iron Man.”

“We adding 'shut up, Iron Man' to that list?” Luke asked. There was a thud, and Tony was pretty sure the building shifted on its foundation.

“I think we should add 'shut up and do your job, Iron Man,' to that list.”

“You're ungrateful, that's what you are,” Tony said. He landed, his feet digging into the concrete of the floor. A man in what looked like a black and orange lab coat made a lunge for a nearby panel, and Tony snagged him by the back of the coat. “Don't know where you're going, but I know it's a bad idea to let you get there,” he said. “Can someone-”

A blast of webbing shot over his shoulder, catching the mad science type in the chest and face. Tony stared at him, nonplussed. “Can he breathe through that?”

“ Probably,” Peter said, swinging by.

“Excellent.” Tony set the man down and crouched down to study the machine. “Jarvis? What're we looking at here?”

“It appears to be an explosive device with an unknown payload,” Jarvis said. The HUD blinked, and then a series of schematics started scrolling across his vision. “I believe it would be inadvisable to allow it to detonate at this point.”

“Wasn't planning on it,” Tony said. A man came running at him, screaming, a length of pipe held over his head like a club. Without looking away from the scroll of data, Tony raised a hand and hit him with a short repulsor blast. He went down hard. “I wonder why these kind of assholes never learn.” He pried open a nearby panel. “Okay, this I can handle.” He set his gauntleted hand against the circuitry. “Jarvis, let's see if you can get in without triggering anything.”

Natasha sprinted by, a man right behind her. She swung to the side, one leg lashing out and catching him in the knees. Her hand snapped out, and he was unconscious before he hit the ground. “Need help?” she asked. She didn't even sound out of breath.

“I think I've got it. Watch out. Flamethrower,” Tony said, as a man in heavy gear came charging at
“Right,” she said, sounding bored. “Clint?”

“Don't blow him up next to the bomb!” Steve snapped, just as an arrow thudded into the flamethrower's fuel tank. There was a crack and a sick, gooey noise, and then the man was on the ground, a pile of expanding foam rapidly swallowing him.

“No faith,” Clint said, his voice laconic. “We've got two moving up towards the office above the main work floor.”

“On it.” Steve shot past, a blur of blue and red, and Natasha fell in right behind him.

On some level, Tony was aware of his teammates moving around him, of the SHIELD teams sweeping in to collect the downed combatants. But most of his attention was locked in on the bomb, moving through the safeguards as quickly as he could.

Luke appeared next to him, crouching down to peer at Tony's work. “We good here?”

Tony reached in, and ripped a circuit board loose, sending a shower of sparks across the concrete floor. Luke jerked backwards, his eyes wide, and Tony grinned in his direction. “We're good,” he said, pushing himself to his feet.


“Yeah.” Tony grinned. “Point of pride, actually. So-”

There was a crash, and a shriek, and then a man came flying through the air, landing in the middle of the bomb with a solid thud. There was a beat of silence, and Tony pointed at him. “I'm glad I finished the diffusing process before you chose to do that, Romanov.”

Above them, Natasha appeared in the newly formed hole in the second floor office. “That... Wasn't me,” she said.

Tony paused as the rest of the team came scrambling in from all directions. He stared up at Nat. “Cap? You okay?”

“Fine,” Steve said. He stomped his way down the metal staircase. “We clear?”

“We're clear,” Coulson said. “Hold position as we secure the scene.”

“Drink 'em of you've got 'em,” Jessica said. She leaned forward. “You got him?”

“Jesus, Cap,” Luke said, yanking the man out of the remains of the bomb. A SHIELD team was waiting to load him onto a stretcher and bundle him out of the building. “Did he talk bad about your mother?”

“No,” Steve gritted out, adjusting the shield on his arm. “Save the chatter for the debrief.”

“He talked bad about Tony,” Natasha said, and as one, the entire team turned to look at Tony.

“Cap, you have to be used to that by now,” Tony said, grinning behind the shelter of his helmet. “Everyone talks bad about me, and not saying that this guy doesn't deserve to be in traction, but maybe I'm not the reason to put him there.”

Steve's jaw was as hard as a rock. He avoided looking in Tony's direction. “Right. So can we-”
“He asked who pitches and who catches,” Natasha said, and it took a second for Tony's brain to make that metaphor work. When it clicked, he winced.

“Tell me this isn't the first time a bad guy's tried to needle you about your sex life, Cap,” Tony said. Steve glared in his general direction, and Tony flipped up the faceplate of the helmet, shock taking away whatever tact he might've possessed. “Oh my God, it is.”

“It's not, it's just—” Steve shifted his weight. “Can we drop this now?”

“Sorry, Cap,” Tony said, and he was, he was sorry. Sorry that people were horrible, mostly, but also sorry he'd gotten Steve into this. “But they're going to do that. They're going to do it a lot now.”

“Do they do this to you?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Tony said, without missing a beat. “All—” He spread his hands. “All the time.”

Steve stared at him. “Why didn't you tell me?” he asked, and he sounded so honestly and truly hurt that Tony wanted to hug him.

“Show of hands. Who here has to regularly deal with bad guys making inappropriate sexual comments during fights?” Tony asked, glancing at the team.

Every single woman raised her hand. Jan raised both, waving them wildly over her head. Clint just laughed, and Luke shook his head. “All the damn time.”

“Really?” Sam asked him. “I mean, I get a little of that, but more racial stuff, honestly.”

“I'm a black man married to a white woman, that brings out the special in a lot of assholes,” Luke said, his arms crossed over his chest.

Steve looked like he wanted to put his fist through something. “Why didn't anyone tell me this was happening?” he gritted out.

“What would you do about it?” Carol asked. “Try to institute conversational standards for trash talking?” She shook her head. “That would've just made it worse.”

“Besides,” Jessica said, dusting her hands off on her thighs, “this is just a daily occurrence for most of us.” She met Steve's eyes, her gaze flat. “At least during a fight, we can punch our local oversharing assholes.”

Steve nodded. “Right.” He took a deep breath. “Right.”

“Also,” Jan said, perching on the edge of a piece of fractured concrete, “because I kind of figured they were doing it to you, too.” She leaned forward. “Is this really your first time?”

“I guess the 'everyone you know and love is dead' is an easier target,” Steve said.

“Most of these guys aren't criminal geniuses,” Tony agreed. “And you are old.”

Steve gave him a look, but he no longer looked like he wanted to murder someone. Tony took that as a positive. “Right. I guess that's better than someone asking me if I want to suck their dick.”

“Guys try it with me all the time,” Clint said, his fingers walking idly up the length of his bowstring. “Which is fine with me, if they really want blow job tips, I'll totally give them some.” Everyone stared at him. Clint shrugged. “Like, I got nothing better to do, I could aim in my sleep, so this kind of livens things up.”
Steve pinched his nose between his index finger and thumb. “Clint...”

“No, seriously, it's 2017, it's not my fault if they're still repressed,” Clint said. “Your attraction to men aside, if you haven't at least tried shoving something up your butt, that's your own problem, and it's a problem I don't have. Like, sorry you're so freaked out by the idea of being thought of as gay that your prostate doesn't get to have a good time, but that's really your problem, and you need to get over it.”

“Oh my God.” Jess had her face in her hands, and Carol was bent double behind her, laughing so hard that she was crying. Luke had his arms crossed over his chest, staring at Clint with his mouth hanging open just a little bit. Sam was just shaking his head, his eyes squeezed shut.

“So if they're like, 'hey, you've got a real pretty mouth, bet you give good head,' I'm going to roll with it,” Clint said, with a nod. “Because the kind of guys who try that are either really repressed or think you are. So they either A. they get turned on, or B. they get freaked out and in either case, that makes them a lot easier to shoot.”

In the silence that followed, Peter gestured at Clint with both hands. “Clint Barton, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, and everyone was laughing now, everyone except Clint, who just grinned, unrepentant. “Someone gave him government clearance.”

“Which is now universally regarded as a mistake, it's true,” Tony said, trying not to laugh. “Barton, seriously?”

Clint just shrugged. “They started it.” He flipped his bow around, snagging it with picture perfect timing. “I'm just finishing it.” He slung it over his shoulder. “Don't let 'em see it hurts you, Cap, or they'll just keep doing it.”

“Which sounds like good advice, but it's harder to do for some people,” Jan said. She smiled at Steve. “I prefer to punch 'em.” She smacked one little fist into her other hand. “Or get Jessica to punch 'em for you.”

“I like punching people,” Jessica agreed with a grin.

“Let us know,” Sam said. He slung an arm around Steve's shoulders. “But really. If you have to throw a couple of people through a couple of walls, we understand.”

Steve heaved a sigh. “Why are you trying to comfort me?” He slanted a look in Sam's direction. “You have to deal with a lot more of this than I do.”

“And you try to comfort me when I do,” Sam said. He patted Steve on the back. “Don't worry. You start whining about this regularly and I'll put you in your privileged ass place.”

“Good,” Steve said. He took a deep breath and let it out. “I appreciate that.”

“Which is another reason why we're fine with comforting you,” Carol said. She propped her fists on her hips. “Now. Who wants to go help clean up and make sure no one went slinking off through the back alleys?”


“Always,” Natasha said. She gave Steve's shoulder a squeeze on her way past, and he smiled at her.

“Does no one say weird stuff to you?” Clint asked Peter, who was now hanging upside down from the ceiling.
“It's not a good idea to ask a guy in spandex about sex stuff,” Peter said. “If they try, I tell them facts about spiders and that confuses them and also makes them think maybe I have a weird kink that they don't want to know anything more about.”

“That's brilliant,” Clint said. He sounded stunned. “I gotta try that.”

“Please don't make people think you do sex stuff with birds,” Jess told him. “Because then they'll start asking me and Nat about if you do sex things with birds, and wow. Not having that conversation.”

“I'll have that conversation,” Natasha said. “Let's go, Hawkeye. You, too, you arachnid deviant. Let's get the remains of this mopped up.”

“I'm going to do some aerial sweeps,” Carol said. “Sam? Wanna join me?”

Sam glanced in Tony's direction. Tony tipped his head in Steve's direction, and Sam nodded. “Lead the way.”

“We'll call you if we need help with the rubble,” Jessica said to Carol, who nodded.

“I mean, if you think you can't handle it by yourself,” Carol said with a smirk.

“Fuck you,” Jessica said, grinning at her.


“I do not do PR duty,” Jessica said, tucking her hands in her pockets. “That's what we keep Cap around for.”

“Fake it for a few minutes, okay?” Tony asked her. She flipped him off. “Perfect. Knew we could count on you.” He waited for them to clear the room before he turned back to Steve. He leaned against the nearest console. “You okay?” he asked.

“I need everyone to stop asking me that,” Steve said. He glanced at Tony, his mouth a thin line, his arms crossed over his chest. “Sorry.”

Tony's eyebrows arched. “What, about the sex stuff?” He huffed out a breath. “Pretty sure that's my line, Cap. You didn't ask for this.”

“No one asks for this,” Steve pointed out. The heat in the words seemed to startle him as much as Tony. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “No one.”

“No,” Tony said. “But LGBTQ people have to deal with it. Because the moment you exist, fully and openly, people consider that you've opened the topic up for public conversation.” He gave Steve a sarcastic sort of smile. “After all, if you didn't want to answer questions about your sex life, then why start talking about your sexuality?”

“Right,” Steve said, with a wry smile. “That-” He shook his head. “That's horrible.” He glanced at Tony, his hands braced on his thighs. “And the women?”

“Well, it's their fault for being openly female in the current political and social climate,” Tony said. Steve ducked his head to hide his smile, and Tony bumped his shoulder against Steve's. “After all, they're the one who forced their identity on the rest of us.”
"Tell me people don't actually think this way," Steve said. He sounded tired, his shoulders slumped forward.

"It's a slight exaggeration," Tony said. "But only about the women." He tried to smile. "Are you—"

"I'm fine," Steve said. He met Tony's eyes, and there was a scuff just under his left eye, a mark of ash or dirt. "I am fine, Tony. You can stop asking."

Tony pushed himself upright. "Probably not going to happen," he admitted. Steve looked up at him, and he smiled. "You going to stop asking me?"

Steve's lips quirked up. "Probably not," he said. He stood up. "Point taken."

"Occasionally, I get one in," Tony said. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Since Thor's back in Asgard, I'm going to see if the terror twins need help in clearing the streets." He raised his eyebrows. "Want to come? Good stress relief."

Steve smiled at him. It almost reached his eyes. "I'm going to go check in with SHIELD to see how Bruce is doing."

Tony nodded. "Let me know if—"

"Go away, Iron Man," Steve said, and this time, his smile seemed less strained. He grabbed his shield. "But don't go far."

"Right," Tony said. He flipped the visor down. "I'll keep you updated." With a quick salute, he took off, heading for the convenient hole that Carol had left in the roof.

The neighborhood had sustained some damage, but a block or so away, the affects were much less obvious. Here and there, people peered out their windows and shop owners cautiously unlocked their front doors. Tony waved at everyone he passed, making a show of his presence. Either it would help them feel a bit more secure, or it would give them a focus for their ire. He didn't really care.

He paused to lift a damaged tree away from a row of small storefronts, making sure he left the road clear for a phalanx of fire trucks and SHIELD vehicles that went rolling past. A few quick repulsor blasts, and he was left with a neat pile of branches and trunk lengths. He stacked them up by the curb, dusting his hands clean as he stepped back. He was about to take off when something in a nearby jewelry shop window caught his eye.

The ring was a smooth, polished circle of white gold, understated enough that it was overshadowed by the larger, flashier pieces of jewelry that surrounded it. But even at a distance, he could make out a subtle, sophisticated pattern etched into the metal. Tony leaned in, shading his eyes as he tried to get a better look.

After a few seconds of squinting helplessly at it, he gave up and took a step back. There was a small, white haired man behind the front counter, bent over an old fashioned ledger that he had spread out in front of him on the glass topped display case. Tony tapped one finger on the window. "Hi, you open?" he asked, when the man at the counter looked up.

There was a beat of stillness, as the man stared at him from behind the smudged lenses of his glasses. Tony could almost see the instant where the situation sank in, and then the clerk scrambled for the back of the counter.

There was a faint buzz, and a click as the door unlocked. Tony pushed it open. "For you, Mr. Stark," the man said, "always."
Tony grinned. "You might change your mind after you hear my wallet's in my other suit." He tapped a finger against the chestplate of the armor. "The one with pockets."

"We'd be pleased to open you a store charge account," the man said, a distinct gleam in his eye. "Provided your credit check goes through, of course."

Tony choked on a laugh. "I do like a cautious businessman." He paused. "I'm not one. But I like them." He triggered the armor's release, and stepped out of it, rolling his neck. "Just going to park that before I end up cracking a display case," he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder at the armor. "Let me know if its in the way."

"I doubt we'll be seeing much by way of customers until the street is less..." The man paused, looking out at the street, his mouth tight. "Less on fire."

"You'd think New Yorkers would be made of sterner stuff," Tony said. "But any excuse to stay home." He tipped his head towards the window. "I'm in the market for a wedding ring. Any chance I could see one you've got on display?"

To the man's credit, he didn't even blink. "Of course." He came out from behind the counter, his shoulders hunched forward as he flipped through a massive ring of keys. "What can I show you?"

Tony pointed at the tray, and followed the clerk back to the counter. He produced a small polishing cloth and smoothed it over the surface of the ring before holding it out to Tony, still cradled within the hollow of the soft fabric.

Tony knew he'd been right as soon as he picked it up.

Still, he held the ring up to the light, rolling it between his fingers. The gleaming white gold had been worked with exacting care, the pattern evoking the angularity and precision of the art deco period. Up close, the artistry was obvious, the fine, precise lines the work of a craftman of exceptional skill. "This is very well done," he said, his thumb smoothing over the pattern. He could feel the rise and fall of the pattern, his fingertips honed for any small deviation in metal. "In house?"

The man nodded. "My daughter," he said, the pride clear in his voice. "Miriam?"

Tony glanced up to find a young woman hovering in the door to the back room, tall and gangly, wearing a heavy canvas apron over her plain dark shirt and pants. A white handkerchief pulled her dark curls away from her face, and a pair of wire rimmed glasses, very similar to her father's, were perched on her nose. Tony held up the ring. "Yours?" he asked. She nodded, a flush spreading across her cheeks. Tony smiled. "You've got a real feel for metal work."

He offered her a hand, and she stepped forward, up to the counter. Her fingers were rough, the nails cut short and the skin calloused, but she offered her hand without flinching. "Thank you, Mr. Stark. That means something, coming from you."

Tony rolled the ring between his fingers, savoring the perfect balance and weight of it. He wanted it. He knew it was stupid, it was beyond stupid, but he wanted it. His fingers closed over the ring. "Jarvis, can you get Steve to-"

"I anticipated your request," Jarvis said, his voice echoing from the open front of the armor. "If you would be so good as to unlock the door, sir?"

The clerk reached for the door release, and Tony heard the door open behind him. "Tony?"

"Ah, speak of the angel, and he shall appear," Tony said, without even looking back. He crooked a
finger in Steve's direction. “Come here.”

Steve stepped up next to him. "That's not how the-

"Yes, I know, I also don't care, give me your hand," Tony said, snagging Steve's left wrist.

"Hello," Steve said, to the clerk and his daughter. "I'm-

"They know who you are, even if they didn't know who you are, they know who you are," Tony said, trying to wrestle Steve's glove off and getting absolutely no help from Steve. "You need to stop assuming everyone needs an introduction, because it's just awkward and it wastes time, and I don't care so much about the first part, but the second part will be the death of me." He glared down at Steve's hand, still stubbornly encased in leather. "Do you put these on with super glue?"

Steve gave him a look, but it was tempered with a slight smile. "You could ask," he said. "Unless you'd like to continue wasting time?"

Someone laughed, and Tony wasn't sure who, but it wasn't him. He gave Steve a look. "Strip, Rogers," he said, and, grinning, Steve peeled the glove off with one smooth motion.

"Better?" he asked, wiggling his fingers.

"Hallelujah, skin," Tony said, as deadpan as he could manage, and Steve started to laugh. While he was distracted, Tony caught his wrist, steadying it as he slipped the ring onto Steve's finger. It settled into place as if it had been crafted to fit there, pale and warm against his skin.

Tony grinned. "Somehow, I knew that was just your size," he said, triumphant. "What do you think?"

He glanced up, and Steve had stopped laughing. He was just staring down at his fingers, his face blank. Tony felt his stomach sink. "Hey," he said. "Sorry, it's okay, should've asked you what you wanted, we didn't discuss it or anything, but I saw that one and thought you might-" He stopped. "Here, I've got it-"

Before he could do more than reach for the ring, Steve's fingers snapped closed, curling tight against his palm. He pulled his hand back, out of reach, before he let his hand relax again. “Give a fella a second, will ya?” he asked.

Tony studied him. “I never know if it's a good thing or a bad thing when you go all Brooklyn on me,” he said, and Steve's lips twitched. “What does it even mean?”

“It means you manage to knock the pins out from under me, every time,” Steve said. He held up his hand, letting the ring catch the light. His smile was slight, almost shy, but his eyes were brilliant. Steve's thumb slid over the band. “So, am I wearing this home, or are you having it wrapped up?”

Warmth flooded through him, and Tony felt some of the tension go out of his shoulders. “I think that's your choice,” he said. To the clerk, he said, “We'll take it.”

“Very good, sir,” the man said, reaching for his ledger. “Will you be paying now, or will we be billing you?”

“I've got a card,” Tony said.

“In the armor?” Steve asked him, looking up from his ring. “Why?”
Tony tapped a small hidden seam on the side of the armor, opening up a small slot. From that, he pulled out a black American Express, flipping it over between his fingers. “In case I need to buy a wedding ring on the fly, of course,” he said.

“Does this mean that I get to choose one for you?” Steve asked, and Tony went still.

He handed over his credit card. “You can,” he said, and his voice seemed to echo in the small space. He licked his lips. “If you want to.”

Steve shifted his weight, his thumb still rubbing back and forth across the surface of the ring. “Do you want me to?”

Tony took a deep breath. “I'm a mechanic at heart, Steve,” he said, his voice blunt. “And rings can be-” He flexed his fingers. “Small spaces and moving metal parts, if it gets caught on something...”

His voice trailed away, and Steve nodded, his face unreadable. “Work hazard,” he said.

Tony nodded. “So yes. You can-” He pushed a hand through his hair. “If you want to, I mean, you can pick one out for me, but I can't promise I'll always wear it.”

“My uncle's an electrician,” Miriam said, and Tony started. For an instant, he'd forgotten there was anyone else in the room with them. She took the ring of keys from her father, crossing over to unlock a display case. “All metal is conductive. I looked into ceramic, but even that, like Mr. Stark says, it's a danger while working.” She pulled out a black velvet tray. “So he went with one that he could wear when he was off the job.”

She set the tray down on the counter. “Platinum is sophisticated, classy, and durable. It won't be bent out of shape with a little rough handling, so it's easy to take off and put on.”

Steve nodded, leaning over the tray. “What does he do with it when he's working?”

She smiled. “He wears it on a chain around his neck.” Miriam tapped a finger against the neckline of her shirt. “As long as it's kept under his clothes, it's much safer for him, and he's-” She shrugged. “He's a bit of a romantic.”

Tony peered over his shoulder. But he didn't say a word as Steve considered the tray. After a moment, he reached for one. “Try this one?” he asked, holding it out to Tony.

It was a smooth, simple piece, the light sliding over the surface. No fuss. Nothing obviously artistic about it. But it was perfect, for all that. Tony held out his hand, expecting Steve to hand it to him. Instead, he cupped his hand around Tony's, sliding the ring smoothly onto his finger.

Tony stared down at it, not sure what the churning sensation in his stomach meant. But when he flexed his fingers, the ring felt like it had always been there, as familiar as the armor against his skin.

“Well?” Steve asked, his voice soft. Hopeful.

Tony looked up. “Good eye, Rogers,” he said, and the smile that bloomed on Steve's face was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He went to take his hand back, but Steve caught his wrist, holding him still. He pulled the ring off, and put it on the counter.

“Can you hold this for me?” he asked, with a smile. “I can come back tonight with-”

The clerk whisked it off the counter. “We will bill you, Captain Rogers.”
“Just tell everyone who asks where you got it, and you can have it for free,” Miriam said with a bright smile.

“Just put it on my-” Tony started.

“Do not do that,” Steve said with a bright smile. “You're not paying for your own ring, Tony, that's-”

“You can pay me back when we get-”

“Sir, so sorry to interrupt,” Jarvis said. “But Agent Coulson has a question about the bomb.”

“Right,” Tony said. He stepped past the armor, snagging the portable comm unit as he passed by. “I'll be right back, this isn't.” He tucked the comm into his ear. “It's non functional, what else do you want from me, Coulson?”

“A bit more information about how, exactly, you handled this,” Coulson said. He sounded exhausted. “The scientific forensic team is... Displeased.”

Tony grinned as he pushed his way out of the store. “Right. When are they ever pleased, Coulson?”

“Occasionally, you do a better job of pacifying them,” Coulson said. “Tell me what you did.”

Tony leaned back against the wall. “Jarvis sent you the schematics, didn't he? And the video? So what else can I tell you about-”

The door opened up behind him, and something went over his head, settling around his neck. Tony looked down. Steve's dogtags gleamed, silver and rough, against the black fabric of the undersuit. And there, tucked between the tags, was the platinum ring. Tony's head snapped up, and Steve was smiling at him. “There,” he said. He held up his hand. “I've got mine. And you've got yours.” He headed up the street. “Get the armor and let's go. Your late for the debrief.”

Tony stared after him, stunned into silence. A spike of pain from his hand shook him out of his stupor. He looked down and found he was clutching the dog tags in the hollow of his palm, tight enough that the metal was digging into his skin.

The raised typeface on the dog tags stared up at him, and he struggled to breathe. His hands were shaking as he tucked the chain under the neck of his shirt.

He tried to ignore the feeling that he'd crossed a line at some point, and he didn't even know when it had happened. But he was pretty sure there was no way back.

And he didn't know if he wanted to.
Steve was getting used to getting little to no sleep.

He didn't really need much. A few hours here and there, and he could survive. Four or five a night, and he was fully rested. He almost never got more than six a night, unless he was recovering from an injury. He didn't need much.

He needed more than 'none,' though.

He turned a corner, concentrating on moving at a smooth even pace. His life had been turned upside down enough; he wasn't about to give up his morning jog. His heart wasn't in it this morning, but it gave him something to focus on, other than wondering where Tony was. What he was doing.

What he was wearing.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Pull it together, Rogers,” he muttered under his breath, the words coming like a chant, right in line with the pounding of his feet. Maybe he just needed to come up with a rhyme scheme to focus on. It'd worked for him in the army. Or maybe it had just been that he was so busy trying not to die of an asthma attack to think about anything else.

Steve cut across the final intersection, heading back towards home. It was still early enough that the city was just starting to stir, pale light spilling over the sidewalks, lights coming on behind windows high above him. Pigeons whirled over the streets, taxis and delivery trucks trundled on their way.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed the slim form that was hovering, some distance from the lobby doors. Steve slowed down, caught somewhere between wariness and curiosity.

The slight build and the clothing, a pair of skin-tight jeans, battered doc martins, and an oversized hoodie, marked the figure as a teenager, as did the backpack slung tight over one shoulder. Their head was tipped forward, their hands shoved into the pockets of the sweatshirt, hidden in the folds of the fabric.

But as Steve drew closer, the head came up, and a boy stared at him, dark eyes wide over the broad width of his freckled nose. His hair had been dyed a sharp, almost electric blue, and cropped close to his head. As Steve approached, he straightened up. “You're Steve Rogers?” he asked. His backpack slipped down his shoulder, and one hand came up, grabbing for the strap. His nails were covered in chipped turquoise polish just a shade lighter than his hair.

Steve nodded. “Yes, do you-”

"Is it true?” The boy hunched a little deeper into his sweatshirt, his shoulders coming forward, bony and hard beneath the soft fabric. His dark eyes met Steve's without flinching, but his breathing was quick, hard. "Are you like me?” His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Are you gay?” His eyes fluttered, the blinking too fast, too hard. "Or, I mean, bi?”

Steve stared at him, blindsided by the question. His heart was pounding in his chest, his pulse spiking in an instant. But there was no threat in the boy's eyes, no rage, no accusation. Just... Something like desperation.
Steve took a breath. "No," he said, and he tried to smile. He needed to smile. "Tony is bi. I'm gay."

The boy never looked away, but his mouth worked, like he was trying to force words out. "Thought you had a girlfriend." One shoulder rose, and fell, his backpack shifting with the motion. "Or, I mean, you did?"

Steve leaned against the wall, bracing his shoulders against the cold stone. He glanced up at the sky, and it was clear here, clearer than he remembered the last time he'd set foot in the city, before the war, before the ice. But it was still the same sky, still hiding in the cracks between the buildings.

The thought of Peggy didn't hurt the way it once had. It ached, low and deep, in the parts of him that felt like they would never heal, but it wasn't something he flinched from, not anymore. It was almost comforting, the reminder of what he had been, what he still was. And how much of that had been tied to Peggy.

"You can love someone, with your whole heart, and not be sexually attracted to them." He smiled, just a little, a wry twitch of his lips. "Sometimes, you love someone so much you think you can be something..." He took a deep breath. "Something that you're not, but something that you want to be." He looked at the boy. "Something you know you're supposed to be."

The boy's shoulders twitched forward. "How'd that go?" he asked, with the sarcastic scoff of a person who knew just how that had gone. Probably through experience.

Steve smiled at him. "Really badly," he said, and that won him a smile. "Mostly because I didn't really want to be anything but me, I didn't want to be something, or someone, else. I just..." He nodded. "I wanted her. I wanted what she represented. And I guess, I wanted to be what she wanted, what she needed. And that was never going to happen."

"Pretty stupid to try," the kid said, his head bent forward. His hands were jammed in is pockets, the pressure of his fists forcing the hem of the sweatshirt down around his thighs.

Steve smiled. "Well, I've been accused of many things, but smart and easy-going don't often make the list." He looked at the boy, with his white lips and his red rimmed eyes. "So. Am I like you?"

The kid stole a glance at him, his head coming up and then ducking right back down again. "I want you to be," he said, the words almost inaudible. "You're my grandpa's favorite, you know? He talked about you, even before-"

He stopped, as if realizing too late what he was saying, but Steve just smiled again. "Before I came back from the dead?" he filled in.

The boy nodded. "What?" He stopped, then forged ahead, the words tripping forward, tangled together. "What was that like?"

Steve thought about it. "Cold," he said, and that startled a laugh out of the kid. Steve smiled down at him. "And lonely. I wouldn't recommend it." He looked up at the pale blue sliver of sky, far above them, savoring the warmth of the sun on his skin. He smiled. "This is much better."

The boy nodded, his chin brushing his chest. "I'll keep that in mind."

Before Steve could come up with anything else to say, the door to the lobby opened. Steve glanced over as one of the security guards, a stout, broad shouldered woman with a no-nonsense scowl started towards them. He straightened up, hoping to head her off. "Morning," he said, with a smile. "I've got this, thank you."
Her face softened, just a bit, her wide mouth relaxing into a smile. "Of course, Captain Rogers." But she tucked her thumbs into her belt. To the boy, she said, "Shouldn't you be getting ready for school?"

His shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "Lotta things I should be doing," he said, an edge to the words.

She nodded. "You got a place to stay?"

Steve stared at her, but the boy just shrugged again, his chin coming up. "It's New York. I mean, the possibilities are endless."

The guard nodded. "They are." She reached into her shirt pocket, pulling out a slim white envelope with the StarkIndustries logo stamped on it. She held it out to the boy. "But you can always use one more."

He looked at it, his expression suspicious. But he reached out to take it anyway. "Sure. Options are good."

"If you end up needing a place to crash, a place that's safe and welcoming, there's a card in there." She tipped her head at the envelope. "Tell them Mr. Stark sent you and they'll find a place for you."

His fingers stilled, one painted nail digging into the paper. "But he didn't."

She tipped her head to the side. "That card says he did." She nodded. "If you need a bite, there's a couple of gift cards in there, too, one for a burger place and one for the grocery store a few blocks up." She turned, as if she was going to head back in, then paused, one heel scuffing against the sidewalk. "Get something to eat."

The kid tapped the envelope against his palm. "Yeah. Right." He nodded, once, and then a second time, stronger this time, and shoved it into. "Tell... Tell Mr. Stark thanks."

"You can thank him by using that," she said. She smiled. "Be safe, you hear?"

He smiled back, a crooked little twitch of his lips. "Yes, ma'am."

She let out a chuckle. "Aren't you polite?" She pointed at the coffee shop door. "You must be freezing. Go on in and tell the girls that Cynthia said she'd pay for your breakfast. They're used to that."

He glanced in that direction. "Is the coffee any good?" he asked, and she gave him a look.

"Better than nothing. Go."

He went, but his shoulders were a little straighter beneath the thin fabric of his hoodie, his movements brisk. Cynthia looked at Steve. "You all right?" she asked.

He blinked at her. "Fine. Why?"

Her eyebrows arched. "Thought that might've been your first." The wind kicked up and she nodded towards the door to the lobby. "C'mon, it's cold out here."

Steve fell into step beside her. "What do you mean, 'my first'?"

Cynthia’s eyes flicked in his direction, then went back to staring straight ahead. "The first LGBTQ
"Kid to come looking for you." She reached for the door, and Steve got there first, pulling it open for her. She gave him an exasperated smile. "It happens a lot around here."

Steve's head snapped in the direction of the coffee shop. "I've never seen-"

"They weren't looking for you, Captain Rogers," Cynthia said. She stepped through the door. "Now, they will be."

For a second, he was frozen in place, everything still, his heart feeling like it had stopped beating in his chest. Then he scrambled to catch up to her. "Who were they-" She looked at him, something like pity in her gaze, and it clicked. "Tony."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Why?" Steve walked across the lobby with her, his hands braced on his hips. "What do they want?"

She considered that. "Validation, mostly." She nodded. "Hope. It's hard, when you're constantly bombarded by the message that you don't belong, that there's something wrong with you, that you'll never be happy." She stopped, turning to face him. "That you'll never be safe."

His chest hurt. "I can't keep anyone safe," he said, and there was a wry note to his voice, an ache that he didn't want to examine too closely. "Not even myself."

"No, but you can live, and be a counterpoint to everyone who argues that to live their lives as they are will only end in misery and suffering," Cynthia pointed out. "People don't want promises. Kids certainly don't, because even if they get them, they know they can't always be trusted. What they want is a chance. A possibility."

She looked up, at the high ceiling of the lobby, with its soaring metal and glasswork. "And that's what Mr. Stark offers. The possibility of living a long, respected, productive life. A life where he can help people, where he can be..."

She stopped, her voice trailing off, and Steve glanced at her. "Heroic?"

"Yes, but not in the way you're thinking." She started walking again, back towards the guard station. "That envelope I gave him? There's a stash of them at the desk. They've got the information of one of the shelters here in the city for runaways, and, well-" Her mouth went tight. "Throwaways. Kids who have no where else to go."

"There are four shelters in the city who will take in LGBTQ kids, and two that focus their efforts on those kids." The lobby was quiet, and her voice was hushed, almost lost beneath the sound of their footsteps. "All of them draw a majority of their funding from the Maria Stark Foundation. They're always full. But there's an agreement." She shook her head. "If the kid comes with a card, they won't be turned away for lack of space. He made sure of it."

Steve's stomach was churning. "It happens that often?"

"Often enough." She waved a hand above them, at the building in general. "We're kind of a big target, for a lot of people. Jarvis will let him know if we've got a particularly stubborn one, or if he's not around, he'll notify us. We make sure they at least leave with a chance." She shook her head. "It's not a perfect system, but if we can get them to the shelter, they can give these kids a safe place to get things sorted out. More than food or shelter, some of them need counseling, they need acceptance."

His hands were in fists at his sides, his muscles so tense that they were shaking. He took a breath, forcing his fingers to relax with a force of will. "Did I do okay?" She looked at him, her eyes going
wide, and Steve met her gaze without flinching. “With him, I mean.”

She turned to face him. “Captain Rogers, do you really care what I think?”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “I wouldn't have asked if I didn't.”

She nodded. “Why?”

Steve thought about that. “Was that the first kid you bought breakfast for?”

“No,” she said, with a faint smile. “But I'm not who they're looking for.”

“But you step up and be the one that they need,” Steve said.

Cynthia reached out, her hand clasping his arm just above the elbow. “You did fine,” she said, with a smile. “Just... Tell them the truth and listen. The listening is important. Most of them, no one listens, or they-”

She stopped, took a breath. “My sister's child is currently living with me,” she said, her head tipping in Steve's direction. Her brown eyes were sharp, but her face was smooth, calm. "Marish is gender fluid. Their parents have..." She paused, her eyes narrowing. "Have difficulty dealing with that, sometimes. Mostly because they're very afraid that Marish's life will be more difficult, if they are so open as to who they are.

“And Marish deals enough with the 'why do you have to be difficult, why can't you just be normal?' shit from the general public. They shouldn't have to deal with it at home. Home should be the one place where there is a full understanding, and a full respect, of a person's identity." She stopped at the guard desk, her hand placed lightly on the polished surface. "Strangers have the excuse of ignorance. Family doesn't. So in the end, it doesn't really matter why your family isn't giving you the support and love you need."

She looked at Steve. "All the child knows is, they need something, and they're not getting it. Maybe when Marish is older, they'll be able to understand why their parents struggled with this. Maybe not. But right now? That's not their problem. Their problem is the rest of the world."

"So they're staying with you," Steve said.

Cynthia nodded. "They're staying with me. Mom and dad are still very much in their life, but I can cope with this, a little better than they can, so until they get their heads out of their asses..." She gave Steve a puckish smile. "I get to deal with a teenager."

Steve smiled back. "How's that going?" he asked.

"Better than I expected," she admitted. She glanced over at the monitors behind the desk, her brows coming down. "But it would've been harder if Mr. Stark hadn't interceded with management and approved a couple of weeks of leave so I could help get them settled in here in the city." She looked back at Steve. "Don't know how he found out. But it was very kind of him to do it."

Steve nodded. “Will you tell me? If someone comes looking for me?” he asked.

Cynthia nodded. “Of course, Captain Rogers.” She settled down at her station. “It's part of my job to announce visitors.”

Steve held out a hand to her. “Call me Steve.”
She took it. “Cynthia.”

“Thanks for your help,” he said. “And bring Marish by someday. I'd like to meet them.”

Cynthia smiled. “I bet they'd like that,” she said. “Now, if you don't mind, I should get back to work before I get fired.”

“If you get in trouble, let me know,” Steve said, smiling. “I've got some pull with the boss.”

“I'll keep that in mind.” She looked down at the monitors. “Have a good day, Steve.”

“You, too.”

Halfway to the elevators, he paused, his head swiveling in the direction of the coffee shop. He couldn't see the boy through the lobby windows, and wondered if he was still there. Maybe he'd taken a breakfast sandwich and left. Maybe he was sitting at one of the corner tables, taking advantage of the warmth until the morning chill had burned off. Steve wondered if he should've asked the boy what his name was.

He wondered if Tony would give him some advice, because he suspected Cynthia was right. Going public, in the way they had, had some consequences he'd never anticipated. Back when he was that child's age, he'd gotten pretty good at figuring out who was safe, who was likely to leave him alone. And who was like him.

But he'd never asked. He'd never said the words aloud, not even in the relative safety of art school, where everyone suspected and few people cared. You suspected. You understood. But you never, ever said anything out loud. Other people did, he supposed, other people found lovers somehow, and it seemed hard to do that without actually giving a name to what you were. But Steve, small and weak and fragile, knew better.

Fear could keep you alive, but it could also keep you trapped. He supposed that really hadn't changed. Maybe it never would.

He reached the elevator and stepped inside. “Jarvis? Is Tony up yet?”

There was a delicate pause. “Sir is in the kitchen of the penthouse,” Jarvis said at last. “Perhaps you would be willing to check on him?”

The elevator doors opened, and Steve paused just enough to kick his shoes off. “Did he sleep at all?” he asked, heading up the hallway.

“Sadly, yes,” Jarvis said, as Steve reached the doorway to the kitchen.

Steve leaned against the doorframe, his chest aching. Tony was slumped over the kitchen table, his head pillow on his arms, his dark hair falling over his forehead. His lips were parted, just a fraction of an inch, his breathing slow and relaxed. There was a clean, empty coffee cup resting just next to his hand, his lax fingers just brushing against the porcelain.

“What happened, Jarvis?” Steve asked, pushing himself upright.

“He was up the majority of the night,” Jarvis said, his voice pitched low. “Examining the remains of the bomb for SHIELD Scientific.”

“Right,” Steve said, shaking his head. “Of course he was.”
“I managed to lure him out of the workshop by sabotaging the coffee pot, with the hopes that he would give in and go to bed,” Jarvis said. He sounded tired. “However, he made it only as far as the kitchen.”

Steve glanced at the coffee pot on the kitchen counter. It was steaming, the pot full and ready to be poured. “And he fell asleep waiting for the coffee to brew, huh?” he asked, affection blooming in his chest, warmth flooding over him.

“I might've delayed the brewing cycle by a few minutes,” Jarvis said. He paused. “The results were not what I had hoped.”


Tony's lips curled up. “Mmm.” He shifted, his head burrowing a little deeper into his arms. “Right. Bed.”

Steve waited, but Tony's breath went slow and even again. He huffed out a breath. “Right. Guess we're doing this the hard way.” Before he could think better of this, before he could consider just how stupid this was, Steve leaned over, scooping Tony out of his seat in one smooth motion.

He straightened up, one arm around Tony's back and the other tucked under his knees. Tony's weight settled against his chest, his head falling against Steve's shoulder. He exhaled, his lips curling up in a smile as he rubbed his cheek against the soft cotton of Steve's shirt. For a second, Steve just stood there, Tony cradled in his arms, his chest aching.

He seemed somehow small. Or smaller than Steve thought of him as being. Without the armor, or maybe more importantly, without the force of his brilliant, oversized personality, he seemed almost slight. Fragile. He fit in Steve's arms, and he shouldn't. He was all heat, and energy, and fierce, sharp movement.

This Tony, still and quiet, was one he'd seldom met, but he was familiar, for all of that.

Steve carried him through the penthouse, his bare feet silent on the polished floors. As he slipped into Tony's bedroom, Jarvis raised the lights without being asked, just enough so Steve could see where he was going. He moved through the shadowed space, savoring Tony's weight in his arms while he had it.

The bed had been half made, and Steve lowered Tony down, getting him into a sitting position on the edge of the mattress so he could steady him with one hand while he pulled the linens out of the way. “Okay, here we are,” he said, and Tony's eyelashes fluttered. For an instant, he stared up at Steve with eyes that refused to focus. Steve smiled at him, affection sweeping over him in a wave. “Bedtime, Tony.”

Tony's head bobbed in something like a nod, and his fingers fumbled at the hem of his shirt. “Okay,” he said, the word pulled like taffy from his lips, slow and sweet. Before Steve could stop him, he stripped the t-shirt over his head, the fabric sliding over his skin. The shirt fluttered to the floor, and Tony leaned back, his back arching as he ran a hand through his hair.

Steve's dog tags shifted across his skin, the wedding ring gleaming in the cool light of the arc reactor, and Steve was suddenly so achingly aroused that he was dizzy with it.

Tony let out a soft, sleepy sort of sound, his eyes half closed. “Sorry. Kind of...” He blinked, his
hand falling to the dip of his flat stomach. “Kind of out of it.” His head lolled to the side, and he smiled up at Steve. “I'll make it up to you in the morning.”

Steve tried to swallow, but his mouth was so dry it hurt. He took a breath, and another, trying to find words that didn't involve begging. Or crying. His skin felt like it was on fire, a prickly, desperate heat. He crossed his arms over his chest, anything to keep his hands to himself. “It is morning.” He was pleased. That sounded almost normal. He sucked in another breath. “So let's just-”

Tony unbuttoned his jeans, his lips curling up in a slow, achingly hot smile. “Then I'll make it up to you now,” he said, and Steve's brain shut down.

“Okay, bedtime,” he said, ripping his eyes away from Tony. “Because you don't know what you're saying and I do, and that's a bad combination, so-” He leaned over, grabbing for one of the pillows, his fingers shaking. “Let's just-”

Tony arched up, his lips brushing against the exposed line of Steve's throat, and Steve made a sound that didn't even seem human. Tony laughed, low and dangerous, as Steve jerked backwards, almost tripping over his own feet. Tony was grinning at him, his eyes bright, and Steve realized he'd clapped a hand to his neck, his fingers clinging to the skin that Tony's lips had touched.

He pointed a finger at Tony. “No,” he said, his voice as firm as he could make it.

Tony grinned, his head lolling to the side. “Morning,” he said. “In the morning.” He fumbled at the waistband of his pants, and before Steve could stop him, he shoved his jeans down. As he was sitting on them, it wasn't particularly effective.

“Tony, you can-” Steve started, just as Tony flopped onto his back, his hips arching up off the bed so he could shove his pants down over his ass and halfway down his thighs. That was as far as he got before he gave up, lying half naked on top of the blankets, one arm threw above his head. He was laughing, low and warm, his eyes closed and his mouth opened.

Steve stared down at him, knowing this was going to play a very large part in his very dirtiest dreams for a very long time to come. At least he was wearing underwear. He huffed out a sigh. Getting them back on was going to be impossible without Tony's help, so he just grabbed the jeans by the cuffs, pulling them the rest of the way off in one smooth motion.


Steve watched him roll over, the muscles of his back and shoulders flexing as he found a comfortable position. It was hypnotizing, watching him curl up against the pillows. He realized he was still holding Tony's pants, the fabric twisted between his fingers. He set them on the end of the bed, and reached for the edge of the sheet.

Steve pulled the blankets up over Tony's back, smoothing them into place with a gentle hand. “Good night, Tony,” he whispered.

Tony's hand slipped out from under the blankets, catching the hem of Steve's shirt. “Stay.”

Steve stopped, still so aroused it hurt. But there was something sad about that one word, something melancholy about the way Tony mumbled it into his pillow, his head tipped away from Steve, as if avoiding his eyes. He took a breath and let it out.

“I'll stay until you fall asleep,” he said, and he found he was smiling. “Just-” He shook his head. “Go to sleep, Tony.”
Tony tugged on his shirt. “You sleep, too.”

“There’s no room,” Steve said, and that was the stupidest thing he could’ve said, because Tony promptly twisted around, wriggling his way to the other side of the bed. The blankets went with him, and he clung to Steve’s shirt, his hand stretched out to hold tight to the hem.

“Stay,” he whispered, and Steve was an idiot, Steve was a lovesick fool, because he lowered himself down, carefully, cautiously clinging to the very edge of the bed. Keeping as much distance between them as he could manage. Tony smiled at him, his eyes fluttering shut. “Stay.”

“Go to sleep,” Steve whispered back. He waited, quiet and still, as Tony slipped back into the embrace of sleep. His body relaxed by stages, the tension going out of his shoulders, out of his arms and legs. The tension went out of his face last, his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks and his lips going lax. The sun was fully up now, the golden light of dawn sliding over his skin, gilding him, making him look like the renaissance paintings that had so enthralled Steve as a child.

Steve reached for Tony’s hand, trying to pry his shirt free of Tony’s grip. But even asleep, he held on, his fingers locked tight. After a moment, he gave up, raising Tony’s hand to his mouth. He brushed a delicate kiss across Tony’s knuckles, his lips lingering against the warmth of his skin.

He closed his eyes. It wouldn’t hurt to rest. Just for a few minutes.

*

Tony’s eyes snapped open.

For a long moment, he stared up at the ceiling, fragments of a very hot, very confusing dream clinging to the edges of his consciousness, to his very frustrated brain. He took a breath, trying to reintroduce some semblance of sanity. “Okay,” he said, to no one in particular. “That was fucked up.” He pressed a hand to his face. “Where the HELL did that-”

Someone snored.

It wasn’t much, just the smallest little rumble of sound. It wasn’t offensive. It was almost cute. But it sure as hell didn’t come from him.

Tony’s head rolled in that direction, not really wanting to, but not able to stop himself. He’d known what he was going to see, even before he did. Somehow, he’d known. But still, the sight of Steve Rogers, sprawled out on the bed next to him, sound asleep, was a shock. Tony had never moved so fast in his entire life. Almost before the reality of the situation could sink in, he was scrambling backwards, lunging out of bed. In what seemed like no more than a heartbeat, he was halfway across the room, his back pressed hard against the wall. He stood there, his breath coming in ragged pants, his heart in his throat.

Steve never stirred, he just let out another small, light snore, his fingers curled against his cheek.

Tony’s fingers fumbled down at his hips, grateful to find that he was still wearing his shorts. “Not naked,” he breathed. “Okay. Minor victory. Right.”

Steve wasn’t naked, either, but he was almost painfully attractive, all long limbs and broad shoulders and narrow hips. His shirt was raked up around his chest, exposing the musculature of his stomach.

Tony made a swift retreat into the bathroom, closing it behind him with hands that shook. “Oh, fuck,” he said, leaning against the door.
“Sir?” Jarvis said.

“One second, Jay,” Tony said, crossing to the sink. He turned it on and stuck his head under the sink faucet, the cold water enough of a shock to make him swear. But it also cleared his aching head, even as it numbed his face. He pulled back, gasping for breath as the water rolled over his face. “Right. Okay. Better.” He swallowed. “Morning, Jarvis.”

“You do have a shower, sir,” Jarvis said. “It’s there, just to your right, if you’d care to turn slightly to-”

Tony straightened up, letting the water roll down his neck and over his chest. He braced his hands on the sides of the sink, holding on like it was the last lifeline he possessed. “And it’s easier to drown myself in the sink,” he gritted out. He blinked at his reflection in the mirror, all huge, dark eyes and chalk white skin. “Jay, how badly did I embarrass myself?”

“I’m not certain how to answer this question, sir,” Jarvis said. He sounded appropriately apologetic. Tony was well aware that it was an act.

He gritted his teeth. “Tell me what happened.”

“You fell asleep in the kitchen,” Jarvis stated. “Captain Rogers, returning from his run, found you there and put you to bed.”

Tony's fingers drummed against the sides of the sink. “And how did this end up with him in bed with me?” he asked.

“You seemed to think it was a good idea at the time,” Jarvis said. “I think it’s a good idea all the time, but I'm an idiot,” Tony pointed out. “Yes, sir,” Jarvis agreed.

Tony turned a gimlet glare at the ceiling. “You're helpful.” “I always endeavor to be as such, sir, thank you.”

“You'd think after this many years, you'd know what sarcasm sounds like.” Tony snatched a towel from the rack. “Call Rhodey, please.”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis said.

Shaking his head, Tony scrubbed his face with the towel, trying to get some blood back into his head. It wasn't particularly effective. He considered the shower again, wondering if he could risk it. The way this day was going, he'd be naked and in a compromising position when Steve decided to walk in.

“Tony?” Rhodey's voice cut into his thoughts, and that was enough to shake some of the tension out of his shoulders. “What time is it? Are you all right? Is there-”

“Steve's in my bed,” he said, and Rhodey stopped.

“All right,” he said after a pause. “Are you okay?”

“Steve's in my bed,” Tony repeated, the words forced out from between set teeth. “How the fuck do you think I am?”
“You appear to be having a breakdown, which is more Pepper's wheelhouse than mine, but, okay.” Tony heard Rhodey take a seat, and he knew just where he was and what he was doing, because those kitchen chairs of his always creaked. “Tony. Did you have any sort of discussion? Were you drunk, or-”

Tony stared at the ceiling, praying for patience. “We didn't have sex.”

Another pause. “Okay, I'm lost. Can we back up?”

“I was dreaming that Steve was stripping me,” Tony said, and that was an understatement, that was absolutely an understatement. Even now, the memory of it was enough to make his knees weak. Steve's fingers, sliding over his skin, coaxing his clothing away, piece by piece, his mouth hot and wicked, his lips whispering soft, dirty words against Tony's skin. Steve, his body swaying against Tony's, pressing close, rubbing against him with every movement. Tony squeezed his eyes shut, struggling against a fresh wave of arousal.

“Right, you and half of the rest of the world,” Rhodey said, breaking the spell.

Tony stared at the mirror. “While I was trying to testify in front of a congressional committee.”

This time, the pause was a lot longer. “Did you filibuster?” Rhodey asked at last.

“I really didn't have a choice!” Tony said. His head fell forward. “And then I woke up and he was, he was-” He sucked in a breath, trying to clear his head. “And he was right there, he was asleep, he was in my bed, and he's wearing those running shorts of his, and they're fucking indecent, Rhodes, someone's going to call the cops on him one of these days-”

“Okay, that's not going to happen-”

“It might happen! I might do it!” Tony turned the sink on with a sharp jerk of his hand. “God help me, that might be my only chance of survival here, starting a moral crusade against Captain America's goddamn fucking indecent short shorts.” He shoved his head back under the tap, letting the icy water sluice over his head and shoulders. It didn't help.

“Well, at least he was dressed?” Rhodey said, and Tony considered hanging up.

“I'm going to hang up on you,” he said, because really, Rhodey should know that this friendship was hanging by a thread.

“No, you're not, because then you'd have to go back to talking to yourself or Jarvis, and that's pretty much like talking to yourself, no insult intended, Jarvis.”

“None taken,” Jarvis said. “Sir, you do have an appointment this morning.”

Tony stared at the sink. “Please tell me that it's not a congressional summons,” he said, his voice dire.

“No, sir.”

“Thank fucking God,” Tony said. “In that case, cancel it.”

“You're going to have to face congress someday,” Rhodey pointed out. “I mean, it's going to happen. You being you.”

“Me being me,” Tony agreed, “I'll just do it with a boner.”

“That'll make the proceedings awkward for everyone involved,” Rhodey said, but he was laughing,
Tony could hear him laughing.

“They always are, now we can just blame erections,” Tony said. He stripped off his shorts and stepped into the shower. “Which is better than blaming how much we hate each other.”

“Less honest, though.”

“And the less honesty the better when Congress is involved,” Tony pointed out.

“So, you woke up and he was there,” Rhodey said.

“Yes.” Tony turned the water on. “Apparently I fell asleep in the kitchen and he put me to bed.”

“Apparently.”

“That's what Jarvis says.” Tony considered washing, but it seemed like far too much effort. Instead, he just propped himself up against the wall and let the water pound down on him. “He's usually trustworthy.”

“Wait, that's what Jarvis said?” Rhodey echoed. “Tony, didn't you talk to him?”

“No,” Tony said, very emphatically. Rhodey sighed. “Tony, are you hiding in the bathroom?”

“'Hiding' is such an ugly word,” Tony pointed out.

“Tony.”

“Look, he apparently needed the bed, and I'm just being a good host and letting him have it,” Tony said. His head fell back against the smooth tile of the shower with a thud. “I live to be a good host.”

In the silence that followed, Tony reached for the shampoo bottle. “Are you okay?” Rhodey asked at last.

Tony's vision blurred over, and he realized he'd been staring at the wall as if held the secrets of the universe. He blinked hard. “I think I just got shampoo in my eyes,” he said.

“Okay, other than that...” Rhodey said.

“It's a serious concern! It stings!” Tony pointed out.

“I'll find you a bottle of 'No More Tears,'” Rhodey said. “Do not sneak out without talking to Steve.”


“Do not,” Rhodey said. “You'll only regret it.”

“I regret so much already, what makes you think I'll even notice one more?” Tony asked. He scrubbed his head with both hands, letting the suds go everywhere. There was something satisfying about that.

“Tony.”

Tony rolled his eyes, and shoved his head under the shower. “Fine,” he said, the words half lost under the pounding of the water. “But if this doesn't go well, I'm going to blame you.”
“Right, because that's logical,” Rhodey said, his voice wry. “Wear pants.”

“You really think I need to be told to wear pants?” Tony asked.

“I'm thinking that a gentle reminder can't hurt,” Rhodey said. “Look, since I'm now awake, I'm going to go hit the gym. Call me?”

“Never again,” Tony said, rinsing away the last of the soap suds. He turned off the shower. “You're no help at all, I don't know why I bother keeping your number in my contact list.”

“Because unlike Pepper, I pick up the phone at obscene hours,” Rhodey said. “Say hi to Steve for me.”

“No,” Tony said, but he was pretty sure that Rhodey had already hung up. “Does it count as getting the last word if the other person doesn't actually hear it, Jay?”

“That is, one supposes, up to the interpretation of the speaker,” Jarvis said.

“Always the political one, aren't you?” Tony said, grinning. He reached for a towel. “Is Steve awake?”

“He remains in bed,” Jarvis said. “But I suspect he is awake, judging by his respiration.”

Tony winced. “Right. Right.” He gave his head a brisk rub. “And now I'm grateful that we included a door directly into the closet from the master bath.”

“It's almost as if you find yourself in this situation more than you would like,” Jarvis said, and Tony paused.

“Stop slut shaming me, Jarvis,” he said, toweling off his arms and chest. The rattle of the dog tags falling back against the arc reactor had him pausing for a moment, his hands hanging in mid air.

“I should never dream of judging your choices, sir,” Jarvis said.

“That's so clearly a lie I can't even bother to mock you for it,” Tony said. He wrapped the towel around his waist and stomped towards the closet door. “Remind me to keep a suit of armor in here for future disasters, Jay.”

“I do believe that if you were to exit the bathroom in the Iron Man armor, you might well cause him a great deal of panic,” Jarvis said. “Might I suggest the blue Brioni?”

“No. You have horrible taste,” Tony said. “What the hell am I doing today that requires the Brioni?”

“Waking Steve,” Jarvis said, with such perfect timing that Tony wished that he was possible to punch his AI. He could probably go downstairs and punch a server or something, but doing that in a towel was just asking for trouble.

“Right. Let's see if it's ironed.”

He was thankfully fully dressed when he walked out of the bathroom, because Steve was sitting up, staring out at the skyline. Tony smoothed his tie into place. “Morning,” he said, and Steve twisted around to face him.

His eyes were flat and tense, and his face was tight, strained. Tony's stomach twisted, guilt sweeping over him. “Sorry,” he said, and he smiled. He wandered across the room and took a seat next to Steve.
Steve turned his attention back to the window. “For what?”

Tony gave him a look. “Jarvis tells me I might've made a nuisance of myself this morning.”

Steve's lips curled up, his face softening. “You can't always trust Jarvis.”

“I mean, I've always thought so.” Tony braced his hands on the edge of the bed, leaning forward just a bit. “Still.” He smiled at Steve. “Thanks. For putting me to bed.”

Steve nodded. “Don't stay up all night, Tony.”

“Yeah, that's... That's probably going to happen again,” Tony admitted. He pushed himself to his feet. “You have breakfast yet?”

Steve didn't move. “Nope.”

Tony tucked his hands in his pocket. “I've got a meeting, but I've got time for something.” His head tipped towards the door. “Can I buy you breakfast?”

Steve glanced up at him. And he smiled. “By that, you mean you'll make me toast?” he said, standing up.

“Well, be nice, and you can have some sliced fruit and a boiled egg, too,” Tony said.

“Know what?” Steve nodded. “That sounds good.” His head dipped forward, and then came up, his smile shy. “Thanks.”

Tony nodded. “Just warning you now. No C-Span over breakfast.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Let's go.”

* * *

“I think you're overthinking this, Steve.”

“You don't think I have a problem?” Steve asked.

Sam's head tilted in his direction, his teeth flashing in a grin. “I think you have a lot of problems,” he said.

“Gee, thanks,” Steve said, and Sam clapped him on the back.

“You gotta admit, man, this is a fucked up situation, this is a problem that you are going to deal with, but no, I don't think that you giving Tony your tags and finding it hot that he actually chose to wear them is one of those problems.” He shrugged. “Welcome to a long history of military folk who've given someone the least romantic present either.”

“It's not-”

“Hey, baby,” Sam said, his voice falling to a low, sexy pitch. “Take this jewelry. The US Government gave it to me for free, so I'm kind of regifting it, and it was intended to identify my charred body, hopefully after I die. But I think it looks better on you.”

Steve stared at him. Sam wiggled his eyebrows at him. “How are you this odd?” he asked.
Sam shrugged. "Pot calling the kettle black here, buddy. You've got some quirks of your own."

"One of which is apparently the desire to put my name on the person I'm in love with," Steve said, his voice dark.

Sam sighed, hitching his gym bag higher on his shoulder. "Man, it's not like you got him drunk and tattooed your name on his ass." He stopped, his hand catching Steve's elbow and dragging him to a halt as well. "You gave him something. He made the choice to wear it. You did not pressure him, harass him or threaten him to make him wear it. You aren't checking on him, to make sure he's wearing it. You're not turning it into a way to control him, or force him to do anything he isn't inclined to do."

He smiled. "You start trying to pick out his clothes, and I'll make sure to pull you aside, okay?"

Steve thought about that. "I would not know where to start."

"Probably with a trash can, but you've got no taste," Sam said. "Now, come on, before-"

"Steven Grant Rogers!"

"Too late," Steve said, as Jan, Carol and Jess came up the hallway behind them.

"Shouldn't you be in the gym, waiting for dance lessons?" Jan asked, her hands on her hips. She was dressed to the nines, her perfectly tailored sweatsuit matching the designer bag in her hand.

"I'm going," Steve said, trying not to laugh. He smiled at Jess and Carol, who were both in workout gear, with matching gym bags. "Did you get dragged into this?"

Carol shook her head. "Oh, hell no. I'm going to spar with Jessica."

"I'm going to teach you how to samba," Jess said, doing a little sideways shimmy.

"You know how to samba?" Carol asked her, her eyebrows arching.

"No, that's what the lessons are for."

Jan's eyes closed. "Wonderful. Let's put that in the 'we're not doing that ever' column," she said.

Jess pouted at her. "Why are you so mean?"

"I'm fifty pounds of rage in a five pound bag," Jan said without missing a beat. "Sam. Darling." She gave him a broad, toothy grin. "Why are you here?"

"Because Steve's my friend and you're terrifying," Sam told her.

Jan considered that, her lips pursed. "Fair," she said at last. She reached into her bag. "Before I forget, I have something for you." After a moment, she came up with a small case. "Here. For you."

Steve took it from her, opening it cautiously. Inside, there were a pair of glasses. The frames were black on top, the rims bleeding into pale, almost transparent plastic at the bottom. He turned them over in his hands, confused. "Glasses?" he asked.


"But I don't need-"
"Doesn't matter," she said. Her head bounced to the side, her hair swinging in a perfect wave against her cheek. "The lenses aren't prescription, they just have a little anti-glare tinting on them."

He stared at her, wondering if this conversation was supposed to make sense. "But I don't NEED-"

"It's for Tony," she said, and he stopped.

"Wait," Jess asked, holding up a hand. "This is a kink, isn't it?" She stared at Steve, her eyes narrowed. "Are you... Trying to seduce your husband?"

"No," Steve said, at the same time that Jan said, "Yes."

"Right!" Jess was already shaking her head, both hands up now. "And I'm out. Not part of this conversation. Not at all part of this conversation."

"Neither am I, but I'm nosy as hell," Carol said, not budging. She waved a hand at the hallway. "Go. We'll catch up."

"I'm not-" Steve tried, and Jess clapped her hands over her ears.

"Yes. You are. Good. For you. I've heard good things. That said? I am not part of this conversation," she said. "You two better finish this up fast, Natasha lays traps when she's bored."

"Yes, yes, I'll hide behind Carol," Jan said with a grin.

"Human shield, that's me," Carol said, her hands on her hips. "And Nat's bringing Clint, he's used to being collateral damage."

Jess stared at one, and then the other. "You're both horrible," she said at last.

"Horrible, yes, wrong, no," Jan said.

"Come on," Sam said, swinging his gym bag to bump hers. "We can go hide in the gym and actually spar."

"No sparring, only dancing," Jan said. Sam and Jess ignored her, but she was used to that. To Steve, she said, "Put on the glasses. If he asks about them, tell him the truth. That you had a med check today, and you were told to wear them tonight. Which you were." She spread her hands. "Simple! No lies!"

Steve stared at them. "But why-"

"Because everyone has at least one solid gold, bulletproof kink," Jan said. "Sometimes it's tight leather. Or lacy underthings. Or the sexy librarian look." She paused. "I do a mean sexy librarian."

"I did not need to know this," Carol told her.

"Should've gone to the gym," Jan said with a smirk. "But yes. Everyone's got something." She took the glasses out of Steve's hand and flipped them open. "Tony spent his formative years at MIT. He's got a thing for boys in glasses." She slipped the glasses onto Steve's face. "Ta-da!"

Steve blinked at her. "Boys in glasses?"

"I suspect he may have hooked up with a few in his teenage years. But male or female, he only gets involved with smart people," Jan clarified. She wobbled a hand in his direction. "Nerdy smart people. I'm going to put you in some nerd chic, he won't even know what hit him."
"That's a damn lie," Carol said. "Have you seen the people he dates?"

"Have you talked to them?" Jan shot back, her lips pursed. "'Smart' and 'hot' are not mutually exclusive." She looked at Steve. "Sure, some models are about as deep as a puddle in the middle of a heatwave. But not all of them. Not even most of them." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Stop judging people based on how they make their living, Steve."

“I... Didn't?” he said, and Jan narrowed her eyes at him, her little mouth set in a scowl. Steve blinked, suddenly not at all sure. Maybe he had been doing that. “Sorry?”

Her face melted into a sweet smile. “You're forgiven.” She patted him lightly on the chest. “Just don't do it again.”

“Can you stop gaslighting him for a second here?” Carol said, her arms crossed over her chest. “And also, I think there's a difference between people we hook up with and people we get into relationships with. Not just Tony.” One of her shoulders rose and fell in a half shrug. “Are we going for a one shot or-”

“Relationship,” Steve said, because there was no point in pretending otherwise, not now. He fiddled with the glasses. “I don't think these suit me, Jan.”

“They do,” Jan said, at the same time as Carol said, “Yes, they do.”

Steve blinked at them. “You're adorable,” Jan said. She reached up, pushing the glasses higher on his face with one finger. “It's a good shape with your face.” She leaned back. “I'm going to find you some better shirts, maybe a suit jacket for a dinner somewhere-”

“Pepper doesn't wear glasses,” Carol said.

“And neither does Rhody, but that's two in like, twenty. I know more of his dating history than you do,” Jan pointed out. “Tony already likes Steve, everyone likes Steve, now we just have to set Steve up as-”

"Wait," Steve said, cutting her off. "He dated Rhody?" He stared at her, his mind grinding to a sharp, painful halt. "When?"

She winced. "Well, he wasn't. Didn't. But he kind of-" She stopped, took a deep breath. "He kind of thought they were dating?"

"How does someone think they were dating when they were not dating?" Carol asked.

"Because he was fifteen or sixteen, I don't remember exactly. But he was at MIT and he was not really ready to be at MIT, intellectually he was fine, of course, but the rest of it? Socially? No. But he was too young and remarkably unsocialized and following Rhody around like a puppy and he was not-"

Jan huffed out a breath, crossing her arms over her chest. "He wasn't really good at reading people. He also didn't have a lot of stable, healthy relationships to base his expectations on? So when Rhody befriended him at school, but didn't have a family or a social reason to do so, he just liked Tony and, well, Tony needed all the help he could get? But he was kind to Tony, and they were inseparable, and-" She stopped, her teeth digging into her lower lip. "Tony read more into it than he should've, that's all."

"Ouch," Carol said.
"Yes, ouch. Rhodey was handsome and kind and warm and open, and Tony had been in a truly horrible boarding school situation since he was seven, surrounded by boys from families as rich, and as messed up as his was, so..." She shrugged, and there was something sad in her eyes. Something resigned. "It's easy to confuse kindness, and friendship, for something more, when your frame of reference is that skewed."

Steve stared at her. "Right," he said. Right. Of course Tony had been in love with Rhodey. They'd always been close, as long as Steve had known Tony, Rhodey and Pepper were the two people he trusted, the two who were always there, the two that knew everything, the two that protected Tony with a fierceness he'd always admired.

He'd loved Pepper, maybe he still did. So why was it surprising that he'd loved Rhodey, too? His fingers flexed at his sides, forming fists for a second before he forced them to relax. Maybe he still loved Rhodey.

"Ouch," Carol said again, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"You-" Jan stabbed a finger in her direction. "Never heard any of this. Got it?"

Carol held up her hands in a pose of surrender. "Hey, look, when I was fifteen I thought one of my brother's friends was going to be my forever-after, true love Romeo. The fact that he was ten years older than me and a certified creep didn't sink in until about ten years after I finally wised up and broke it off."

"Ooooh, yeah, I know that guy," Jan said. She put her hands on her hips. "Mine was a corporate raider with a soon-to-be ex-wife." She made a face. "Or so he claimed. Unsurprisingly, that divorce never went through."

"Mine was a motorcycle mechanic who sold drugs on the side, but yeah." Carol gave her a wry smile. "Probably the same guy."

"I didn't date," Steve pointed out. "But I very much want to go back in time and punch some bastards right now, so..."

Jan nodded. "Right, right. So, Tony does not suffer boredom lightly, and pretty much everything bores him. But for some reason, he's still hanging around you after all these years, so I think we're safe." She smiled. "He likes 'em smart, and you?" She poked Steve lightly in the middle of his chest. "You're smart."

"Or at least not boring," Steve said.

"And that's just as good. Just put on the glasses tonight," Jan said with a smile. "And see what happens."

He glanced down at the glasses in his hand. He should give them back. It was stupid. Maybe even manipulative. Instead, he tucked them back in their case. "Thanks."

Jan wrapped her arms around one of his elbows, leaning into his shoulder. "I'm rooting for you. Now." Her head tilted up, her eyelashes fluttering. "Let me see your ring."

"No," Steve said, ignoring the way she pouted at him. "So, is Clint going to-?"

"No, Clint is, as it turns out, vastly unreliable," Jan said.

"This is a shock to absolutely no one," Carol said. Jan stuck her tongue out at her, and Carol grinned.
“Oh, I guess it was a shock to you. That’s... That’s unfortunate.” She patted Jan on the back. “Poor naive little-”

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie,” Jan said, and Carol just blew her a kiss. Jan tossed her head, her hair swinging in a perfect arc around her cheeks. “Now. Steve.”

“Jan,” he said, amused despite himself.

“I have a much better plan for today.” She set her hands on his back and pushed. “Let’s go!”

“I’m going, I’m going!” Steve said, laughing. But she never let up, nudging him mercilessly in the direction of the gym. Only when they reached the door did she dart around him, throwing the door open with a theatrical gesture.

“Ta-da!” she crowed.

Inside, Jess and Sam were both leaning against the balance beam, both of them in identical poses with their arms crossed over their chests. Clint was perched on the beam next to them, one foot braced on top and the other dangling down to the floor. Natasha was standing behind him, balanced delicately on one foot. She raised the other one in a sweeping arc, and Clint ducked under it without even looking back at her.

In the center of the mats, Thor was waiting, Jane hovering just next to him. “Friends!” he boomed, his face splitting in a grin. “We have come for your lessons!”


“I have no idea,” Jane said.

“So,” Sam said, his lips curling up. “Thor. You got Thor to come and dance with Steve.”

“Yes,” Jan said.

“Did you think to ask him if he knew how to dance?” he asked, all sweetness and light.

Jan blinked at him. “I did.” She looked at Thor. “I did!”

He nodded. “Aye. You did.”

“Did you ask him if he could dance, I don't know, Midgardian dances?” Jess asked.

Jan's mouth opened. Closed. She sighed. “You can't-”

Thor shook his head. “Dance, I can, and have. And would be pleased to show you how we dance in Asgard. But the dances of which they speak-” He waved a hand at the others. “Of these, I am ignorant.”

Jan nodded. “Right.”

“But I have much interest in learning!” Thor threw his arm around Jane's shoulders. “As does Jane!”

Jane was already shaking her head. “No. No, actually, I-”

“Fine,” Jan said, her hands on her hips. “Clint, you get to-”

That was as far as she got before Nat executed a neat turn, switching feet as she did. Her heel clipped
the back of Clint's head and he swayed in place for a second. And then he pitched over, falling to the mats with a thump.

“I gotta say,” Sam said, as Jess leaned over to check on him. “I knew you were going to be thwarted, you busy bee, but I did not see that one coming.”

Jan sighed. “Neither did I.”

“I'm okay,” Clint said, from his face down position in the mats. “Let's do this.”

* 

“So, this is new.”

Ellen didn't look up from her work. “Don't touch anything.”

“You sure? Because this looks like it could use something.” Jesse leaned back, one finger tapping her chin. “Like pushpins and red string to thread between pictures.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Yes. Haha. Very clever.”

“Do you have a tin foil hat yet?” Jesse asked. “Because your birthday's coming up and you're always so hard to buy for.”

Ellen let her head fall into her hands. “Jesse-”

“I don't even know where you got most of these.” Ellen peeked out from between her fingers, to find Jesse peering at the wild, unmatched collage of pictures that stretched along the length of her living room wall. Jesse reached out, tapping one with a blunt fingernail. “Man, is this from the Battle of New York?”

“Probably.” Ellen reached for her tea pot. She poured it, her fingers steady on the hot porcelain. “Want some?”

“Is it your mom's blend?” Jesse asked. She reached up, pulling a photo down.

“Yes, and don't TOUCH anything,” Ellen said. She slid down off her stool and headed for the kitchen, her slippers slapping on the ground with each step. “I've got everything exactly where I need it.”


Ellen considered her shelf of tea cups. “You get the ugly cup,” she declared. “Because you're being a bitch.”

“Cool,” Jesse called from the other room. “I like the ugly cup. It might not be pretty, but it's got character. And a good shape.” There was a pause, and Ellen paused, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Like me.”

Ellen rolled her eyes, and snatched the chipped cup from the top shelf. “I withdraw my offer of tea,” she said, stomping back into the living room.

Jesse held up the manila folder in her hand. “That mean you don't want my photo files any more? Cause that's cool. You've got enough crazy here. You don't really need any more, do you?” She balanced the folder in one hand, flipping through the pictures. “I've got a good one here of Stark
from the opening of Stark Tower, and—"

"Fine. You harpy." Ellen dumped a measure of tea into the cup and thrust it in Jesse's direction. "Gimme."

Jesse took it with a pleased smirk, and offered the folder in exchange. "Enjoy."

Ellen snatched it from her and clambered back onto her stool. "Didja see the ring?"

Jesse sniffed at the tea, her eyes falling closed. "Everyone saw the ring." She took a cautious sip. "I mean, everyone who's following Janet VanDyne's Instagram."

"Which is everyone," Ellen said. She leafed through the photos. She'd seen most of them before, but a few were unfamiliar. She fished them out, laying them out on the desktop. "I think Instagram just assumes that everyone who opens up an account wants to follow VanDyne."

"Her account is amazeballs," Jesse said. "I only follow like, ten accounts and three are family members. But I follow her." She paused, her cup cradled in her long fingers. "Did you see that thing she did last month? Where she demonstrated this year's hot hairstyles on Thor?"

"He looked good in the curly thing she did," Ellen said. She held up a picture. "Where did you get this one?"

Jesse took it from her, her brow furrowing as she thought. "Ah, I think that's one of Clark's," she said. "It never got published, because it's not particularly good framing, an' Duck said we weren't a damn tabloid."

Ellen folded her arms on the edge of her desk. "Yeah, but that's Rumiko Fujikawa, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah, Clark was at, uh, I think it was Empire University to cover one of Reed Richards' lectures. He stepped out for some reason—"

"Because Reed Richards is super boring?" Ellen asked.

"Clark is a science reporter," Jesse said, propping a hand on her hip. "He's probably less bored than you are by, you know, science."

"Everyone's bored by Richards," Ellen said.

"Okay, but anyway, he stepped out and while he was checking his equipment, Stark and Fujikawa came out of one of the other buildings." She shrugged. "Right place at the right time, but at the time, he only recognized Stark, so—"

"So this was taken before their relationship was public," Ellen said.

"I think so. Which is why it never got published. Clark and Duck assumed it was just a date. Not a business agreement."

"When, in fact, it ended up being both." Ellen hopped down, taking the picture back. She walked forward, then back along the wall. She found the right spot and stuck it up.

She stepped back, and Jesse stepped up next to her. "Okay," she said, her voice quiet. "What am I missing?"

Ellen studied the timeline. "Stark's never managed to keep a relationship quiet for more than a few
weeks,” she said. She walked to the beginning, tapping each face as she passed. “Most of them, it was public in a matter of days.”

She stopped at the end of the line, her fingertip hovering over the shot of Steve Rogers, an embarrassed smile on his face, holding up his left hand to show off his ring. Ellen tapped it.

“So when did this start?”

*

Steve glanced up from his book. "Welcome home," he said, and when he smiled, the light caught the lenses of his glasses and Tony gritted his teeth against the urge to say something very obscene.

"Something's new here," he said instead, because he could bullshit with the best of them. He braced his hands on the back of the couch, narrowing his eyes at Steve, who just smiled up at him, his expression amused. Tony leaned in. "New shirt?"

"It has a hole in the hem," Steve pointed out.

"They sell them that way now, means nothing," Tony said, just to watch the pained look sweep over Steve's face. He grinned. "That caused you physical pain, didn't it?"

"No," Steve said.

"Good try there, with the lying. That was a good, solid, college try," Tony said. "Why are you wearing glasses?"

Steve set his book against his stomach, resting one broad palm on the spine. Tony had never envied a book so much in his life. "Had my medical check today," he admitted. "And afterwards, I was told to wear them."

"Right," Tony said. He hated his life. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, a nervous twitch to take his mind off of his baser instincts. "For... How long, exactly?"

"At least tonight," Steve said. He blinked at Tony, his blue eyes guileless behind the slight magnification of the lenses. "Want me to take them off?" There was a faint note of amusement to his voice.

Tony pointed a finger in his direction. "It's unnatural." Steve cupped a hand over his mouth, and Tony leaned in. "Are you laughing at me, Rogers?"

Steve shook his head, but his hand remained firmly clamped over his lips. "Nope," he said, the word muffled by his fingers. "Not at all."

“Right,” Tony grumbled. He hovered by the couch, knowing he should leave before he got himself in trouble, but fuck it. He made bad choices. “You have dinner yet?”

Steve shook his head, pushing himself up. “Want to make something?”

“No,” Tony said, without missing a beat, and Steve laughed. It was true, though. He wanted to stay here. Right here. In this room. With Steve. “Want to order pizza?” He shifted his weight, his hands going to his hips. “We can watch a movie or something?"

Steve's face went blank, his eyes blinking in surprise. But before Tony could take it back, he grinned. “Yeah. That sounds great, actually.” He rolled to his feet. “You want to order, or-”
Tony glanced down at himself. There was still grease under his nails, and this shirt had seen better days. “You mind calling it in?” he asked, picking at the hem of his shirt. “I really need a shower.”

He looked back up, catching a fleeting glimpse of an expression that he couldn't quite read on Steve's face. But it was gone before he had a chance to puzzle over it, Steve's usual smile creasing his cheeks. “Sure. Any requests?”

“Pizza,” Tony said, just to make him laugh. “And an order of garlic knots.” He stopped. “Or two.”

“If I get a double order, does that mean I can have some?” Steve asked.

“Get three,” Tony said, and he'd never get tired of the sound of Steve's laughter, the way it started soft and rose, bright and warm. The way he tried to hide it by ducking his head or covering his mouth. The way his eyes danced. Tony grinned at him. “Want something to drink?”

Steve nodded. “Grab me a beer on your way back?”

Alcohol was a seriously bad idea. He knew that. Surviving Steve was bad enough now without adding liquor to the mix. But Tony nodded. “Give me in fifteen minutes.”

It was closer to thirty when he returned, still damp from the shower and wearing a clean pair of sweatpants and t-shirt, he had two bottles of beer dangling from one hand. The smell of garlic and tomato hung heavy in the air as he poked his head into the media room. “We need plates?”

Steve waved a hand at the coffee table. “Got 'em. And napkins.” He held out a hand, and Tony handed over the beer. “Thanks.” He studied the label, his lips twitching. “'Imperial Stout Trooper?’”

“Yes, yes, I'll rip the label off next time,” Tony said, throwing himself down on the couch with a sigh. The pizza boxes were almost within reach, and he considered them with a narrow look. “Just drink it.”

“It sounds like an overweight space Nazi, which is not really-”

“Oh, so the Empire is based on-”

“Space Nazis,” Steve said, the bottle hovering at his lips.

“Listen-”


“Shut up and drink your beer, Rogers,” he said. He reached for one of the pizza boxes. God, he hadn't realized how hungry he was until he'd smelled it. Steve handed him a plate, and Tony helped himself to a slice, over flowing with chunks of sausage and thinly sliced onions and peppers. “So, what are we doing here? You picked a movie yet?”

Steve grinned. "We're going to do movie Russian Roulette."

Tony paused, the slice of pizza halfway to his lips. On the other end of the couch, Steve was grinning at him, his eyes bright behind the lenses of those damn glasses. "We're doing what now?" Tony asked.

Steve took an enthusiastic bite out of a garlic knot. The butter did lovely things to his lips. "Jarvis has organized every video in the database-"
"Every movie or show file," Jarvis said. "Just as a point of clarity."

Tony's lips twitched. "Thank you for clarifying." He blew on his pizza, wondering if he was willing to risk mouth burns yet. The answer was probably yes. "So, he's got the catalog in order, and..."

He let his voice trail away, taking a bite of the still too-hot pizza, and Steve picked up where he left off. "And assigned every file a randomly generated four digit number," he said. He grinned. "Now you and I are going to choose the numbers, two each."

Tony did not like where this was going. "And?"

"And watch whatever comes up," Steve said, reaching for the pizza.

"No," Tony said, and Steve started to laugh. Tony pinned him with a withering glare. "No. Absolutely not. That database is packed to the gills with Jess's recordings of 'Project Runway'."

"I don't know why she records that, she doesn't even seem to like it," Steve said. "She doesn't care about the show, she just likes watching Jan work herself into a rage about it." He shook his head. "There's Luke's 'Antiques Roadshow' and Clint's stupid cartoon movies and Bruce has recorded every single episode of 'Mysteries at the Museum'!" He scraped his hand over his face. "Natasha's Bollywood musicals and Jessica's 90's rom-coms-"

"She still claims those aren't hers," Steve said, around a mouthful of pizza.

"And she's still lying," Tony told him. He ripped apart a garlic knot, gesturing with the chunk of dough. "I mean, they're either hers or Luke's, and Luke would own up to it. He owns up to the copy of 'Bambi' that's in there."

"Who doesn't like 'Bambi'?" Steve asked, and Tony raised his hand. "Speaking of liars."

"It's a horrible movie about a deer being shot," Tony said. "And what you're describing could lead to us watching it."

Steve considered that. "Yep," he said, and took a bite of pizza. His eyebrows arched. "And?"

"And that means this is a stupid idea," Tony pointed out.

Steve nodded. "We're still going to do it."

Tony stared at him. "No. No... We're not," he said, and he tried his best to sound absolutely certain about that. Confident. In control. Steve tipped his head to the side, and his glasses slid down his nose. For a second, he went crosseyed, his expression a perfect mix of amusement and befuddlement, then he pushed the glasses back up.

And Tony discovered a new kink that he could've lived without.

"Those don't fit you," Tony said. "At all."

Steve took them off, flexing the hinges. "Loaners," he said, and before Tony could breathe a sigh of relief, Steve put them back on. Tony stared at him, resigned. Steve smiled. "Pick a number between zero and nine."

"No," Tony said. Steve just kept smiling at him, and his shoulders slumped. "No."

"Want me to go first?" Steve asked.
"I want to pick my entertainment, without a random element that results in me watching a weird, badly dubbed Japanese anime that Peter and Clint are watching for mockery purposes," Tony said. "Or they say they're watching it for mockery purposes, but hey, they're still watching it, and the mockery has since died down and-"

Steve leaned in, holding out a garlic knot to Tony. "Pick a number," Steve said.

Tony huffed out a sigh, and grabbed hold of the other side of the knot. "Six," he said, ripping half of it away.

"Three," Steve said, juggling the garlic knot between his fingers, stopping to lick the butter from his fingertips.

Tony stared at him. "Five."

Steve grinned, bright and happy. "One." He glanced up. "Jarvis?" He tossed the rest of the garlic knot into his mouth.

"Playing file six-three-five-one," Jarvis said, and the huge screen went dark for a second. When it flickered back to life, it was to a scene of a heavy wooden galleon sailing across a calm sea. Within minutes, a sea battle had broken out, cannons flashing and half-naked men slashing at each other with swords.

And a very familiar song started playing over it.

Tony pressed his face into his hands. "Oh my god."

Steve reached for the pizza. "What... Is this?" He frowned as the scene cut to a man standing at in front of a tv showing the same thing they'd just been watching. He leaned forward. "What." A bevy of bikini clad girls marched past in perfect unison.


"You purchased it several years ago," Jarvis said.

Tony stared at the screen, dismayed. "Was I DRUNK?"

"It's entirely possible, sir," Jarvis said. "It does match your usual pattern of-"

"RIGHT, we're not doing this, I can't-" Tony shook his head. "Stop the playback, no, nope."

Steve looked at him, bemused. "Is this-" He squinted at the screen. "Is this porn?"

"It's not-" Tony's head fell forward. "It's 'The Pirate Movie,' a bad eighties movie that builds off of 'The Pirates of Penzance,' Steve," he said, resigned to everything. He slumped very low in his seat, staring at the screen from between his fingers. "It's... It's not good."

Steve stared at him, his eyebrows arched. "I wouldn't have taken you for a fella who likes musical theater," he said.

“I didn't watch this for the music,” Tony said. “I watched this for-” He waved a hand at the screen, where a lithe young blond man was jumping around, naked to the waist and waving a sword with a great deal of enthusiasm. The leading lady, dressed in an oversized flannel shirt and jeans, as shoved forward by her bikini clad peers. “Look, teenage-Tony appreciated the costume design.” Steve gave
him a look. Tony shrugged. “Or lack thereof.”

Steve's lips twitched. “Right,” he said, and Tony kicked at him.

“We could watch something else,” Tony pointed out.

“We could, but we're not going to,” Steve said. He pointed at the screen. “How much time does he spend shirtless?”

“About 75% of the movie,” Tony said. “Last chance to shut this off before the ninjas arrive.”

“Well, now we're DEFINITELY watching this,” Steve said, grinning.

Tony huffed out a sigh and reached for his beer. “I hate you,” he said, and Steve held out the box of garlic knots. Tony took one, distracted momentarily from the cinematic train wreck that was playing out on his tv. “God, the eighties was an ugly, ugly decade.”

"I'll have to take your word for that. So, the man in the open shirt and the, uh-" Steve paused.

"The jewel encrusted cod piece," Tony filled in for him, because that piece of the wardrobe was so bizarre as to require comment.

"Yes, that," Steve agreed. "So, his way of convincing a young man that he's better off without girls-"

"Is a full array of half-naked men, flexing," Tony said. “And comparing their muscles.”

Steve nodded. "This movie's a little bit gay," he said.

Tony's head rolled in his direction. "Darling," he drawled, "I came out at fifteen and you accidentally married a man. This movie is the third gayest thing in this room, at that, maybe fourth or fifth, I've got a coffee cup with a penis on it somewhere, I don't even know.”

Steve choked on a laugh, his hand clamped over his mouth. Grinning, Tony pushed himself to his feet. “There's no way I can do this without another beer,” he said. Onscreen, the bevy of bathing beauties did a very well executed dance with spinning parasols, and Tony felt a headache coming on. “Or a bottle of scotch.”

“It's a pirate movie,” Steve pointed out. “Don't you think it should be rum?”

“I'll find you a hollowed out coconut of some sort,” Tony said, heading for the door.

“If you don't come back, I'm going to come find you and carry you back,” Steve called over his shoulder.


By the time he returned with a couple more beers, Steve was laughing, his whole body shaking with the force of it. There were tears in his eyes, his cheeks pink, and he stared up at Tony, trying to pull himself together. Tony arched an eyebrow at him. “I did try to warn you about how bad this is,” he said, and Steve lost it again, a hand clamped over his face, little giggles slipping out from behind his fingers.

Tony took a seat on the couch next to him, his lips twitching. There was something beautiful about Steve, something bright and buoyant and real, and he envied it. Some small, detached part of him
wondered if he could just do this. Maybe he could. Maybe he could live like this, with no end date, no cutoff. Steve seemed comfortable with it, Steve seemed...

Happy.

Tony let his eyes slide closed, trying not to cling to things he couldn't have, shouldn't have. But Steve was there, beside him, full of laughter and warmth and life. He was getting used to that. To hearing Steve's footsteps in the hallway before the sun was even up. To find Steve in his kitchen, with bowls of oatmeal or oversized sandwiches, braced over a copy of the newspaper or a tablet. Steve's running shoes in the hallway next to the elevator, Steve's sweatshirt thrown over the back of the couch. Steve stealing his remote and yelling at him about the dirty coffee cups scattered around the living room.

He stopped, catching himself halfway gone to a fantasy of mingled loads of laundry and half-finished Sunday Times Crossword puzzle. He was losing his mind. He was absolutely losing his mind. He had a laundry service for a reason; no part of his fantasy life should involve the phrase, 'are these my socks or yours?'

And Steve was happy now, but sooner or later, he was going to find someone, someone he wanted, someone he loved, and Tony was too old to just sit back and enjoy the ride. He knew too much about the crash landing waiting for him to just live in the day, live in the moment.

There were definitely downsides to being a futurist.

"How long is this movie?" Steve asked, snapping Tony out of his thoughts.

Tony glanced at the screen, where the leading lady, who had traded in her flannel and jeans for a filmy white dress cup up to her hip, was wandering aimlessly on a beach. On the other side of the beach, her soon-to-be beau was wandering, just as aimless, just as pointless. "About twelve more songs, three chase sequences, and a pie fight," Tony said, before taking a sip of his beer.

"A pie fight," Steve echoed.

Tony nodded. "Pizza pie fight."

Steve shook his head, settling back on the couch. "This is the worst thing I've ever seen," he said, but he was grinning at the screen. "Where did they get horses?"

Tony gave him a look. "That's your only problem with this movie?"

"So far? Yes." Steve threw himself down on the couch, his glasses crooked, his hair a mess. He grinned up at Tony. "Want some more pizza?"

Tony stared down at him, and gave up. He might not have this for long, but he could have it for now. "At this point, I can only hope the cholesterol kills me," he said, holding out a hand. "Just pass the box."

Chapter End Notes

"The Pirate Movie" is a real thing. It is really, really ridiculous.

If you'd like to see some of the 'highlights,' consider checking out this video, from one
of my favorite YouTube Channels:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEGBXEptdJo&t=28s

(If you have any interest in musical theater, I'd highly recommend you check out the rest of his videos, and his podcast: Jim and Tomic's Musical Theater Happy Hour: http://jimandtomic.com/

"Imperial Stout Trooper" is a real beer. I'm told it's pretty good.

https://www.beeradvocate.com/beer/profile/357/34484/
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There's a bit of a tonal shift mid chapter, and some canon appropriate levels of injury. Nothing graphic, nothing that will stick around, but we do have a hospital scene and some discussion of pain and fear that comes from being in the hospital when you really, really, REALLY have reason to fear being in the hospital.

“Next time I'm bringing the suit.”

“You're not allowed to bring the suit.”

“That's why I'm giving you fair warning, Pep. Next time? Next time I'm bringing the suit,” Tony said, stalking up the hallway.

Pepper heaved a sigh. “Can you slow down, please?” she asked. She reached out, catching his sleeve. “Tony, I refuse to run in these shoes. The heels would probably survive, but I'm not certain my ankles would.”

Tony slowed down, just a little, just enough for her to catch up. “Know what would fix that problem?” he gritted out.

“I'm not wearing armor, even if you make it for me,” Pepper said, proving that she knew him far too well. “So don't even try.” She patted his arm. “That went well.”

Tony shot a look in her direction. “Were you in the same meeting that I was?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Tony stared at her. “And you think that went well?”

She gave him a look. “Yes.”

“Right,” Tony said. “I need a drink.”

Pepper patted his arm again. “No.”

Tony threw his hands in the air. “This company is going straight to hell.”

She struggled not to smile. “Yes, Mr. Stark.”

They turned a corner and Tony wasn't surprised to find Marcy standing there, clearly waiting for them. “Don't say it,” he said.

“That went well,” Marcy said to Pepper, who nodded.

“You're both delusional,” Tony said, as Marcy fell in on his other side. He glanced from one to the other. “Is this a flanking maneuver?” he asked, suspicious. “Are you attempting to outflank me?”

“It's not an attempt,” Pepper told him.
“We have outflanked you,” Marcy said. She gave him a bright smile. “And we didn't even have to try particularly hard.”

“At least do me the courtesy of making an admiring comment about my flanks,” Tony said. He patted his butt with one hand. “I mean. I don't ask for much. A few compliments about my ass would not be amiss.”

“It's lovely,” Pepper said, without missing a beat. “You should consider shorter suit jackets to really show it off.”

“That seems--”

“You think that we have the board support?” Pepper said to Marcy.

Marcy nodded. “They're fussing, but--” She wobbled a hand through the air. “That's what they do.”

“True,” Pepper said. “But the third quarter--”

“We have the potential to--”

“Yes, but the portfolio offering--”

“Do either of you ever finish a sentence?” Tony interrupted.

“No,” they said, absolutely in sync.

“It's a waste of time,” Marcy said, tapping a finger against her phone screen.

“Okay, so, I don't think I'm needed here,” Tony said, holding up his hands. “I'm going to go--” He gestured at the door. “I'm going to go, I don't know, invent something or blow something up, I haven't decided yet.”

“If you invent something, remember you're still under contract,” Pepper said cheerfully.

“And if you blow something up,” Marcy added, “do it off site, we don't have the budget to clean it up.”

“Wonderful, truly feeling the love here,” Tony said, right before Pepper caught his arm, tugging him to a stop. She brushed a light, gentle kiss against Tony's cheek. He gave her a look. “Was that supposed to placate me? Remove the desire to blow up objects which are technically company property?”

Pepper smiled at him. “Yes. Did it work?”

“No,” Tony said, and he wasn't fooling anyone, but he had his pride. “Call me if you need me, I'll be out back juggling missiles.”

“You know, before I took this job, I would've thought that a sentence like that could only be a metaphor,” Marcy said.

“We're going to assume it's a metaphor here, too,” Pepper said.

“Not a metaphor!” Tony yelled, even as he wandered towards the door. He darted out, letting it fall shut behind him with a solid bang. It was childish, and he did not care. He had energy to burn and a lot of frustration, and he didn't want to go home and he probably shouldn't drive when he was like this.
He really wished he had the damn suit.

But lacking the armor, he just started walking. Between the buildings that ringed the SI property, up narrow alleys and across parking lots. Down to the test ranges, along the length the broad swaths of the tarmac that made up the airstrip and through the dusty side lots. He walked until he was exhausted, until he was too tired to think, until he found an unattended warehouse on a rather deserted corner of the property.

“Knock knock,” he said, pushing the door open. “I own the place. So if you're having sex or taking a nap—” He shrugged. “Hide. Or don't. I don't care.” He glanced around. “Actually, given the state of this place? Hiding might be a good idea.”

He wandered up the nearest aisle, studying the cases that lined the sparsely filled shelves. “I thought we burned everything associated with this project,” he said, scowling at the names printed on the tags. “I absolutely remember serving a burn notice on this.” He yanked the nearest case off the shelf, and flipped it open. “This looks distinctly unburnt.”

His phone rang, and he considered ignoring it. But it was Pepper's ringtone, and he knew better than to ignore that. It never worked out for him. Without looking, he answered it with a tap of his thumb. “Stark's House of Trash,” he said. “How can direct your call?”

“Where are you?” Pepper asked, not at all put off by that.

Tony considered a damaged part. “Trash heap.” He tossed it back in the box. “Do we throw nothing away?”

“No. We don't. I blame our previous CEO, who was a packrat who clung to outdated tech like floppy drives might well make a comeback in the 22nd century,” Pepper said.

Tony paused, one eyebrow arching. “I'm sensing some resentment here, I think—”

“Where are you?” she repeated. “I thought we'd be able to track you by the sound of the explosions, but there's been nothing, and your car's still here, and Jarvis says that all the armor is accounted for—”

“I'm being good,” Tony said. On the other end of the line, that was met with stony silence, and he grinned. “Fine. I'm on the far side of the campus. Some shithole warehouse where we've been hiding our not so secret shame.” He held up a piece of plating, eyeing it with suspicion. “As it turns out, we've got a lot of shame, Potts.”

“It's pretty well known,” she agreed. “Are you coming back?”

He made a non-committal sound. “Eventually.”

“Uh-huh.” She paused. “I think you should—”

“I'm fine,” he said, slamming the case shut. There was a door on the far side of the building that he was pretty sure lead to the roof. “I'll be—” He shook his head. “Don't you have enough to worry about, Pep?”

“Yes, but you are still on my list of things to fret over.” She paused. “You okay?”

Tony smiled. “I'm fine. Go distract Marcy before she convinces the board that we can walk on water.” The knob of the door turned easily under his hand, and he ducked into the stairwell.

“She's good, but she's not that good,” Pepper said. She sounded amused. Tony took that as a positive
He opened the door to the roof, stepping out into the sunshine. The wind whipped past, and he reached into his pocket for his sunglasses. “You don't know,” he said. “She's out there. Doing things. You have no idea what those things are.” He slipped them onto his nose. “You should get on that, Potts.”

“Right.” She paused. “No explosions.”

“Goodbye, Pepper,” he said, but he was grinning. He hung up the phone, tucking it into his pocket as he wandered across the roof. Without a second thought to how much his suit had cost, he settled down on the edge of the roof, his arms braced on the lower strut of the railing and his legs dangling off the edge.

Tony took a deep breath, savoring the sun and the wind on his face. He could hear traffic in the distance, the grinding of tires on damaged pavement and the slow, steady beeping of big machinery backing up. The smells of hot tar and motor oil hung in the air, and below that, the tang of salt from the ocean, out of sight but waiting just there, beyond the skyline. His fingers flexed against the metal of the railing, feeling the rough edges of the flaking paint, and the gritty degradation of rust.

The urge to fly was never far from his mind.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there, letting his mind wander, when his phone started to play “Star Spangled Man.” Grinning, he reached for it. “Ciao, el capitan.”

There was a beat of pause. “Are we having this conversation in Spanish, Italian or English?”

“Caller's choice, one supposes,” Tony said, grinning. “What's up?”

“You okay?”

Tony blinked. “Yeah, I'm fine, what-”

“Well, you're sitting on the roof of a warehouse, some people would interpret that as 'not really fine,' so you can see-”

His lips twitched. “And by 'some people' you mean Pepper, don't you?” He leaned back, bracing one hand on the roof behind him, his face tipped towards the sun. “You absolutely should not listen to Pepper.”

“Yeah, I'm going to listen to Pepper.”

Tony groaned. “Listen, I don't think-” He stopped, the words clicking in his brain a little too late. “How do you know where I am?”

“Hi,” Steve said, and movement in the parking lot below him caught Tony's attention. He leaned forward, somehow not surprised to find Steve standing there, looking painfully attractive in a pair of jeans and a skin-tight white t-shirt. He had a plastic bag in one hand and his phone in the other, and even from this distance, Tony could see the hopeful, lopsided smile on his face.

Tony tipped his head forward, looking over the top of his sunglasses down at him. “Security breach,” he said, just to hear Steve laugh. “How the hell did you get in here? I have security, clearly it's not very good security, but still, there's-”

“As it turns out, I have security clearance,” Steve said, interrupting him.
“I cannot imagine how that happened, but I suspect you used your wiles on Potts.”

“I'm very wily, but Happy gave me a badge. It's got my picture on it and everything,” Steve said.

“How did you FIND me?” Tony asked.

“Pepper told me,” Steve said, the soul of patience.

“How did PEPPER find me?”

“Did you swipe your badge to open the door to that warehouse?” Steve shot back.

“The security system has worked against me,” Tony said.

“It's a double edged weapon, it's true,” Steve said. Tony saw his head cant to the side. “So. Now that you know I've been properly vetted, can I come up?”

Tony was smiling and he didn't know why. He folded his arms on the railing in front of him. “What if I say no?”

Steve held up the white plastic bag in his hand. “Then I guess I've gotta eat this all myself.”

As if on command, Tony felt his stomach growl. He rested his chin on his arm. “What's your offer?”

“Crab rangoon, egg foo young, shrimp chow mein, pork fried rice and General Tao's chicken,” Steve said, and Tony tried not to moan.

“Tell me you've got spring rolls.”

“Yeah, but I'm not sure I'm sharing those,” Steve said, his voice full of laughter. The wind kicked up, and his pale hair flopped over his forehead. “That's my offer, Stark.”

Tony pretended to think about it. “Not bad,” he admitted.

“I try. What's your counter offer?”

“Grab a couple of Cokes from the vending machine by the door, and I'll pay you back,” Tony told him.

Steve laughed, and Tony let his eyes close, savoring the warmth that swept through him at the sound. “You're lucky I'm easy.”

“In a surprise to no one, I hear that a lot,” Tony said. “Door's open, take the first set of stairs to the right of the entrance.” Below him, Steve made a show of turning off his phone before stepping forward and out of Tony's line of sight.

A few minutes later, the door behind him opened, and he heard the familiar tread of Steve's boots. He tipped his head back, a smile slipping over his face. “What'd you bring me?”

Steve leaned over, pressing an ice cold can against the side of Tony's neck. Laughing, Tony batted his hand away, managing to snag the can from him. He popped it open as Steve settled down next to him, setting the bag between them. “Hi,” Tony said, grinning at him over the rim of the can. “You smell amazing.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Like garlic and hot grease.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, with all due gravity. He pulled another Coke out of his pocket, balancing it on his knee. “That might be the food.”
“Might be,” Tony agreed. Inside the plastic bag, there was a brown paper one that had been folded over and stapled shut. He ripped it open, pushing packets of sauce, utensils and napkins to the side to get to the food underneath. He pulled out the white containers, checking each one and setting them aside until he found the spring rolls.

“Hey!” Steve said, his voice full of laughter as Tony ate half of one in a single bite. Unashamed, he held the other half out to Steve. Steve considered it, cracking open his soda. “I get your leftovers?”

“I tested this one.” Tony wiggled it in front of him. “For poison and general tastiness.”

“Always thinking of me, aren't you?” Steve asked. But instead of putting his soda down and taking it by hand, he leaned forward, his lips parting. Before Tony realized what he intended, he'd taken a bite, his lips brushing against Tony's fingertips.

Tony's breath caught, a spike of heat going straight through him. Steve's eyes tipped up to meet his, and if he was anyone else, Tony would've thought he was flirting. “Thanks,” Steve said, his fingers brushing Tony's as he took the last bite of the spring roll. Tony let him take it, hoping that his face wasn't as red as it felt.

“I'm taking the rest of them,” Tony said, and Steve laughed.

“Aren't you greedy?” he said, popping the rest of the spring roll into his mouth.


Steve grinned at him. “Fine, keep them.” He picked up a carton, popping open the flaps. “What's your pleasure?”

“You,” Tony said, and Steve blinked at him. Tony blinked back. “I mean, whatever you don't want.”

Steve grinned at him. “Rice?”

Tony took it, and the disposable chopsticks Steve offered. “So what brings you all the way out here?” he asked.

Steve shrugged, fishing through the cartons until he found the one he wanted. “Pepper seemed a bit worried when you pulled a disappearing act after the meeting. I think she expected you to come back after you blew off a little steam.”

Tony snorted around a mouthful of rice. “Pepper worries entirely too much,” he said, stealing a shrimp from Steve's carton. “I did my job and then I got the hell out of there before I hauled off and punched someone.” He grinned at Steve. “She should be proud of me. I didn't even blow anything up.”

Steve's mouth tipped up in a slight smile. “I am,” he said, and Tony rolled his eyes, despite the rush of warmth that went through him at the words. Steve nudged him with an elbow. “You okay?”

Tony smiled. “Always,” he said. “But I'd be better if there was-”

Steve offered him the carton of egg foo young, and Tony took it, pleased. “This is setting a bad precedent,” he said. “You know what I like and I am going to fail utterly at remembering what you like, so the next time I do the ordering we're going to end up with something you hate, and that'll be the end of this.”

“Or you could just order the stuff I've already marked off on the menu,” Steve pointed out. “Or ask
Jarvis what I ordered last time.” He shrugged. “You know. Like you always do.”

“That seems like cheating, though,” Tony said. He broke a crab rangoon in half and offered a piece to Steve.

“Seems like better living through technology,” Steve said, taking it. “Isn't that your motto?”

“It's 'let my tech rock your world,' actually,” Tony said. Steve stared at him, his mouth hanging open just a little. Tony grinned at him. “What?”

“Tell me it's not.”

“It could be, if Pepper had more of a sense of humor,” Tony said. He traded the rice for the chow mein. “I did have it put on a coat of arms once.” He grinned around the tips of his chopsticks. “There were some pretty suggestive lugnuts involved.”

“Wow,” Steve said, his eyebrows arched.

“That's what all the boys say,” Tony agreed. Steve looked at him, and Tony grinned, unrepentant.

Chewing his way through a mouthful of slivered carrots and bok choi, Tony watched Steve scoop up a bite of egg foo young in the tips of his chopsticks. Steve caught his eye and paused, the morsel halfway to his lips. “What?” he said, a smile creasing his cheeks.

Tony bent back over his food. “Nothing. Just always a little surprised every time I see you use chopsticks.”

Steve looked down at the chopsticks, held easily between his fingers. “Oh!” He snapped the chopsticks at Tony. “Morita taught me.” He reached past Tony, sneaking a bit of pork from the rice with ease. “We all got pretty good at it, except Falsworth.” He shook his head. “If he didn't have a proper fork in his left hand and a knife in his right, he was lost.”

“You used chopsticks in the field?” Tony asked, and Steve shrugged.

“Let's just say that we had a problem holding onto gear,” he said, his eyes dancing. “And you can eat a lotta stuff with two relatively straight sticks.” He tapped the tips of his chopsticks together with a grin. “Who taught you?”

Tony grabbed another crab rangoon. “Don't really remember,” he admitted. “Probably just one of those things I had to know before I was allowed to join my parents at the really fun restaurants.” He took a bite, savoring the combination of crisp shell and creamy filling. “But I really got good at it when I was at MIT.” He popped the other half into his mouth. “Boston had some very nice dim sum places. If you could behave yourself, you might get someone who spoke the language to take you along.”

Steve traded cartons with him. “So... You behaved yourself?” he asked. Tony considered taking offense at that, but it was kind of comforting that Steve knew better.

Tony grinned at him. “Nope, I tagged along when Rhodey got an invitation. If you're paying, you can be as much of an asshole as you'd like.”

“Really?” Steve reached around him, snagging a pea pod from the box on the other side of his hips. “Good to know.”

“I walked into that, didn't I?”
Steve held the carton of spring rolls out to him. “Tell me what happened in the meeting,” he said.

Tony took one. “A lot of boring people said a lot of boring things,” he said. He rotated the spring roll between his fingers. “I refuse to spread the boredom any further.”

Steven nodded, and picked up the container of rice again. “Tony?” He looked up, meeting Tony's eyes. “You're many things. Boring is not one of them.” He took a bite of rice. “What happened at the meeting?”

Tony opened his mouth, a quip hovering on the tip of his tongue, but Steve was just watching him, his gaze level and steady. Tony let out his breath in a huff of laughter. “What do you want to know?” he asked, leaning over his food.

There was a moment of silence, then Steve reached over, sneaking a water chestnut from under Tony's nose. Tony looked up, meeting his eyes, and Steve smiled, popping the chestnut into his mouth. “Everything,” he said.

It was a ridiculous thing to say, and it was even more ridiculous because Steve actually meant it. Tony took a deep breath and started talking.

By the time he ran out of words, they were running out of food, too. Empty cartons littered the rooftop around them, and Tony was digging the last of the lo mein from the carton. “And that's why I'm going to fire everyone and replace them with those little drinking birds,” he said, waving his chopsticks around. “They can hit keyboards randomly just as well as these idiots, and they don't even need health care.”

“Brilliant management strategy,” Steve agreed. He reached behind Tony, trying to grab the last crab rangoon.

“Hey!” Tony tried to move it out of reach, leaning sideways with the carton held out as far away from Steve as he could go. Laughing, Steve just crowded in on him, his chest pressed to Tony's until they both unbalanced, tipping over onto the roof.

Tony landed on his back, his arms stretched out over his head to avoid tipping the food everywhere. Steve was half on top of him, laughing into his chest, one hand braced against Tony's stomach. “Tell me you didn't spill that,” he managed, his head coming up.

He was so beautiful, his face so close to Tony's, and Tony's heart skipped a beat. “If I did,” he managed, because he could keep talking even when his life was falling apart, “it'd be entirely your fault.”

“I'll take responsibility with the press,” Steve said, and for an instant, Tony didn't think he was going to move. And when he did move, it was to come closer, levering himself up so his lips were right there, right next to Tony's, so close that all either of them had to do was move an inch to close the distance.

For a long, painful moment, Tony fantasized about just that. About lifting his head just that inch, that fraction of an inch, and kissing him. Kissing him until they both forgot where they were, forgot who they were, forgot all the reasons why this wasn't going to work, why they couldn't work together. Until Tony forgot how badly this was going to end.

Before he could lose his mind, or whatever was left of his morals, enough to do it, Steve moved. He pushed himself up, and extended a hand to Tony. Tony took a breath, and let it out. “You're a thief, Rogers,” he said, taking Steve's hand and letting Steve pull him up. “A dirty thief.”
He went to pull away, but Steve's fingers squeezed his, tugging him in close. “Actually, I think that's you,” he pointed out. “I paid. You're the one who's the freeloader.”

Tony took a deep breath, trying to steady his heartbeat. “Fine, I'll buy dessert.” It was flippant, the words slipping out without a thought, but Steve's face split in a grin.

He grabbed the bag. “Great. Let's go.”

Tony watched, stymied, as he started to pick up the empty containers and crumpled napkins. “What are you-” Steve took the box out of his hand, and he started to laugh. “I was eating that!”

“I was promised ice cream,” Steve said, rolling to his feet. “Let's go.”

“Who said ice cream?” Tony asked. “I don't remember a word about ice cream. Are you-”

“The only way to survive a conversation with you is to learn to read between the lines,” Steve said, so cheerful about it that Tony started to laugh.

“Doesn't that no matter what I say, you get to decide what it means?” Tony asked.

Steve extended a hand to him. “Well, if you don't want me reading into things, maybe you need to stop with the double talk.”

“Sorry, it's pretty ingrained by now,” Tony said, grabbing hold of Steve's hand and letting Steve pull him to his feet. For a second, he wobbled on his feet, swaying into Steve's body. But Steve's grip was strong and steady, and he held on, long after Tony needed his help to stay upright. He just started moving towards the door, towing Tony along in his wake. Tony, laughing, stumbled after him.

It was ridiculous, to cling to Steve's hand like a lovesick teenager, to revel in the way that Steve's wedding ring bit into his palm. But he did it, he allowed himself to do it, to scramble down the stairs right on Steve's heels, through the warehouse and out the door into the sunshine. Steve shoved the remains of their meal into the trashcan beside the door, and Tony tugged on his hand. “I'm not going to escape, so you wanna-”

“You're tricky, I think it's better that I don't give you a chance to escape,” Steve said, grinning.

“Help, help,” Tony said, absolutely deadpan. “I'm being kidnapped.” His head lolled to the side. “Oh. Won't anyone save me?”

Steve choked on a laugh. “Come on, Stark.” He tugged gently on Tony's hand, and Tony followed him, down the street and around the corner, into a nearby parking lot. On the end of one row, in a visitor's spot, Steve's motorcycle was waiting, gleaming in the late afternoon sun.

Finally, Steve's hand fell away from Tony's, hopping onto the bike. Tony's hand hovered in mid-air for a moment, wishing that the warmth of Steve's fingers didn't fade so quickly. He tucked his hands in his pockets. “Okay, so-”

Steve twisted around on the seat, his helmet braced on his hip. He grinned up at Tony, holding out a second helmet. “Hop on.”

Tony stared at him. “My car's-”

The helmet tipped forward and back, the sunlight smoothing over the polished surface. “I know you like to be in the driver's seat,” Steve said, and Tony froze, his skin going cold in an instant. Steve
shifted forward in his seat his eyes locked on Tony's face. “But trust me.” His eyes were brilliant, fathomless and a far darker blue than Tony remembered. “Just this once.” Steve's hand came up, the helmet dangling from his first two fingers. “Trust me.”

Tony didn't even know he was reaching for the helmet until he felt the weight of it between his palms. “Get me a red one,” he said, turning it over in his hands. “I've got a theme going on here, and you're ruining it.”

The smile broke over Steve's face with slow, inevitable force of the sunrise. “I'll keep that in mind,” he said, starting the bike with a twist of his wrist. “Hop on.”

Tony slid onto the bike behind him, settling down onto the seat before pulling the helmet on. He snapped it into place, his fingers steady on the strap. Steve looked over his shoulder, his profile sharp against the setting sun. “Ready?” he asked.

Tony's arms tightened, an instinctual response to the sudden forward momentum. Their bodies swayed as the bike roared to life, the wheels struggling for traction. The tires caught, and just like that, they were flying.

Tony let out a whoop, a sound of pure joy bursting out of him, and Steve was laughing, high and bright and warm in his ears. They shot between the buildings, the motor roaring as they cut through the parking lots, one after another, accelerating as Steve found one narrow gap after another. Tony found himself grinning, his arms wrapped tight around Steve's waist, his body moving easily with Steve's on each turn. “This as fast as this thing can go?” he said, and his voice sounded husky and raw, even to his own ears. He grinned, heat rushing through him. “Impress me, Rogers.”

Steve didn't reply. He just leaned forward, his body pushing into the wind. Tony leaned into his back, and settled in for the ride.

For the first time all day, maybe for a lot longer than that, he didn't miss the armor at all.

* * *

“When did this become a group activity?” Steve asked. He paused as Thor and Jane waltzed past, Thor humming a tune that he was pretty sure wasn't of earthly origin. Steve got out of their way. “I think it's legitimate that I get to ask that question.”

“As it turns out,” Jan said, stretching one leg up behind her, “the Avengers fall into two categories: either they can dance and they like to dance, or-”

“Or they're hopeless but very enthusiastic,” Natasha said. She gave Carol a pointed look as she and
Sam went past, doing a heavily modified box step. Steve was pretty sure that she was just letting him do what he wanted, and keeping her feet out of his way.

Carol gave her a smug grin, unconcerned. “I punched a dinosaur last week.”

Jan patted her on the shoulder. “And we're going to teach you how to do it gracefully.”

“Good luck with that,” Jess said, grinning. “Steve, we didn't list 'dance lessons' on the group calendar, that's about as discreet as we're going to get.” Steve tried to glare at her. It was harder than it should've been, and she just shrugged. “We're helping! Right?”

“You're helping,” Steve said, because he'd always been weak to a hopeful smile. “Other people, not so much.”

As one, everyone looked up at the ceiling, where Clint was dangling upside down from one of Peter's webs. “No, give me a sec,” Clint said. “I got this.”

“You've been up there for fifteen minutes now,” Jan said, her hands on her hips. She pointed one imperious finger at the ground. “Get down here and help me demonstrate!”

Clint threw his arms up. Or maybe down. Steve wasn't sure. “I'm working on it!” he said.

“Peter...” Steve said, glancing at him.

“Look, I don't, I don't know how he could-” Peter scratched his head. He huffed out a sigh. “I don't see a way to fix this, to be honest.”

“Take your shoe off,” Nat suggested to Clint.

“He'll die,” Sam said. Nat shrugged. Sam shook his head. “You are cold.”

Natasha grinned, her teeth flashing sharp and bright. “He's used to it.”

“What the hell is going on in here?”

Steve glanced over his shoulder as Jessica strode in, ready to spar in a pair of yoga pants and a sports bra. Behind her, Luke was staring up at the ceiling, his mouth hanging open just a tiny bit. He gestured at Clint. “Parker, what the hell?”

“I didn't do it!” Peter said. “I mean, I know I'm the obvious suspect, but really, he got himself into this mess.”

“And I'm going to get myself out of this mess,” Clint said. He wiggled a bit, his free leg flopping through the air. “Huh. How long until this stuff dissolves, Pete?”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering if this is what insanity felt like. “Carol, can you please-”

Carol rolled to her feet. “On it.” She shot straight up. “Hold still, Barton, for God's sake.”

“God has no place in these walls,” Steve said, his voice dour, and Luke burst out laughing.

“In general, no,” he agreed. “What are you all-”

Jan popped up in front of him, a finger pointing at his face. “Can you keep a secret?” she asked, her eyes narrowed.
He stared at it. “Better than you can.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. “That's... Probably true,” she admitted.

“That's definitely true,” Carol said, descending with her arms wrapped around Clint's chest. He hung limply in her grip, a distinct pout on his face. “Here, Steve, I found your dance partner. He's mostly undamaged.”


“He's learning how to dance from me,” Jan said. “Clint is assisting.”

“I get paid in cookies,” Clint said. His foot, still covered in webbing, stuck to the floor, and he pried his foot out of his shoe.

“I think I mentioned this,” Jessica said to Luke. She tugged Luke out of Thor and Jane's path before they could plow into him. “Pretty sure I mentioned this.”


“How does it look like it's going?” Jessica asked, at the same time as Jan said, “It's going just fine.”

“He's stopped kicking me in the shins,” Clint said. He paused. “Mostly.”

“You're all horrible people, you know that?” Luke shed his sweatshirt, tossing it onto a nearby piece of equipment. “Sweet Christmas, he's gonna be traumatized.”

“He should be used to that by now,” Carol said, tripping over her own feet as she tried to follow Jess through a complicated step that Steve was pretty sure had been a fox trot once upon a time. Laughing, Jess did a side-step and a shimmy, keeping her feet just out of reach.

“I am,” Steve admitted. “Could stand a little less of it, though, to be honest.”

Luke held out a hand. “C'mon, then.” His teeth flashed in a broad smile. “I taught Danny to dance, I can teach you.”

“Danny still dances like a dying fish looking for a puddle,” Jessica said. Her hands flopped through the air, her legs twitching in a caricature of dancing. “All limp limbs and gasping for air.”

“That's... Very descriptive,” Jan told her, her lips pursed. She grabbed Clint's hand, and, one foot bare, he fell into step with her.

Luke gestured in Steve's direction. “You wanna do this?”

Jessica paused in the midst of pulling her hair back in a ponytail. She considered Steve. “Fuck no.”

“So, you're just going to hang out here and make snide comments?” he asked, a fond smile twitching his lips.

“Mostly I'm going to punch the shit out of something, but I guess I can work in making snide comments between punches,” Jessica said, her head tipped to the side.

“Wonderful.”

She stabbed a finger in his direction as she crossed over to the punching bags. “You're the one who tells me I've got to learn to multitask.”
“You gotta love it when your very good advice comes back to bite you on the ass,” Luke said to Steve.

“It happens a lot in this group,” Steve agreed. “Maybe we should stop giving advice.”

“If you held it in, you'd die,” Sam told him. Natasha poked him in the shoulder. “What the hell was that for?”

“Pay attention to your partner,” she said, her eyes narrowed.

Sam blinked at her. “My partner's over there-” he said, waving at Carol, right before Natasha shoved Peter at him. Sam stopped. “I guess you're my partner?”

“I generally do what she tells me to do,” Peter admitted. “Spider pecking order.”

Sam offered him a hand. “Why are all the women I know terrifying?”

“Because all women are terrifying,” Jess said. She was doing something bizarre with her hands and knees; Steve was pretty sure she was attempting the Charleston. She was also failing, but she sure was trying. “The ones who don't seem terrifying are just extra good at hiding it.” She did a hopping kick. “Right Jane?”

“I think about murdering my male colleagues at least twice a day,” Jane said, looking up at Thor with a lovesick grin. He was laughing as he kissed her lips.

“Thatta girl,” Jessica said, wrapping her hands. “Let us know if you need help with that.”

“If she chooses to lay waste to the scientific community, she will require no assistance,” Thor said. He sounded insulted by the very thought.

“Please don't murder anyone,” Steve said.

“I'll do my best,” Jane said, never breaking eye contact with Thor. He scooped her up, his broad hands cupping her narrow waist, lifting her off her feet to spin her around. She was laughing as she threw her arms around his neck.

“You leading or following?” Luke asked Steve. Steve stared at him. “You... Gotta figure that out. You know that right?”

“It wasn't first on the agenda,” Steve said. “Is there etiquette for that?”

Luke paused, a frown crossing his face. “I honestly have no idea. Jan?”

“If you're dancing with a lady, generally you'd lead,” Jan said, tangoing past. Clint spun her in a circle and dipped her. She looked up at Steve from her upside down position. “If you're dancing with another gentleman, then generally the one who asked for the dance leads.” She grinned, her hair brushing the ground. “Like rolling for initiative.”

“Nerd,” Carol said, hopping past with Jess clinging to her back.

“One does what one must to survive,” Jan said, as Clint set her back on her feet. “But like most points of etiquette, there's always exceptions, Steve.” They did a quick set of steps, and Jan went spinning out, one hand caught in Clint's. “Negotiation, consent and understanding your partners needs are just as important on the dance floor as they are in the bedroom.”
Steve watched her go. “So... Do I lead?” he asked Luke.

Luke grinned at him. “You planning on asking, or waiting to be asked?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I don't think I'm going to be able to-”

“You planning on asking, or waiting to be asked?” Luke repeated.


“Good. Then you got something to work towards, right?” He tucked his hands in his pockets. “So?”

Steve shook his head. “So?”

“Ask the man to dance, dumbass,” Jessica said from behind the punching bag. She wound up and landed a blow that threatened to send it crashing off its chain. She grinned, wide and bright. “Unless you don't need practice with that.”

“You need practice with that,” Sam said, sweeping Natasha in a wide circle.

“This isn't helping,” Steve said.

“Sure it is,” Carol said. Jess was now standing on her shoulders, balanced like an acrobat. Carol took a couple of steps forward, then backpedaled, keeping Jess's weight centered. Sam and Peter broke apart, both of them scrambling in opposite directions as Carol stumbled forward. “If it wasn't for us, you would've given up and gone to punch things.”

“Hey, don't dis punching things,” Jessica said, her eyes narrowed at the punching bag. “Punching things is great.”

“Have you considered that maybe you're using physical exertion and general violence to cover for deeper emotional problems in your life?” Jan asked her.

“Every damn day,” Jessica said, aiming a ferocious right hook at the bag.

“Well, then, carry on,” Jan said, as she and Clint tangoed past.

“Don't knock it til you've tried it,” Clint said. He'd acquired a fake rose from somewhere, and had it tucked behind one ear. “Keeps most of the team off the streets and out of jail.”

“Y'all need therapy,” Sam said. “Seriously. Therapy.”

“Probably,” Steve said.

“Absolutely,” Natasha said, and Sam gave her a spin.

“I'm handing out referrals at the end of this.”

“And we're all looking forward to that,” Steve said. He gave Luke a slight smile. “Right now, though, I need a dance partner.” He held out a hand. “Wanna dance?”


* 

Tony wasn't running. He wasn't. Running would be a symptom of panic, and he absolutely was not
panicking. So he wasn't running. He wasn't running.

He was walking very quickly, that was true, but it absolutely, positively wasn't a run.

A flicker of light darted up the hallway, swirling around his head, and then Jan appeared next to him, growing back to her normal size in a single blink. “He's fine,” she said, and they both knew who 'he' was.

“Bullshit,” Tony bit out. He didn't slow down.

Jan fell into step beside him, her feet flying over the polished floor of the hallway. “Tony. He's fine, and-”

Tony spared her a cutting glance. “Where the hell is Sam? Sam is supposed to-” He shook his head. “He's going to need Sam, and-”

“Sam's incoming, but still at least an hour out,” Jan said. “Tony, you need to clean up before you go in there, you're just going to-”

Tony glanced down at himself. He'd left the armor on the landing pad on the roof, but the black undersuit was decent enough. “What, do you think that I'm going to go get a facial and a manicure? Get a bespoke suit?”

“Maybe you could shower, you smell a little ripe,” Jan shot back, as they cut through a pack of orderlies, heading straight for SHIELD's version of an ICU. People scrambled to get out of their way, and Tony barely noticed. “Look-”

Tony slammed through a set of double doors and nearly crashed into Bruce.

Bruce took one look at Tony's face and immediately said, "He's fine.”

Tony bit back the urge to say something dark and angry and horrible. "What are you doing out of bed?” he asked instead. "You should be-"

"I'm fine," Bruce said, with a wan smile. "Tony-"

"I'm fine!" Tony said, throwing his hands in the air, stomping up the corridor. "Great! You're fine, he's fine, everyone's FUCKING FINE."

"Tony-" Jan said, and Tony glared at her.

"If everyone's so fucking fine, why are we in goddamn SHIELD medical?” he snapped, and Bruce wrapped a hard, solid arm across his chest jerking him to a hard stop.

"We are here," he said, his voice very soft and very controlled, "because part of being fine is getting adequate medical treatment when things go wrong." He was pale, his lips tight and dark circles etched beneath his eyes, but his gaze was steady, his grip strong. "So if it helps you to say, 'everyone will be fine' as opposed to 'everyone is fine,' than that's fine, too, we can do that, we can work with that, but you. Need. To. Calm. Down."

Each word was bitten off with precision, his teeth clicking against the consonants. Tony sucked in a breath, and tasted copper and dust in his throat. "I'm calm," he said.

"And I'm fine," Bruce said, his lips twitching. His head tipped forward, just far enough so he could look up at Tony from under the heavy line of his brows. "Right?"
Tony didn't smile, but he didn't scream, either. He considered that a win. "Right." Bruce's arm relaxed as he took a step back, his hand sliding against Tony's chest, bracing him, holding him up. Tony reached up, grabbing hold of his hand and squeezing. "Is he-"

"Blunt force trauma," Bruce said. "There's some burns, some cuts and contusions, but mostly, Tony, it was blunt force trauma."

"The shield took most of the blow," Jan said, and Tony realized she was still holding onto his other arm. "But the weight-"

"He sustained a series of hairline fractures throughout his system," Bruce said. "So he looks bad." His eyes fluttered, hard and fast. "His body is focusing on fixing the worst of it, there's an internal triage going on, he's protecting his core, his organs, his skeleton are getting the attention. The surface stuff, it, uh, it looks bad, but it's all surface."

"Bruises, cuts, burns, got it," Tony said. He swallowed. "He's going to be okay."

"He IS okay," Bruce said. "He's here. I know you don't like it here, he doesn't like it, no one likes it." He leaned into his hand, pressing against the arc reactor. "His body is handling this, but even he can stand to get a little help."

Tony nodded. "Jessica?"

"Dislocated shoulder, possible concussion, definite bruised tailbone, general bad temper," Bruce rattled off. His smile seemed lighter now. Easier. "She would like everyone to know that she's most definitely not okay, and she is very, very pissed off about it."

Tony's breath came out as a laugh. "Right." He started forward, and this time, they let him. "Luke's with her?"

"Yes," Jan said. "Jess, too."

Tony's head jerked in her direction. "Jess?"

Jan grinned. "Trust me, she can handle it." She bounced along next to Tony, her feet barely touching the ground. "Carol and Thor are still on site?"

"With Peter," Tony agreed. "And the SHIELD crews." He shoved a hand through his hair. "We've got experts coming in to take over the clean up, but for now, SHIELD needs all the heavy lifters we've got." He shook his head. "I can't deal with this right now, where is he?"

Bruce glanced at him. "You okay?"

Tony nodded. "I'm fine." He wasn't sure he meant it, but he was getting really good at faking it.

*  

Steve looked worse than he expected.

The room was too loud, too busy, too full of people talking in low, serious voices, and machines beeping away with steady insistence. There was a few members of SHIELD scientific mingled in with the doctors, nurses and interns that seem to overflow every available inch of space. But in the midst of it all, there was Steve, too pale and too still. The left side of his face was a mass of bruises, his lip split and his eye swollen almost shut. A butterfly bandage held together a nasty looking gash on the side of his neck, and his hair was matted against his forehead. Someone had made a clear
effort to clean him up, but the skin showing above the bandages on his arms looked grimy still.

“Spouse, and thus, medical proxy coming through,” Tony said, because he wasn't sure if that was right, but what the hell was the point of accidentally marrying one of your best friends if you couldn't use it to throw your weight around? He brushed his way past a nurse and what looked to be a couple of interns, plowing straight towards the bed.

“Steve?” Tony smoothed Steve's hair down, his fingers as light as he could make them. But Steve shifted, his head turning into the pressure of Tony's hand. His eyes opened, and he squinted up at Tony.

“Hi,” he said, and he was trying to smile, Tony could tell that he was trying.

Tony smiled back. “Stop trying to catch things with your face, Cap.”

Steve made a sound kind of like a laugh. “Listen, mister, I do what I need to do to get the job done.”

“You're a disaster,” Tony told him. “And this is me talking. This is Anthony Stark saying, you are a walking human tire fire.”

“Diagnosed by an expert,” Steve said.

“It's information you can trust,” Tony said. Someone behind Tony moved, a machine rattling as it was bumped, and Steve flinched, his body going tense. Tony looked back over his shoulder. “Okay. Thanks for your help. You can all go.”

For an instant, there was silence. The doctor frowned at him. “He needs to be monitored, Mr. Stark.”

Tony gave him a thin lipped smile. “Right. He's hooked up to every machine imaginable, Jarvis has got a lock on him, and Sam will be here soon.” He leaned in. “He's being monitored. But all of you-” He waved his hand at the medical staff. “Are only stressing him out right now, and that's not beneficial.”

He crossed to the door and opened it. “So anyone who's not comfortable with asking the injured man to loan you five bucks? Out.”

“Mr. Stark,” the doctor started, and Bruce patted him on the back.

“He's having a pretty bad day,” Bruce said with a slight smile. “And if you don't want to have a worse one? I'd suggest you leave quietly.”

The doctor stared at him. “Are... You threatening me?”

“No,” Bruce said. “Of course n-”

“If that means you'll leave?” Tony said, giving him a vicious smile. “Yes. I am. Get out. And if you have any problems with the situation, you can take them up with Fury. But unless he comes down here to reinforce the status quo?” Tony leaned in. “I'm in charge.”

“Tony-” Steve said from the bed, and he sounded almost amused. “Don't-”

“Too late!” Tony said, because everyone was filing out, one after another, with varying degrees of speed. Bruce was the last one to slip through the door.

“Call me if you need me,” he said, his voice quiet. He glanced back at Steve. “Either of you.”
Tony nodded. “Just... Don't blame me if I barricade the door.”

Bruce nodded. “I wouldn't blame you, and I wouldn't be surprised.” He slipped through the door, pulling it shut behind him.

Steve let out a breath. “Thanks,” he said. His tongue flicked out, moistening his lips. “I...”

“I know,” Tony said, sinking back down into the chair next to the bed. “How're you feeling?”

Steve managed a smile. “Fine.”

Tony nodded. “Uh-huh.” He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “How're you really feeling?”

Steve was silent for a second. “I'm... Very aware of having bones,” he said at last, and Tony didn't know exactly what that meant, but it sounded very unpleasant.

He reached out, pushing Steve's hair away from his forehead. “Sam's coming,” he said, because that had to be a comfort. “He'll be here soon. Okay?”

Steve smiled, his eyes struggling to focus. “Okay.”

Tony paused. “What- Is there anything I can do to help? You, I mean?” He shifted in his chair. “What does Sam usually do? Is there a usually in this situation? Please don't let there be a 'usually,' Steve, this isn't-”

Steve took a deep breath. “Come... Come here.” He shifted forward, pushing himself upright, and Tony jumped out of his chair like he'd been launched from it.

“Hey, don't-” He barely got the words out before Steve managed to grab hold of his arm, tugging him forward, pulling him towards the bed. “Steve, what-”

“Sit with me,” Steve said, and his head was down, his shoulders hunched. But he was holding onto Tony like a lifeline, and Tony loved him so much it hurt.

He leaned over. “Steve. I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere.” He managed a smile, his hand cupping over Steve's where it gripped his wrist. “What do you need?”

Steve took a breath, and it looked like it hurt, it sounded like it hurt. “Sit here,” he said, his voice reedy and thin. “On, on the bed, and-” His voice trailed away, leaving Tony to fill in the blanks.

Tony blinked. “Oh, you want to put your head in my lap?” He grinned. “Sure, that's fine, just let me-” He stroked his thumb over the back of Steve's clinging hand. “Let me do this okay?”

Steve's fingers tightened, just for an instant, and then relaxed. Without thinking, Tony raised caught Steve's hand in his, raising it up and pressing a light kiss to Steve's ragged knuckles. “There we go,” he said. “Trust me. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be your pillow until Sam comes to replace me.”

Chuckling, he snagged one of the extra pillows. “Can you sit up? Real quick, and I can-” He didn't even manage to finish the sentence before Steve was struggling up into a sitting position. As quick as he could, doing his best not to disturb any of the monitors or Steve's IV, Tony slipped up to sit at the head of the bed. He dropped the pillow in his lap and then wrapped an arm around Steve's shoulders. “All set. Lie back down. Careful.”

Supporting Steve's weight as best he could, Tony lowered him back down, until Steve's head settled
in his lap. For an instant, Steve was tense, his face pinched and tight. Then, he let out a breath, and the strain seemed to go with it. Tony smiled down at him. “There you go,” he said, and Steve's eyelashes fluttered. “Better?”

Steve tried to nod. “Better,” he said. “Sorry.”

“You're fine,” Tony said. And, because that could read a couple of ways, he tried again. “I don't mind. And you will be fine.” Steve didn't move, didn't say a word, and Tony stroked his hair, as gently as he could. “It'll be okay,” he whispered. Because he'd never been good at platitudes. “It hurts because you're healing. It's going to be okay.”

Steve's shoulder twitched, his fingers twisting the fabric of the blankets. “What if I'm not?”

Tony blinked, his head falling forward. “What?” Steve was silent, and Tony took a deep breath. “The serum-”

Steve let out a raw, angry bark of laughter. “We-” He sucked in a breath, and another. “We don't know if that's... Permanent,” he said. Tony's fingers stilled against his hair, and Steve's head turned, twisting away. “We don't know anything.”

Tony nodded. “No. We don't.” The strands of Steve's hair slipped between the rough pads of his fingertips. “You're one of a kind, Rogers. And you hold your secrets pretty well.”

For a long, weighty moment, he was silent. Then, “What happens if it stops working?” he whispered.

Tony took a breath. “Then it's a very good thing you're married to a guy who can afford the best insurance coverage,” he said. He rubbed a thumb across the angle of Steve's cheekbone, gentle on the bruised skin. “I might not be so good at fixing myself, Steve, but I'm stubborn about fixing the things I-” He stopped short of saying 'love.' It seemed wrong. It seemed dangerous. “The things I care about.”

Steve didn't say anything. Tony wasn't even sure that he heard him. But then, in a sudden, almost frightening rush, he rolled over, pressing his face into Tony's stomach. Tony's breath left him in a rush, the shock of the contact rolling over his skin in a wave of heat. “Don't-” he choked out, but Steve had already gone still again, his body curled forward, one hand in a fist next to Tony's hip.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, and Tony struggled to get himself back under control. He was not a randy teenager. He gritted his teeth, trying not to think about Steve's breath, hot against his stomach, the armor's undersuit barely any barrier between Steve's mouth and Tony's skin. Steve's fingers flexed, his knuckles brushing against Tony's thigh. “Sorry.”

Tony licked his lips. “Don't move,” he said. His hand was shaking as he stroked Steve's hair. “You're going to hurt yourself, Steve. Don't do that.”

Steve exhaled, and Tony hated himself. Hated himself for thinking about just how warm Steve's breath was against his skin. He gritted his teeth, trying to concentrate on the steady, slow beeping of the machines that surrounded them. They were in SHIELD medical for a reason. Steve was hurt, Steve was in pain, and Tony knew he had no shame, that he was a selfish asshole, he didn't need more goddamn proof of this.

“'M okay.”

The words were almost inaudible, but they were enough. Enough to remind Tony that he wasn't here for himself. He was here because Steve needed him. Because Steve was in pain, was suffering.
Steve was, for the lack of a better word, afraid.

Tony sucked in a breath. “You're going to be fine,” he said, and he was certain of that. That was a rock solid certainty. He'd make sure of that. “And if the serum stops working, well, then, guess we'll finally get a day off, Steve.” He went back to stroking Steve's hair, because Steve didn't seem to mind the contact. “We'll get a van and drive across the country. Looking for America. Or, if that's too hard to find, just a good fried chicken joint.”

Steve huffed out a breath, and it sounded almost like a laugh. “Right.”

Tony leaned forward. “Oh, you think I'm kidding?” He grinned. “I can make this happen. You. Me. A van. It'll be our hobo van. We can criss cross the country, looking for trouble.”

“Looking for trouble?” Steve repeated.

“Yes, and when we find it, we'll hit it with our van,” Tony said, and this time, he was sure that was a laugh. He smiled, some of the strain going out of his shoulders. “What's the point of having a hobo van if you can't use it to run over all of your troubles?”

Steve's head moved, just a little, just enough so that he could peer up at Tony with one red-rimmed eye. “You'd resent me after a week,” he said.

Tony arched an eyebrow at him. “I can work anywhere,” he said. “You can drive. I can curse out my latest design in the back.”

Steve's eyes closed. “Just because I couldn't be a hero, doesn't mean you'd have to give it up, too.” He sounded tired. Resigned.

Tony's fingers stilled, his palm cupping the back of Steve's head. “I don't know,” he said at last. “The most heroic I ever felt in my life was a time Happy and I came across this old car broken down on a coastal highway.” He stared, unseeing at the wall. “It was dark and cold, like a hundred plus miles from anywhere, and they had, like, four kids in the backseat.” His fingers flexed, the callouses on his fingers scraping against his own palms. “It wasn't even a hard fix, you know? Just needed the know how and a couple of tools.”

He smiled. “Small things mean a lot, sometimes. I guess.” He took a deep breath. “You're always going to be a hero, Steve. We need your brains, after all. You're the strategist around here. You're the one with the plan. You're the one we all trust.” His thumb stroked over Steve's jaw. “You're going to heal. But even if you didn't...” He smiled. “We'll still need you.”

For a long moment, Steve was silent. “So the hobo van's the backup plan?” he said, and Tony laughed.

“The hobo van is absolutely the backup plan,” he said. It didn't even seem like a bad backup plan. Of course, if he had to sleep in a van with Steve within arm's reach, he'd probably die from sexual frustration. But it would be worth it. “We'll find little acts of heroism. Paint a mural. Fix up a playground. Change a tire here or there, or a window pane.”

“Steve n' Tony's Fix-It Service,” Steve said, and he was breathing better now. Less ragged. Less strained. “Most startups fail in their first year, you know.”

“It's okay, you've got a backer with deep pockets,” Tony said.

Steve nodded. “Will he be forgiving if we don't turn a profit?”
He had a sudden and overwhelming vision of Steve in one of StarkIndustries more formal and overwhelming board rooms, the table piled high with profit and loss statements and charts showing a failing business. But Steve was grinning at him, rough and wicked, his fingers wrapping around Tony's tie and tugging him forward, confident in his ability to secure continued funding, despite all financial sense.

It was a very, very pleasant thought.

Steve shifted, and Tony did his best to drag his mind out of the gutter. He was very, very glad of the pillow between Steve's head and his lap. “Probably,” he said, and his voice sounded raw, even to him. He cleared his throat. “The guy with the money's never had much sense.”

Steve's fingers brushed against his thigh, and Tony gritted his teeth. “I don't know,” he whispered. “He's always talked sense to me when I needed it.”

Tony took a deep breath, and let it out, his fingers stroking Steve's hair. “Well, aren't you lucky?” he said. “You're going to be okay, Steve. Just get some rest.” Steve's shoulders twitched, and Tony drew the blankets up to cover him, as best as he could manage without moving him. “You'll feel better in the morning.”

Steve nodded, his face rubbing against Tony's midsection. “Promise?” he mumbled.

Tony took a breath. “I promise,” he said, because he was adept at two things: lying to himself, and forcing reality into whatever form he wanted it to take. His hand smoothed over Steve's hair, and even that casual contact hurt. “Go to sleep.” He made himself smile.

He was good at that, too.

*

"Where WERE you?"

Sam stopped, confusion slipping across his face. As soon as it came, it was gone, and he gave Tony a look that Tony couldn't quite read. "Debriefing," he said. "Because that's the protocol." He spread his hands. "Unless you found someone else dumb enough to be third string quarterback for this crew."

Tony locked his teeth together, struggling to get himself back under control. It was harder than it should've been, but Steve was still asleep in his lap, his breath soft and even against Tony's lower stomach. Tony had lost track of time somewhere along the way, his back and shoulders were aching, his legs numb, and he didn't give a damn about that. He was used to that, and he was used to ignoring that.

He stared at Sam across the dim, shadowed length of the room. "He needed you, he's been waiting for you to show up for hours, and you were in this building? You were here, but instead of coming up here, you were filling out PAPERWORK?"

Sam nodded, a slight dip of his chin. "Yes," he said. "Because Steve was out of commission, and you were with him, and that means that per protocol, I-"

"I don't care!" It came out too loud and too sharp and too EVERYTHING, and Sam didn't even react. Somehow that made it worse. Tony took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't."

"I know," Sam said. He crossed the room and lowered himself into the chair next to the bed, facing Tony. He folded his hands on his lap. "I know you don't. I know you're stressed, and I know you're
not comfortable with dealing with this kind of shit."

"I'm-" Fine, he wanted to say, but it was such an obvious lie that he didn't bother.

"I also know," Sam said, giving him a flat look, "that I did what needed to be done today, instead of what I wanted to do, and I was able to do that, because I knew that you-" He flicked a finger in Tony's direction. "Were here. With him." He settled back in the chair, his head tipped slightly to the side, his dark eyes steady. "I trusted that you could handle this."

"Well, that was pretty fucking stupid," Tony said, and Sam's lips twitched.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, and Tony could see the trap at his feet, gaping like a canyon in front of him.

“Don't go all shrink on me,” he said. Sam didn't say anything. He just waited, his face calm, his gaze steady. Tony huffed out a breath. “You said it yourself. I'm bad at this.”

“No, what I said was that you're not comfortable with dealing with things like this,” Sam pointed out. “Hating it and being able to do it despite hating it are two different things.”

“Yes, well, I can't do it, that's why I hate it.”

Sam's eyes dropped to Steve. “I don't know.” He looked back up. “He looks like you did just fine.”

Tony's hands were in fists at his sides. “He needed you.”

Sam considered him. “He needs more than me,” he said at last. “Even if I was prepared to be his only friend, his only source of support, the only person he could depend on, that's not healthy, not for either of us.” He leaned forward. “He's one of my best friends, and I'm one of his best friends, Tony. But I am quite certain that he was just as relieved, just as happy, to see you walk through the door tonight as he would've been if it had been me.”

Tony took a breath. “Yeah. We both know that's a lie.”

“Well, you'll just have to wait for him to wake up and then ask him, then,” Sam said. His eyebrows arched. “And in the meantime, you have anything else to say?”

Tony's eyes closed. “I'm sorry I snapped at you,” he said.

“And?” Sam asked.

Tony glared at him. “I was an asshole and you didn't deserve that, and I shouldn't have done it.” He stopped. “I'm... Working on that.”

Sam nodded. “Work harder.” He smiled. “But apology accepted anyway.” He pushed himself to his feet. “Now that I am here to relieve you, AFTER having handling all the paperwork, I'd like to point out, you want some help moving him?”

Something in Tony recoiled from that, from Steve being taken away from him, from the idea of being relieved of this burden, physical or emotional or both. But he was exhausted, and he knew it. He took a deep breath. “Thanks,” he said. But when Sam slid an arm behind Steve's shoulders, helping Tony to lever him up, just far enough so that Tony could slip out from under his weight, his eyes burned. He ignored that, making sure that Steve was settled back against the pillows before he collapsed into the nearby chair.
Steve exhaled, slow and light, but he never even moved. Somehow, that hurt too. That he didn't even notice that Tony had left. That he was gone.

Tony scraped a hand over his face. “You're losing it,” he mumbled.

“What?”

He looked up at Sam. “Nothing,” he said. “Talking-” He flopped a hand through the air. “Talking to myself.” He leaned forward, and God, his back was killing him. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

He looked up. “Sit there for that long with his head in your lap.” Sam stared at him. Tony waved at the bed. “Like that.” Sam still looked blank, and Tony frowned. “Don't you-”

Sam blinked. “Oh. Yes. Yes, of course.” His eyes darted to the side. “He usually doesn't stay under this long, to be honest, so I don't-” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don't have to worry about it for very long.”


Sam touched his shoulder. “Now you know how he feels, when you end up in here.”

“Annoyed and frustrated?” Tony said, because he didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to think about Steve, trapped in a chair like this, his stomach churning with fear and anxiety. Tony scraped a hand over his face. “Pissed off?”

“Let's go with that, sure,” Sam said.

There was a slight knock at the door, and Tony was too tired to turn around to see who it was. But Sam's face lit up, his face splitting in a grin. “Look who the space cat dragged in.”

“Weak, Wilson.” Abigail Chase walked up next to Tony, slipping her arms around Sam's neck. He leaned in for the kiss, and Tony resisted the urge to kick them both in the shins.

“Please, have some respect for the dead,” he said, when the two of them gave every indication of having forgotten he was in the room.

Abby's head came up, her lips swollen from the force of kiss. “He's not-”

“He's not, but I definitely am,” Tony said. He glared at her. “I thought you were supposed to keep aliens off of the surface, Agent Chase.”

“This might surprise you, Mr. Stark, but space? It's a pretty wide open expanse,” Abby said, adjusting her glasses. “And occasionally, things get past us.” She leaned back against Sam's chest, and he looped his arms around her waist. “We're working on it.”

Tony gave her a suspicious look. “Are you using this little mishap as an excuse for a booty call?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice flat. “I absolutely am.” She reached back and patted Sam on the cheek. “And no one'd blame me.”

Tony raised his hand. “Me. I would.”

“And no one cares what you think,” she said. She turned, kissing Sam's jaw. “But for now, duty calls, and for that, I need you, Stark. There's some tech that we can't figure out, and as much as I'd
like to lock you out of my labs on a permanent basis, you're our best bet for figuring it out.”

Tony was so tired he could barely breathe. So tired that keeping his head up hurt. But he looked at Sam. “You got this?”

Sam nuzzled Abby's neck, and she made a sound that from anyone else, Tony would call a giggle. From Chase, he was pretty sure it would be a growl. Or something close. But Sam pulled himself free. “I've got this,” he said, smiling at Tony. “Go.”

Tony went, without a single glance back. He was proud of himself for that.

*

Steve's eyes flickered open, and waking was pain followed by an inexplicable sense of loss. He took a breath, waiting for it to pass. The pain subsided to a dull ache. The sense of something missing, something lost, something ruined, did not.

“Morning, sleeping beauty.”

Steve's head rolled to the side, just a little, just far enough to find Sam sitting next to his bed, a tablet braced on one knee. Sam smiled at him. “How're you feeling?”

Steve took a breath. His ribs protested the small movement, but the pain was manageable. Almost comfortable. “Pretty bad,” he managed.

Sam grinned at him. “Yeah, well, maybe don't try to stop a crashing spaceship with your shield next time.”

Steve smiled back. “Next time a spaceship is crashing down on a crowd of civilians,” he said, “I'll remember your advice.”

“Our lives are fucking weird,” Sam said. He set the tablet aside and reached for the water pitcher beside the bed. “Seriously. How're you feeling?”

Steve lifted one hand off the bed, flexing his fingers. It took more effort than it should've, but everything moved as it should, with only a dull ache as the skin and muscles moved. He nodded, and let it fall back down at his side. “I think I'm okay.”

Sam poured him a cup of water. “Yeah?” His eyes canted up to meet Steve's. “Because I have something that'll make you feel better.” Steve arched an eyebrow at him, and Sam nodded. “Ready for this?”

“No,” Steve said, but he was smiling.

“That's right. You're not.” Sam reached for his backpack. He reached into the front pocket and came up with a red, white, and blue silly straw. Sam dropped it into the water cup with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

Steve stared at him. “You're an idiot,” he managed at last.

“You love me,” Sam said, holding the cup out to Steve, one eyebrow arching. “I mean, I thought you did.”

Steve paused, his fingers just brushing the cup. “I... Do?” he said, because Sam still seemed to be waiting for a response.

“Huh,” Sam said, making sure he had a grip on the cup before he sat back down. “Because all the
times I've hung out by your bedside after you've been injured, you've never once asked to put your head in my lap.”

Steve froze, his lips still pursed around the silly straw. He gave a slight cough. “So.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I... Might've taken advantage of the situation.”

Sam cupped a hand over his mouth, which did absolutely nothing to hide his smile. “Cap. I'm shocked,” he said.

Steve hunched forward over his cup of water. “Shut up,” he mumbled. Sam grinned at him, and Steve took a petulant sip of his water. “I just wanted-” He sighed. “I don't know what I wanted.”

“The comfort of human touch?” Sam asked. He braced an elbow on the arm of his chair, leaning his cheek against the cradle of his hand. “Which, I might add, is something that human beings need in order to maintain mental and physical health, but which we're denied by modern society, by and large.”

Steve considered that. “Is that why I'm still trying with the dance lessons?” he asked. And why Tony's hand stroking his hair had felt so good. His face felt hot, and he focused on drinking his water.

Sam nodded. “It's entirely possible, and speaking of that, Jan stopped by. She wanted me to make it clear to you that just because you were dumb enough to get yourself injured-”

“A ship crashed on me,” Steve said.

“She considers this a personal failing on your part,” Sam told him. He leaned back in his chair, bracing one foot on the side of Steve's bed. “And she wants you to know that the reception's going off as planned, even if she has to strap you to a stretcher and drag you there herself.”

Steve sipped his water. “She'd do it.”

Sam nodded. “Yes. Yes, she would. She takes her party planning seriously.”

"She absolutely does.”

Steve looked up to find Luke in the doorway of his room, one arm braced on the frame. There was a padded yellow envelope in his upraised hand. He grinned at Steve's straw. "I see we've been raiding the juvenile ward again.”

Steve let out a noise that was half laugh, half cough, and Sam reached for the water pitcher to refill his cup. Steve waved him off. "I'm fine," he managed, trying to get his breathing back under control. "Just a-"

Sam shook his head. "Please stop trying to bullshit me, it is just embarrassing." After he handed Steve's cup back, his head tipping in Luke's direction. "Everything okay with Jessica?"

Memory crashed over Steve like a wave, knocking the breath out of him, and he jerked upright, his free hand fumbling at the sides of his bed. "Jessica! Is she-"

Sam grabbed his shoulder before he could manage to get fully upright, snagging his cup before the water went everywhere. "Don't even think about it, Cap."

Luke crossed the room in two huge strides, tossing the envelope onto the bedside table. “Hey, hey, hey,” he said, grabbing for Steve's other arm. “Stay still. She's fine.” Steve stared up at him, looking
for a lie in his face, and Luke smiled. “She's two doors down, wrapped up in a blanket burrito, hissing at Jan and Jess as they try to fuss at her.”

“When he says 'try to fuss over here,' he means 'totally succeed in fussing over her,’” Sam said, easing Steve back to the bed. “Because she's like that cat who snarls at you when you try to pet it and then bites you when you try to stop.”


Steve stared at him. “She's okay?” he managed.

Luke leaned over the bed. “She's okay,” he said, with a reassuring smile. “Everyone's okay.”

Steve took a breath, and then another. “Right. I-” He shook his head. “Sorry. I didn't even think, I-”

“Hey, man, it's okay. You're fine.” Luke patted him gently on the shoulder. “I'll tell her you asked about her, okay?” He straightened up. “And Tony had this delivered before he passed out, but it's got your name on it, so-” Luke nodded at the envelope. “Pretty sure it's for you.”

Steve glanced over at the envelope. He as pretty sure he'd never seen it before. “Don't think so,” he said, but Sam handed it over anyway. His name was written on the front, in Tony's strong, familiar hand. He cleared his throat. “Is Tony back at the tower? I mean, he was here, earlier, and then...” His voice trailed away, his face hot.

“He's asleep on the other side of the ward,” Sam said, with a slight smile. “I kicked him out when I got here, but he didn't get far.”

“Oh.” Steve caught himself smiling down at the package in his hands. “Okay.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, it's fine if he goes home, he should-”

“Not something to brag about!” Sam called after him.

“You got something to say, Sam 'Made of Eggshells' Wilson? Cause if I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut.” With a wave, Luke ducked out of the room and was gone.

“Loser,” Sam yelled after him.

“As parting shots go, that was not your best work,” Steve told him.

“Look, they can't all be gems,” Sam said. He picked up Steve's water cup and took a sip from the straw. “So. What'd he get you?”

“What?” Steve looked down at the envelope in his hands. “Oh. I don't know.” His fingers twitched against the need to rip it open. “I suppose I should wait to open it, or ask...” He looked at Sam. “Right?”

Sam's lips pursed around the straw, his eyes narrowing. “No. Open your gift.”

Laughing, Steve peeled back the flap. “If I get in trouble for this, I'm blaming you,” he said.

“Fine with me,” Sam said. He scooted his chair closer to the bed. “What'd you get?”

Steve tipped the envelope up, and a small hardcover book slid into his hand. On the yellow cover, a
simple picture of a pirate had been stamped in black ink. He turned the book over in his hands. “The Dark Frigate,” he read aloud. The cover wasn't familiar, but the title sent a spark of recognition through him. “Oh, my God...”

Sam peered over his shoulder. “Pirates,” he said, with a nod. “Awesome.”

Steve's heart was pounding, so loud in his ears that he was surprised that Sam couldn't hear it. “No, I-” He turned the book over between his palms. “Tony asked me about my favorite book, and I told him-” He shook his head. “I told him about one I read, as a kid. I didn't remember the name, though, I just-”

He opened the book, cradling its slight weight between his palms. There was piece of paper tucked in the front, a letter folded in neat thirds. The letterhead identified it as being from the Brooklyn Public Library, and the note on it was written in a neat, precise script. 'Based on the timeframe, reading level and description,' it read, 'I'm fairly certain this is the book you're looking for. If not, let me know.' There was no signature, just a smiley face sticker at the bottom right corner.

Steve realized he was grinning down at the book, so wide that his face hurt. His thumb stroked over the edges of the pages, smoothing over the rough edges, the paper weathered and worn by a hundred, by a thousand other hands. It wasn't a new copy. And somehow, that was better.

That was right.

Sam touched his shoulder, and Steve's head came up. Sam was looking at him, his face creased in a slight frown. “Hey, you okay?”

Steve blinked, and realized that he was crying. He shook his head, reaching up to swipe up his cheeks. “I'm fine,” he said, with a slightly wobbly smile. “I'm just fine.”

Sam studied him, his face unreadable, and then gave a slight nod. “Want me to read you some of that?” he asked, nodding at the book.

Steve gave a slight chuckle. “I think I can manage it on my own.”

Sam reached for it. “Yeah, but I'm sick of talking to you and if I leave, people are going to judge me, so I think it's story time.”

Laughing, Steve let him take the book, reaching out to steal his water cup back. “Okay,” he agreed, settling back against the pillows. “I expect you do to the voices, though.”

“'Do the voices?'” Sam repeated.

Steve nodded. “Do the voices.”

“Right, I'm going to pretend I know what that means, and just- You know, read this,” Sam said.

Steve let his eyes drift shut. “Okay, but if you don't do the voices, I'm going to be very disappointed in you, Sam.”

“I don't... Care if you're disappointed in me?” Sam said.

Steve grinned. “Yes, you do.”

There was a pause. “Goddammit. Yes, I do.” There was the sound of pages being turned, and then, “Philip Marsham was bred to the sea as far back as the days when he was cutting his milk teeth, and
he never thought he should leave it; but leave it he did, once and again, as I shall tell you.”

Steve smiled, and did his absolute best not to read anything into this.

He knew he would. But he could try not to. He could try.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A couple of things!

1. I know zero about fashion and cloth. I read a lot of bespoke clothing forums. I might get stuff wrong. I apologize, but I don't care.

2. This ends on a bit of a cliffhanger. I reiterate my usual promise: This is going to be just fine. Everyone will be happy. I promise, I know everyone is full of bad ideas, but I swear. I have a plan. 8)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hold still."

Luke gave Jan a cutting look, his hands propped on his hips. "We got work to do here, and you're getting in the way, Flutters."

Jan waved an airy hand in his direction. "We've all got work to do," she said, the words mumbled out around a mouthful of pins. "And I had to work this in when I could bring in my people."

Luke stared at her. "I can't believe you have people."

"I own a company." She slid a pin out from between her teeth like she was unsheathing a sword. "You do realize that, right?" She gestured at the gym floor, where dozens of fashionable people were hard at work. "I have so many people, and you-" She stabbed the pin in Luke's direction. "Don't have appropriate formal wear."


"Hey, now, don't-" That was as far as Luke got before a wave of eager assistants crashed up against him, tape measures snapping through the air.

"Do you have a safeword?" Peter asked, and heads turned in his direction. Peter went pale. "No."

"Don't call attention to yourself. You've got a very tempting silhouette," Jan said, yanking a pencil out of her hair. She scribbled a string of incomprehensible numbers on her notepad. "Steve. Arms UP."

"I... Don't know how to make them more 'up' than they currently are," Steve said. "I'm-" He looked up at his hands. "This is as far as they go, Jan."

She chewed on the eraser of her pencil, her attention still focused on her calculations. "Then put them down." She looked up. "Marjorie! What's our stock of black barathea?"

Marjorie was a short, round woman with a halo of blue curls that almost exactly matched the flowers
on her pale yellow dress. Steve wondered if she changed her hair with her clothes, or if she matched her clothes to her hair. Either seemed equally likely. She pushed a pair of orange cats eye glasses up her nose, frowning down at her tablet. "Barathea?"

Jan nodded, very emphatic. "Barathea. Maybe a silk weave for drape."

Marjorie stared at Steve. "Weight?"

"Ah, a hundred and ninety pounds-" he started, and Jan cut him off.

"Twenty-four ounces," Jan said.

"Not twelve?" Marjorie asked.

"Not twelve," Jan said, emphatic.

Marjorie made a 'you're the boss' face. "Ten bolts."

"Right, we're going to-" Jan poked Steve in the stomach, her lips pursed. "We're going to need more."

Marjorie gave the room an unimpressed look. "Yes. We are." She fished a sleek phone from the depths of her equally sleek black purse. "I'll call in some favors."

"Thank you, darling," Jan stared at Steve. "Be smaller."

"I tried that," he said, his lips twitching. "Didn't work out for me. Not going back."

She huffed out a breath. "So difficult."

"You do remember-" Luke managed to surface long enough to aim a glare in her direction. "That this is dance class, right? You got that?"

"And that means everyone is in one place." She studied her notes. "Peter, get off the ceiling."

"Promise they won't measure me!" His voice echoed down.

She smiled. "I promise nothing of the sort. You are not showing up in filthy jeans and a shirt you got six years ago because you signed up for a credit card or won it in a beer pong tournament." She waved her pencil at Thor. "Thor is getting a new suit!"

"And I am honored," Thor said to the young woman who was trying, and failing, to get a tape measure around his bicep. She turned a rather unfortunate shade of red.

"Thank you," she said. Then, "Or, you're welcome? It's- It's nothing?" She looked helplessly at Jane, who was draped in half a dozen bolts of jewel toned cloth. "Help me?"

"Stop flexing, Thor," Jane said. He grinned at her, and she flipped the end of a strip of silk at him. "Or I'll tell them you should be in puce."

"What the hell is puce?" Sam asked. He was standing stock still as a shirt was sewn into place around him. Steve envied how unfazed he was by the situation. "It doesn't sound pleasant."

"It's, like, an orange, right?" Jessica said. A phalanx of nervous looking fashionistas was hovering just out of arm's reach, huddled together like a flock of birds with particularly elaborate plumage.
One, a tall, lanky young man wearing something Steve would’ve called leiderhosen in another life, took a cautious step forward. Jessica pointed a wrapped fist at him. "No," she said. He retreated. Quickly.

"It's like, a greenish yellow," Clint said. He was barefoot and shirtless and Steve didn't know how that had happened, but no one working around him was complaining. "Or just a yellow?"

"It's a dark reddish purple," Steve said. "Almost a brown."

"There's the artist," Jan said. Her head tipped in Thor direction. "He'd look good in puce. Puce, with a dark gold trim, it's on brand. but enough of a change that it would indicate that we are, in fact, dealing with a formal event. I think-"

"Focus," Marjorie said, and Jan made a face.

"Puce," she said, stabbing her pencil at the girl who was struggling to get her measuring tape around Thor neck. "Do you need a stepstool, darling?"

"No need." Thor reached down and tucked a forearm against the back of her thighs, lifting her clear off the ground and up to eye level. He smiled at her. "There. That is better."

She grabbed for his shoulder, then his arm, then his neck. "Not at all," she said, her voice rising to a panicked pitch.

"Thor. Consent," Jane said, right before a cloth was draped over her head. She kept going, her voice barely muffled. "Body autonomy. We've been over this."

He winced. "Ah. Tis true." To the young woman who was now clinging to his shirt with a deathgrip, he said, "My apologies. I was attempting merely to assist, but it appears that I have overstepped."

“No, I mean, I-" She took a deep breath. “Thank you. For your help.”

“I hope everyone's getting hazard pay for this,” Jess said. She was wrapped in a pale teal silk that made her skin glow and her hair look like ebony. “Especially for trying to make a move on Jessica.”

“I will break fingers, I don't want to, but I will,” Jessica said, skittering sideways to keep the punching bag between her and the designers. They were whispering among themselves, doing quick calculations and sizing her up from a safe distance. Jessica gave them a suspicious look. “You need your fingers, right?”

“You're going to end up with a sack, you know that, right?” Carol asked.

“I'm going to end up in jeans and a t-shirt,” Jessica said. “The same as any other day.”

Jan pinched the bridge of her nose. “Only you could object to getting a custom designed couture dress,” she said.

“I'm special,” Jessica agreed. “And Luke's the fashion plate in this relationship.”

“It's the cross I have to bear,” Luke agreed. “You put me in black, and I'm going to be deeply disappointed in you, Jan.”

“I know what I'm doing,” Jan told him, her lips drawn up in a smirk. “Trust me.”

“Speaking of not trusting you,” Carol said. “I want a sleeveless dress.”
Jan gave her a look. “It's an evening wedding reception, Carol.”

Carol gave her a look right back. “That's true,” she said. “But I need to show off the guns.”

Jan stared at her, her mouth pursed. “The guns,” she repeated.

Carol flexed, the impressive musculature of her arms stretching the fabric of her shirt. “Guns,” she agreed, her teeth flashing in a bright grin.

Jan nodded. “You're an idiot.”

“With excellent biceps, give me that much,” Carol said, not bothered by that. “So you can give me a sleeveless dress-”

“No,” Jan said, but Carol kept going as if she hadn't said a word.

“Or watch me rip the sleeves off of your dress after they get in my way,” Carol said.

For an long, very quiet moment, they stared at each other, eyes narrowed, feet braced. “She'll do it,” Jess said. “Not even deliberately. She'll get into a pissing match with someone-”

“Probably someone from Asgard,” Clint said, leaning over to make a change to the sketch in front of him. He still wasn't wearing a shirt.

“Definitely someone from Asgard,” Carol said, grinning.

“And she'll flex and the next thing you know, you've lost a seam,” Jess said. Peter darted past her, running full out for the door, and she snagged him by the back of his shirt, dragging him to a stop. “So... Up to you, fashionista.”

Jan buried her face in her hands. “Or, you know, you could go one night without flexing,” she mumbled into her fingers.

Carol patted her gently on the back. “You ask the impossible of me.”

“Are we done here?” Luke asked. “Cause we're supposed to be dancing here. I don't mean to bring this up, but-”

“You're very demanding for a man who is going to look fabulous in a few days.” Jan looked at Marjorie. “We have everything?”

Marjorie flipped through a notebook, her short, gleaming nails catching the light. “We're missing one?”

Jan snapped her notebook closed. “Right. Nat's our honey pot on that one, she'll bring him in.” She nodded at Luke. “I'm done with this,” she said, gesturing at Steve. “You may take him away.”

“This is undignified,” Steve told her, as Carol turned on the sound system. Jess came barreling across the floor to leap onto her back.

“I love you,” Jan sing-songed at him, as her staffers got dragged onto the 'dance floor.' “And I'm going to make you look good.”

Laughing, Steve leaned over to brush a kiss on her cheek. “I never doubted it,” he said, affection sweeping over him. “Now, stop harassing the team.”
She pouted at him. “Must I? I'm just—”

“Found him,” Natasha said, shoving her way through the door, one of Bruce's arms clamped firmly in her hand. Bruce stumbled along in her wake, his glasses bobbling sideways on his nose. “Sorry we're late.”

For a second, everyone was still. Then Bruce started shaking his head. “Oh, no,” he said, holding up both hands like he could ward off the room at large. “No. Absolutely not. I, I do not know what this is, but—”

“Dance lessons,” Luke said. He clapped his hands together. “Speaking of which, Steve, we're burning daylight here. Let's go.” He held out a hand, and Steve squared his shoulders.

“Right,” he said, stepping up. “Waltz or—”

“Let's start with a waltz, you need the practice.”

“Okay. Yes. This is, this is a thing you're all doing, and it's very nice, why is there fabric?” Bruce nodded, a jittery little jerk of his head. “Actually, never mind, I don't dance, so—”

“No time like the present to learn,” Clint said. He was dancing a box step with a woman half a head taller than him, who was probably old enough to be his mother. “Come on, Doc, let's cut a rug.”

“I don't, I don't think that's a good idea,” Bruce said. He made a sideways step, trying to get past Natasha. She countered him, her face bored. He stared at her, nonplussed. “I'm not dancing. I don't dance.”

Jane, her hands held by Thor and the woman who'd been measuring him, skipped in an uneven, off kilter circle. “Sure, you do!” she said, her face flushed.

Bruce looked in her direction. “No,” he said, stressing the word. “I don't.”

Jane's head craned, twisting around to face him as she rotated. “Of course you do, that conference in Albuquerque—”

The color leached out of his Bruce's face. “No,” he repeated, but it had taken on a desperate note. “Jane, that was—”

“Wait,” Peter said. He was doing a conga line with half a dozen young men in very tight jeans. “Wait, what? What, Albuquerque, what happened in Albuquerque?”

“Nothing!” Bruce said, with more force than was absolutely necessary. Everyone stared at him. He took a breath. “Okay. So. There might've been more alcohol in the punch than I'd realized. It was a scientific symposium, I wasn't expecting the punch to be spiked.”

“Yeah, that was Darcy,” Jane said.

Bruce's eyes squeezed shut. “Of course it was,” he said. “But that doesn't mean—”

“Oh, wait, I think I've got video on my phone,” Jane said, pulling away from her dance partners. “I can show you!”


*
Tony braced his hands on the kitchen island. “Where the hell is everyone?” he asked.

There was no answer. Tony’s head tipped up. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?”

“As there is no one else here in the room, or-” He slashed a hand through the air. “Or anywhere else that I can find, that question was aimed in your general direction.”

“Ah. I had thought it rhetorical,” Jarvis said. He sounded apologetic.

Tony waited. Nothing else was forthcoming. He took a deep breath and made a desperate grab for patience. “Jay?”

“Yes, sir?”

Tony’s head fell forward. “Where is everyone?”

There was a beat of silence. “In the group gym.”

Tony frowned. “Everyone?”

“Yes.”

He pushed himself away from the counter. “Like, everyone?”

“Everyone,” Jarvis agreed.

“Are they having a party and they decided not to invite me?” Tony asked, trying to make it sound sarcastic, but it just come out a bit hurt. He headed for the door. “What, do I smell bad or something?”

“I believe they are preparing for the reception,” Jarvis said. “An event that you have made clear that you want no part of.”

Tony made a face. “Okay, that's true, that's, that's almost fair, but-” He headed back towards the elevator, his feet eating up the distance with a nervous sort of efficiency. “Look, I don't want to be involved, but I also don't want to be excluded, I mean, that's only common sense, Jarvis!”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis said, in that particular tone of voice that he used when Tony was being very irrational. Tony was used to that tone of voice.

“Anyways, did they tell you not to tell me?” he asked.

“No, sir, or I would not have done so.”

“Good to know where your loyalty lies,” Tony groused as he stepped onto the elevator.

“I was unaware that you wished me to spy on your teammates,” Jarvis said, his voice tart. “And provide you with information they considered private and confidential.”

Tony pulled a face. “Well, when you put it like that, it just sounds tawdry.” He punched the elevator button and leaned back against the wall, grateful for the moment of rest, no matter how fleeting. “Sorry, Jay. I haven't-” He scraped a hand over his face. “I haven't been sleeping particularly well.”

For a long moment, the elevator traveled in silence. “Neither has Captain Rogers,” Jarvis said at last.
“I suspect he is struggling to adjust to your current arrangement, just as you are, sir.”

Tony tried to smile. “Now who's telling tales out of school?”

“If it were to bring you comfort, I cannot see him objecting,” Jarvis said, just as the door to the elevator opened. “He worries about you.”

Tony tried to ignore the warmth that swept over him. “I think you're projecting, Jay,” he said. He pointed up towards the ceiling. “You're the only one fussing around here.”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis said.

“Just so we're clear,” Tony said, and he didn't know how to end that, so he just gave a firm nod and headed for the gym.

Halfway there, he picked up the faint strains of music, echoing through the hallway. The closer he got, the louder it got, the twang of a steel guitar mixing with a pounding, driving beat that seemed to vibrate the very walls of the hall.

Curious now, Tony pushed the doors open, took one step into the gym, and came to a dead stop.

The gym was filled with people, half of them unfamiliar to him, and all of them in the midst of what Tony would charitably describe as a 'boot scooting boogie.' Leading them was, of all people, Bruce, who was demonstrating a complicated step to what appeared to be a pair of identical twins. His face was flushed, and with each hop and sway, his glasses bounced on his nose, getting more and more off kilter.

Behind him, Steve, Sam and Peter were doing their best to follow Luke as he moved smoothly through the steps, his thumbs hooked in the belt of his pants. He was leaning so far back that he seemed to be prepping for a limbo contest, rather than a country line dance. Jess was lipsyncing along to the song, with Carol, Clint and Thor acting as backup singers, their hips swaying and their heads bobbing along to the beat.

Jan was dancing along, but most of her attention seemed to be on the sketchpad she'd balanced against her left arm, her pencil sweeping over the page with reckless abandon. There was a length of very expensive fabric tied around her neck, like a child playing super hero with a bath towel cape. All around her, an array of people were doing their own thing, more or less following along with the music.

There was fabric draped everywhere, bolts of it stacked up on top of the gym equipment and leaning against the walls, draping across the floor and trailing behind Natasha and Jane as they danced a delicate waltz, despite the music and the faux togas they were wearing.

Jessica was leaning against the wall next to the door, her arms crossed over her chest. She was watching the goings on with a smile that was faint, but very real. “Is this ’Achy Breaky Heart?’” Tony asked her.

She raised one shoulder in a half shrug. “Your guess is as good as mine,” she said. Her smile stretched. “They're all idiots.”

Tony gave her a sideways look. “Did you do something new with your hair?” he asked, eyeing the length of blue silk that had been tied in a massive, lopsided bow around her hair. “I'm thinking you did something new with your hair.”

She grinned. “Fuck you.”
“Excellent, get right on that, but first.” He strode across the room, his head up. “Jarvis. Can we run a scan here, because I think my entire team appears to have been replaced by pod people or life model decoys or—” He pointed at Bruce. “Banner. Really, I expected this from Cage and Danvers, but you? You?”

“I was blackmailed,” Bruce said. “I—” He was laughing too hard to continue, and Tony grinned at him.

“Right, what excuse do the rest of you have?” he asked. He looked at Steve. “I never knew about this country side of you.”

“Yeah?” Steve said. “Do you like it?”

“Put on some tight jeans and a pair of boots and we’ll talk,” Tony said. “Jan, who are all these people?”

“Design staff,” Jan called. “Here to outfit our people with only the finest of haute couture.”

“Right, am I paying for this?” he asked, grinning.

“We’ll discuss it,” she said, even as Steve grabbed Tony's hand, dragging him into the dance line.

“No,” Tony said. “No, Rogers, don't you, I do not boot scoot or boogie, this is unacceptable, what are you—”

Steve was laughing, his eyes bright. “Come on, just for me?”

Tony heaved a very put upon sigh. “Is this song on repeat?”

“I tried to get some Charlie Pride going on here, but no one listens to me,” Luke said. He scuffed a foot across the floor with a great deal of aplomb. “Jessica!”

“No,” she called back. “Just sittin' here. Enjoying the view.”

“I'm going to go join her,” Tony said, and Steve's hands were on his waist, pulling him in until his back was braced against Steve's front.

“Leaving me already?” he said, and he was laughing hard enough that Tony could feel it. “C'mon, Stark.”

Tony let his head fall back against Steve's shoulder, his feet following along with the steps, the ridiculous, stupid steps. “Jeans, boots,” he said. “What part of this is so hard to understand?”

Steve leaned in, whispering in Tony's ear. “You first, Stark.”

Laughing, Tony let himself fall into step with everyone else, doubt washing away. For now, it was enough. It was all he needed.

*

"Wow."

Jan gave a little hop. "I know," she said, grinning so wide that it looked like it might hurt. "Didn't I do a good job?" She tipped her head to the side, fluttering her eyelashes at Tony. "Tell me I did a good job."
Tony's lips twitched. "It's adequate." She stuck her lower lip out in a pout, and he struggled to keep a straight face. "You did a good job, Jan."

Jan pressed her fingertips to her chest. "Oh, darling, it was noooooothing," she said, before turning huge eyes on Steve. "Steve? Do you like it?" She wrapped her arms around his bicep, hugging his arm. "Tell me you like it."

Steve stared at the room, stunned. "Wow," he repeated, and she gave a firm nod.

"Good enough." She bounced away, grabbing a massive binder from a nearby table. "Now, about the appetizers-"

Steve wasn't really listening anymore. He was just staring.

The massive ballroom had been decorated with a careful hand and an artistic eye. Clusters of tables ringed the gleaming dance floor, their silvery white linens matching the glittering crystals in the chandeliers and lighting fixtures. The place settings were black with a matte gold edge, the champagne flutes gleaming crystal. Tall, delicate, art deco style vases sat in the center of each table, overflowing with greenery and surrounded by gleaming pillar candles.

"We won't have the flowers until the day of," Jan said, drawing his attention. "Red dahlias and yellow roses, blue gladiolus and white lilies." She grinned at him. "Your colors."

"It's going to look like a flag with daffodils stapled to it," Tony said, leafing through the pages. Jan aimed a kick at his ankle, and he skittered sideways, grinning. "Did you get the lobster?"

"Yes, and the beef wellington," Jan said. "This is costing you a fortune." She sounded gleeful.

Tony snapped the ledger shut. "I expected nothing less." He braced his hands on his hips, towards the front of the room. "Who's seated with us?"

"Sam and Natasha on Steve's side, Pepper and Rhodey on yours," Jan said. "I, meanwhile, get to be at the fun table in the back." She pointed. "The fun table is next to the bar."

"Tell me Clint isn't at the fun table," Tony said.

"I could tell you that, but it would be a lie," Jan said. She smiled at Steve. "Want to look at the menus?"

He shoved a hand through his hair. "Not at all," he admitted with a faint smile. "Thanks. Though. For this." He looked across the polished marble floor. "This is... This is amazing, Jan."

"I had such fun!" she said. She looked around, a pleased smile blooming on her face. "I think it turned out really well. This is going to be the party of the season."

"Everyone RSVP?" Tony asked. He picked up a piece of silverware from a nearby table, turning it over between his fingers.

Jan took it away from him. "Mostly. We're missing a few here and there. Mostly ones we were expecting." She squinted at the fork, checking it for fingerprints before putting it back in place. "Stephen Strange is always a question mark, no one even knows what plane of existence he's inhabiting on any given day, and Sue says that her pack are coming, but Reed's unreliable at best."

“That is the truest thing you've ever said, on so many levels,” Tony said.
“Be nice,” Steve said, trying to keep a straight face.

“I am not nice, and I refuse to pretend to be nice,” Tony said.

“Okay, then, be diplomatic,” Steve said, his head tipped back. The ceiling of the ballroom was arrayed with swaths of almost transparent fabric, a silvery-white silk that seemed to glitter in the light.

“Hello,” Tony said, holding out a hand. “Have we met?”

“Yes, and you can be diplomatic when you try,” Steve told him. To Jan, he added, “Have we heard from Jean and Scott?”

“Yes, the crew from Xavier’s is getting their own tables,” Jan said. “As far away from the SHIELD personnel as I could get and still be in the same room.” She braced a hand on her hip. “And the Asgardians are separated from the Atlanteans.”

“Do they not get along?” Steve asked.

“It’s less that they don’t get along and more that they like to teach each other drinking games, and if they start playing vodka pong, we’re not getting the damage deposit back,” Jan said.

“Oh, there’s no chance we’re not getting that back anyway,” Tony said. He picked up a napkin, letting the snowy fabric unfold between his fingers. “Keep the Fantastics away from the Atlanteans as well.”

“As I was hoping to get through this without a kidnapping or Sue being forced to shank a head of state with a butter knife, I have made note of that,” Jan said. She stopped him before he could pick up a water glass. “Stop touching everything.”

“I paid for it, I can—” Tony started and Jan put both hands on his chest, pushing him away from the table. “Hey!”

“Steven, I’m going to remind you that this is your problem, I’m going to have to insist you take care of it,” Jan said, and Tony leaned into her hands. She braced her feet, struggling to keep him upright as he let the full brunt of his weight fall on her. “Toooooooony, stop it!”

“Stop what?” he asked, grinning. Jan muttered something that sounded like a curse, and Steve wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist, pulling him away before they both ended up on the floor.

“You’re both children, you realize that, right?” he asked, as Tony collapsed back against him, laughing out loud now.

“Excuse me, I am a mature and intelligent woman, he’s a five year old,” Jan said. She aimed a tiny fist at his shoulder. “Jerk.”

Tony caught it, and leaned over to press a kiss to her tight knuckles. “Twit,” he said, grinning at her.

She looked down her nose at him, regal as a queen. “I get to keep all the dessert leftovers.”

“You can fight Jess for them,” Tony said. “And I’ll buy you a fresh box of cannoli.”

“Acceptable,” she said. She looked at Steve, tucking a whirl of dark hair behind her ear. “Steve? Do you want to look at the menus?”

He shook his head. “I trust you,” he said. And to be honest, this was overwhelming, in a way he couldn’t really articulate. “Thank you, Jan.”
She went on tiptoe to brush a kiss against his cheek. “Tomorrow, we've got your last fitting for your suit, you'd better show up, or you get to wear something held together with pins and tape.”

“Understood, ma'am.” He watched her go, her scarf fluttering in her wake, a faint smile on his face. Next to him, Tony sank down into a chair at one of the tables, his fingers idly playing with the stem of a champagne flute. Steve looked down at him. “Tony?” Tony looked up at him, and Steve tried to smile. “Are you... Okay with this?”

Tony blinked. “What? Oh.” His face relaxed into a smile. “Yes. I'm fine, Steve.”

Steve nodded. “Because I know you didn't want to.”

Tony kicked the chair next to him away from the table. “Steve. Sit down.” Steve took the chair, sinking down next to him. When they were on the same level, Tony's head tipped in his direction, his lips twitching. “If I didn't want this, I would've told Jan no.”

“I seem to remember that you did,” Steve said, and Tony grinned, his head falling forward. “Okay, I would've said no and made it stick,” he said. He picked up the champagne flute, rolling the stem between his fingers. “I didn't.” He huffed out a breath. “Look, this happened, and it wasn't what we intended, but we're both dealing with it, right?”

His face was unreadable, but Steve nodded. “Right,” he said.

“And this seemed like, it seemed like a stress that we didn't need.” Tony leaned back in his chair, graceful and relaxed. “But she was right.” He stopped, his eyes cutting towards Steve. “Don't ever tell her I said that.”

Steve folded his arms on his knees. “Cross my heart,” he said, his lips twitching.

“This is-” Tony's head dipped forward. “This is nice.” He looked up at the room. “Hell, it's a much nicer wedding reception than I ever thought I'd have.”

Steve nodded. “I really thought, if I ever got married, it'd be at city hall, just me and my spouse and a witness in front of a judge, or something.” He reached out, running a careful finger along the edge of the plate. “Receptions weren't even on my radar.”

Tony smiled at him. “Glad I could expand your horizons.” He held out his champagne glass. “To Jan. And her ability to spend other people's money.”

Steve reached for the flute in front of him. “To us,” he said, tapping his glass to Tony's. “And expanded horizons.”

Tony's eyebrows arched, but he nodded. “To us.” He stood. “Come on. Let's go try some champagne.”

Steve blinked at him. “It's barely noon.”

Tony held out a hand to him. “And we didn't get to choose our dinner menu or our desserts or our appetizers. Let's go choose our champagne.”

It was wrong, and it was right, or maybe it was both. Steve found he didn't really care any longer. He reached out, grabbing Tony's hand. “Lead the way.”
"Relax," Tony said. His eyes slid in Steve's direction. "You look like you're about to face a firing squad."

A muscle in Steve's jaw jumped. "I think I'd prefer the firing squad," he gritted out. "That, at least I'd understand. This?" He nodded at the door. Security was doing a good job at keeping the press and assorted gawkers at bay, but the plaza was packed with bodies, jostling for space and a good angle. "This is so far from my frame of reference that I just want to lean out and ask them if there isn't something better they could be doing."

Tony stifled a smile. "Like what, exactly?"

"I don't know." Steve gave him a tense shrug, his shoulders jerking upwards. "Volunteering. Stuffing envelopes for a charity. Washing their dog." His eyes slid in Tony's direction. "They need a hobby."

"Like, macrame?" Tony suggested. "Or collecting postage stamps?"

"Or joining a firing squad," Steve agreed.

"I'm concerned that you keep coming back to the firing squad, it's really not healthy."

Steve glared at the door. Tony considered reminding him that it was one way glass, and they couldn't see the disapproval, but that seemed secondary. He was pretty sure Steve just wanted to BE disapproving. "I understand the firing squad. It has a purpose."

"Yes, but the purpose is to shoot you," Tony pointed out, amused despite himself. "You may have removed the doubt of what's going to happen, but that just means you know that they're going to shoot at you."

"A lot of people shoot at me," Steve said, and he didn't seem bothered by that. Tony was pretty sure he should be bothered by that. "I know how to handle that?"

"By, what? Ducking?" Tony asked him, with a wry smile. "Or just bleeding?"

Steve's shoulders shifted beneath the expertly tailored fabric of his suit jacket. "Depends on the situation."

Tony ducked his head to hide his smile. "Right. Can't commit to a course of action unless you're sure of what the extenuating circumstances are."

Steve gave him a look out of the corner of his eyes. "Are you mocking me, Mr. Stark?" But there was a smile hiding at the corners of his mouth, a faint upward twitch to his cheeks.

"Captain Rogers, I would never," Tony said, doing his best mock innocent voice. Steve, who knew him a little too well by this point, just grinned. Tony crooked a finger at him. "Come here, your collar's all bunched up."

Steve rolled his shoulders. "It's fine."

Tony paused, studying him. "Well, I thought it was your collar, but maybe it's your shorts you've got in a bunch," he said, and Steve choked on a laugh, his face twisting with the force to hold it in. Tony smirked at him. "Here, let me check-" He reached for the waistband of Steve's pants, and Steve skittered sideways, his breath leaving him in a burst of laughter.

"There is nothing wrong with my shorts," he said, and he was trying not to smile now. Trying, and
mostly failing. "Get off."

"There we go," Tony said, smiling at him. "Much better. You look-" He waved a hand through the air, trying to find the right words.

"More relaxed?" Steve suggested.

"Less rabid," Tony said, and that won him another burst of laughter. He grinned. It felt like a win, in a way that he wasn't quite comfortable with. But he'd take the wins he could get. "Ready?"

Steve stared at the front door. "Fix my collar?"

It hurt, in the best possible way. Tony smiled at him anyway. "Lean over." Steve leaned into his personal space, so close that Tony could feel the heat from his body, could hear the light, steady sound of his breathing. Tony smoothed his fingers along the line of Steve's collar, making sure that it lay properly over the fine silk of his tie. "You're going to be fine."

Steve sucked in a breath, his body swaying towards Tony's for an instant. Tony steadied him, a hand catching Steve's shoulder, resting easily on the fabric, warm from his body. Steve glanced up. "Glad someone thinks so," he said, with a wry smile. His hand came up, covering Tony's. "I'm just going to smile and look pretty, okay?"

Tony grinned at him. "Excuse me, that's my job." Steve's hand fell away, and Tony caught it before he could withdraw it completely. Gently, he wove their fingers together, giving Steve room and space to pull away, if he wanted to. Instead, Steve hooked his fingers through Tony's, just as cautious, just as tentative. Their fingers were barely touching, but somehow, it was enough.

"Sir?" Jarvis said, and Tony looked up to see Marcy heading across the lobby, stunning in a ice blue silk dress, draped beautifully from one shoulder.

"Ready?" she said, her hair arranged in a complicated swirl of curls, an arrangement of real lilies tucked along her hairline.

"No," Tony said, at the same time as Steve said, "Yes."

She smiled at them, her big dark eyes gleaming. Tony was pretty sure there was glitter in her eyeshadow, along the long sweep of her lashes. "You'll both be fine," she said, even as she gave them a critical once over. They must've passed muster, because she gave a glance at her watch. "The guests should be-"

"Flowers!" Jan came floating across the lobby, resplendent in black velvet. The bodice was lavishly embroidered in gleaming gold thread, the skirt cut above her knees and trailing down to the floor in her wake. Pepper was right behind her. "Who needs flowers?"

"Please tell me that you didn't let her into the inner circle," Tony said to Pepper, who just smiled. Her dress was a swirl of green fabric, cut close around torso and hips and falling in waves around her feet.

"I'm considering it," she admitted, as Jan tucked a yellow and red rose into his pocket. "She's very good at nudging you in the right direction."

"Harpy," Tony said to Jan. She brushed a kiss against his cheek.
"You're lucky you're cute," she said with a smirk before turning her attention to Steve. "Where would you be without it?"

"Still rich and brilliant?" Tony offered, tucking his hands in his pockets. "Possibly less married. Or more married. My stunning good looks have likely intimated most people, so-

"How lucky for you," Jan said to Steve.

"That I wasn't blinded by his pure beauty?" Steve said.

"Or scared off by his animal magnetism," Jan agreed.

"I know you're both mocking me right now, but I'm choosing to believe you're being utterly sincere. It's good for my ego," Tony said, straightening his coat. Pepper pushed his hands away and smoothed the fabric back down.

"Stop fussing," she said, and he smiled at her. She smiled back. "You do look nice."

"Coming from you, that's quite the compliment." He leaned forward, brushing a gentle kiss against her cheek. "You throwing us to the wolves, Potts?"

"That's my job," Marcy said. She shifted her weight, her head tipping to the side. "Are we ready?"

Tony glanced at Steve, who took a deep breath. "Ready," he said, and Tony smiled at Marcy.

"Release the hounds," he said, and Steve was right beside him, almost shoulder to shoulder, as they stepped through the doors and out into the plaza.

He'd gotten used to that first wave of flashes, the moment of pure blindness as everyone took that first shot almost simultaneously. He's gotten used to keeping his face still, his smile bright. Relaxed. Amused.

But next to him, he felt Steve's shoulders go tight, felt the tension sweep through him. Without glancing in his direction, Tony reached out, his fingers just brushing against Steve's. It wasn't even holding hands. It was barely touching. But their fingertips tangled together, light and delicate, easily pulled apart.

He wasn't sure why it felt so intimate. And it didn't really matter. It probably looked good for the cameras.

He could hear them now, questions being called from all directions, and he was a pro at ignoring the stupid ones, the ones that were just trying to get a rise out of him. But a few, cherrypicked from the horde, were just what he wanted. He focused on those, not caring who was asking. The question was all that mattered.

"Who's coming tonight?"

"Anyone who's anyone, at least, anyone who's anyone that I can still stand to be in the same room with," Tony called back with an easy smile. "Which exempts about half of New York society and three-quarters of our elected politicians."

"Aren't you concerned that you've made yourself a target tonight?"

"If anyone's really that eager to come attack a building of super heroes, I wish them luck," Tony said. "I'm not getting involved, this suit was expensive, but most of these people hate dressing up and are
looking for a reason to get rid of their suit jackets and heels; I wouldn't give them one, personally."

"Where's your gift registry?"

"We're registered with the Maria Stark Foundation and Captain's charity of choice, New Yorkers Helping New Yorkers." Tony gave them a brilliant smile, and another wave of flashes went off. "We ask that any money that would've been wasted on wedding presents goes there, and Steve'll send you a nice thank you card."

"We'll send you a nice thank you card," Steve corrected, his lips twitching, and Tony shook his head, mouthing, 'No, we won't.' Steve gave him a look, narrow eyed and amused.

"Fine," Tony said. "We'll send you a nice thank you card, but one of my bots is doing my signatures. Probably Dummy. He's gotten pretty good at faking my signature for the FedEx guys."

"Did Doctor Doom have a hand in your marriage?" someone shouted, and Tony choked on a laugh.

"Not to my knowledge, but he's pulled weirder stunts for less publicity," he said, grinning. "But if this was his fault, he should be paying for at least half of this reception."

"Does that make him the father of the bride, or the groom?"

"I am not claiming him," Steve said, and everyone was laughing now, the photographers jockeying for positions, for angles. Steve ducked his head, a faint smile creasing his cheeks, and they went nuts, shutters clicking so fast that it was just a wall of sound.

Tony turned his attention to someone who was waving a recorder in his direction, barely noticing as Steve was handed one softball question after another. Until, suddenly, "Captain Rogers, aren't you concerned about the possibility of cheating?"

It was the kind of paparazzi question designed to elicit a response, and Tony's shoulders went tight.

"I wasn't planning on it, no," Steve said, his eyebrows arching. "I mean, took me this long to get into a relationship." He shrugged. "It was exhausting, to be honest, I don't know how people manage to juggle several." He leaned forward, his eyes opened wide in a mock expression of confusion. "Unless you mean, am I worried about Tony cheating on me?"

The photographer who'd shouted the question now found himself somehow alone in the middle of the press corral. Despite the fact that there was no where to go, and no extra space, somehow, everyone had found a way to edge away from him, leaving him very exposed and very obvious. He blustered on anyway. "Well, some people do worry that, what with his history-"

Steve's teeth flashed in something that could be mistaken for a smile. "And what history would that be?" he asked, and Tony bit the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. The 'golly, gee whiz, mister' facade that Steve put on sometimes was endlessly amusing to him.

Steve's eyes went wide. "Oh, well, that's less his dating history and more his, you know, sexuality."

"See, he's very literal," Tony said, amused. "He's very bad at passive aggressive attempts at speaking in veiled concepts, for some reason, he insists on talking about the thing we're talking about."

"Yeah, I'm weird like that." Steve wandered forward, his hands tucked in his pockets, his body
canted forward, relaxed and easy. But there was a threat in each step, a hard, vicious intent. "So what you're really getting at is this idea that bisexual people are predisposed to cheat, which seems to be built on the idea that they just have more choices in people to cheat with?" He paused, his head tipped to the side. "Which seems a sad way to think about it." He leaned in, smooth and controlled. "Don't you think?"

The photographer seemed to be struggling to find something to say. From the back, someone else called out, "So how do you think about it?"

Steve straightened up. "That out of all the people he could've chosen, male and female..." He paused, a smile slipping across his face. "He chose me." He shrugged. "Which seems like the egocentric way to think about it, now that I say it aloud." He glanced back at Tony, and his smile enough to take a man's breath away. "All choices he had. All the people he could've loved." Steve's eyes crinkled, just a little at the corners, and he was bright and beautiful and right. "He chose me."

Tony's pulse was pounding in his ears, hard and fast, almost blocking out everything else. He couldn't think about it, he couldn't even begin to think about that, or he'd lose his mind, and this was not the time or place for that. He tucked his hands in his pockets, so no one could see how they shook. "Well, to be honest," he said, and his voice was steady, was faintly amused, "I only married you because I got sick of waiting for Beyoncé to dump Jay Z."

"Oh, well, if Beyoncé had been single, this would never have happened," Steve agreed, tossing his hands in the air. "I might be gay, but Beyoncé transcends sexuality."

"You'd marry Beyoncé?" Tony asked him, struggling against a grin.

"In a New York minute," Steve said, grinning back at him. "And you know it, buster."

Marcy appeared just behind him. "We have guests incoming," she said, one eyebrow arching. "Ready for the receiving line?"

"No," Steve said at the same time Tony said, "Yes."

"And that averages out to a good solid maybe," she said. "Don't worry. It's-" She plastered a smile on her face. "It's the Atlantean delegation, so no one will be paying attention to you anymore."

"Fabulous," Tony said. Steve glanced at him, a puzzled look on his face. "Namor and his people consider 'formal attire' to be the same booty shorts and bikinis they always wear, except with a cape," Tony said, his voice pitched too low for the bystanders to hear. He spread his hands. "And when they're up here, they guilt trip the world by making those capes out of the trash that we asshole surface dwellers have dumped into the oceans."

A muscle next to Steve's eye twitched. "Ah," he said at last, and Tony started to laugh.

"Tactful," he managed.

"I'm trying my best," Steve said. Tony didn't think about it, didn't even consider what he was doing, but suddenly, he was reaching for Steve's hand. Steve's face went blank for a moment, confusion melting away into a warm smile. His fingers wrapped around Tony's his grip warm and firm.

The words 'I love you' hung so heavy in his mouth that he could almost feel them, and he gritted his teeth, desperate to keep them from being spoken. Steve's hand in his centered him, anchored him, and he fixed his face in a smile as the reporters focused their attention on the street.

Namor had outdone himself, and probably depleted a good portion of the North Atlantic Garbage
Patch at the same time.

"When did you start dating?"

He wasn't sure how he heard it. It wasn't loud. It wasn't aggressive. It was, if anything, strangely neutral. Tony glanced over at the crowd of reporters. And despite the chaos happening there, he knew who'd asked it.

She was a small woman, with a round face and straight black hair. When the wind kicked up, he caught a glimpse of bright, almost florescent pink, hidden under the more work appropriate jet strands. Dark eyes met his without flinching, sharp and direct, her high, round cheeks pink.

Tony didn't respond to the question. He just looked back at the red carpet, where Namor and his people were taking their time upstaging the surface dwellers. "Marcy."

He knew she was behind him, without even looking. "Sir?"

"The Asian woman, in the left side of the press corral, orange jacket," Tony said. He gave the crowd a smile. "Do we know who that is?"

There was a beat of silence. "Ellen Ning," Marcy said.

Tony frowned. "I know that name, why do I know that-"

"She's the one who broke the story." Marcy paused. Then, "This story."

Tony's chin dipped, the faintest hint of a nod. "Right." And then, again, "Right." He took a deep breath. "Can you look into that for me?" She shifted away from him, and Tony turned back to meet her eyes. "Quietly."

Her chin came up. "Unlike you, Mr. Stark," she said with a smile, "I'm always quiet."

"I need to stop hiring subtle people," Tony said, turning back to the approaching delegation. Steve caught his eye.

"Everything okay?" he said, his voice quiet, almost lost under the noise from the crowd.

Tony forced a smile into place. He was good at that. He'd had a lot of practice, after all.

"Absolutely."

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"Ready?"

Steve nodded. "Not at all," he said.

Sam gave him a look, even as he straightened Steve's tie. "C'mon, man, you can do this." He took a step back, his hands clasped on Steve's shoulders. "So. Ready?"

Steve took a deep breath. "Absolutely not."

The door to the bathroom opened, and Clint leaned in. "Not to put any pressure on you here, but people are done eating and if we don't get them up from the tables soon, someone's gonna get bored and invent something we all regret." He checked his reflection in the mirror. "I told Jan putting the Hanks at the same table was a bad idea for so many reasons, but right now, they're out there arguing
who could make a better bomb with stuff found only on the buffet.”

“Do you think this is a problem everyone has at their wedding reception?” Steve asked Sam. “This seems like a common thing. Maybe they mention it in 'Modern Bride.’”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam said. “That, and also, how to run an effective sword check station when half your attendees are carrying blades the size of your left leg.”

“Total cover story material there,” Steve said.

“Band's all warmed up,” Clint said, leaning back against the counter. “I mean, as warmed up as a string quartet can get. They're trying to stay professional, but Hogan brought a lute and a lot of enthusiasm, so, look forward to that.”

“Ready?” Sam asked Steve. He didn't wait for Steve to reply. “Good! Great!” He clapped his hands together. “Let's go!”

“I can't do this,” Steve said. “You can start the dancing.”

“Abby and I'll be right behind you,” Sam said. “Clint?”

Clint gave them a thumbs up. “Nat is good at distraction. Things get rough, she'll make sure no one's looking at you.”

“I don't even want to know-” Steve started.

“Wardrobe malfunction,” Clint said.

“That doesn't seem like something she'd agree to,” Steve said.

“Well, not her wardrobe,” Clint explained. “Mine.”

“I Hope we don't have to go that far,” Steve said.

“Yeah, but if we do, I wore the good underwear,” Clint said. He grinned at Steve. “So. Ready? C'mon, Cap, this cannot be the scariest thing you've done this month.”

“I kind of think it is,” Steve said, smoothing his hair back. His hand might've been shaking. He chose to ignore that. “I've never asked anyone to dance.”

“Yeah, but if you've gotta choose someone to be your first, Tony's a pretty good one to go with.” He pushed Steve's hand down before he could make a worse mess of his hair. “Right?”

Steve closed his eyes, trying to keep himself calm. “Right,” he said. He squared his shoulders, bringing his chin up. “I can do this.”

“Damn right,” Sam said. He wrapped an arm around Steve's shoulders. “C'mon. Let's go and do this thing. I want to impress Abby with my new moves.”

“I'm not losing my pants for you,” Clint said.

“What is wrong with you? Seriously?” Sam asked, and Steve was laughing as he headed back to the ballroom.

The party was still in full swing, and he had to admit, it had gone off without a hitch so far. The food had been delicious, there'd been no super villain attacks, and everyone was, up to now, playing nice
with each other. If he could get through this, he could have cake. He smiled to himself, wondering if he should make that offer to Tony.

Tony was chatting with Rhodey when he reached their table. Tony glanced up at him. “You okay?” he asked. “I was about to ask Jarvis if you’d fled the building.”

“I was considering it,” Steve said. “But I didn’t want to let dessert go to waste.”

“Nice to see that the promise of pastry is the only thing keeping you here,” Tony said with a grin.

“Excuse me,” Pepper said, on Rhodey’s other side, “the promise of pastry is the only thing keeping any of us here.” She smiled behind the rim of her champagne glass. “Jan's been talking sweets with us for a week.”

“Or more,” Natasha agreed. She looked up as Clint wandered up behind her. “Hello. Want the rest of my potatoes?”

“Does anyone ever say no to that?” Clint asked, taking her plate.

“We don’t have much of a leftover problem around here,” Tony said to Rhodey.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Rhodey said. He tossed Clint a roll. “You having a good time, Steve?”

“I’m doing my best,” Steve said. He took a deep breath. “Want to dance? With me?” he asked Tony, the words coming out a little too fast, stumbling over themselves. Tony blinked at him, and Steve stopped, his hands flexing at his sides. “Sorry. Let me try that again.”

“You don’t have to,” Tony said, dropping his napkin over his plate. “I got the-”

Steve leaned in. “Tony. Will you do me the honor of a dance?”

To his surprise, something like a blush rose on Tony's cheeks. He turned away, reaching for his champagne glass. “Of course I will,” he said, before draining his glass. “I-” He looked up, his smile steady and warm. “Yes. Thank you, Steve.”

He stood, and Steve took a step back, giving him room. Across the room, the string quartet came to smooth end to their current song, letting silence fall as Steve offered Tony his arm. All around the room, people went quiet, heads turning in their direction. There was the soft sound of chairs being moved, as teammates and friends turned to watch them.

At the 'fun table,' Luke gave him a thumbs up. Steve tried to smile at him. He was pretty sure he wasn’t successful, but he tried.

Reaching the center of the dance floor, he turned, taking one of Tony’s hands and settling his other in the center of his back. “I apologize in advance for stepping on your feet,” he said, as quietly as he could.

Tony burst out laughing. “Piece of advice from a man who's made a lot of mistakes, Steve?” His dark eyes danced as he moved close, his body relaxed beneath Steve's hands. “Never apologize until you have to.”

Steve smiled, a little of the fear melting away. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said as the quartet started to play. The song was soft and slow, a modern tune he felt like he should’ve recognized. It had a melancholy feel to it, but somehow, it felt almost natural to be dancing to it.
He took one step and stepped on Tony's foot. He bit out a curse, the worse hissed out from between his teeth.

“Steve.”

“Sorry. I should be better at this, I'm—”

“Steve.” Tony was smiling at him, his expression almost gentle. “Muscle memory,” he said, his lips barely moving. “You know what to do. You know how to do it. Your body knows.” His smile stretched, and it was beautiful, it was luminous. And more than that, better than that, it was kind. “Your head's getting in your way.”

Steve exhaled on a desperate laugh. “Yeah, that happens,” he said, and Tony's fingers squeezed his.

“Stop thinking,” he whispered, his breath warm against the angle of Steve's jaw. “Stop trying. It's like throwing the shield, Steve. You know what you need to do, you don't need to analyze it, you don't need to think about it.”

They were still moving, Steve realized, and it wasn't so awkward anymore. His knee clipped Tony's and Tony didn't even flinch. “You're going to make mistakes,” he said, “and no one cares.”

Steve knew he was tensing up, and couldn't seem to do anything about it. “Well, that is definitely a lie.”

Tony's head came up, his eyes meeting Steve's. “Well, then, I don't care. And right now, right here, no one else matters.” There was a twinkle in his eyes, amused and brilliant. “I'm the only one, the only thing, that you have to worry about, Steve.”

They turned, and it was smooth and easy. “Only you,” Steve breathed, and Tony laughed, soft and warm.

“Only me,” he agreed. “Focus on me, and we'll get through this, you and I.” His hand tightened on Steve's shoulder. “We're in this together, after all.”

He didn't know where his feet were, what they were doing, but it was okay, because he hadn't stepped on Tony's toes, he hadn't kicked him in the shins or yanked him off balance. It wasn't perfect, he knew that, but it was smooth. It wasn't easy, but it was worth the effort. Because Tony was relaxed in his arms, his eyes locked on Steve's, a slight smile on his face.

Steve's chest ached. “Sorry I dragged you into this,” he whispered.

Tony's eyes slid shut. “I'm not,” he whispered, and there was a note in his voice that Steve couldn't quite understand. But they were dancing now, and he wanted to laugh, he wanted to cry.

He wondered if being in love was always this complicated, or if it was just him. Making things complicated. Making things harder than they had to be. Stuck in his own head, when he didn't need to be. Loving Tony was muscle memory by this point, he didn't have to think of it, he didn't have to work at it. It was just there, with him, part of him.

It was like breathing, it was like his heart beating, it was like taking a step or standing up, it was easy, it was necessary. It was just embedded in his bones now.

The song had ended, and he didn't know when, because Tony was still with him, following his lead, holding his hand. He glanced up at Steve, his eyebrows arched, and things needed to be said, and Steve didn't know how to say them.
Instead, he just leaned forward, and he knew he shouldn't do it. He knew that. But Tony met him halfway, their lips meeting with a surety, with a grace, that had been missing from their dance. This was muscle memory, too, for all that he'd done it only a few times.

He'd dreamed this so often his body knew what to do anyway.

The kiss was delicate, soft, almost gentle. But Tony was in his arms, Tony's fingers stroking the back of his neck, their bodies so close that he could feel the heat of Tony's skin through the fabric of both their suits.

The kiss tapered away, their mouths parting, separating by an inch, maybe two, still so close that Steve could feel the warmth of Tony's breath on his lips. From a distance, he heard people applauding, heard the cheers of the people who had become his friends, become his family.

And Tony was smiling at him, as if he could love Steve, too. As if maybe he did.

“What?” he asked, and Steve realized that he was grinning, he was laughing. Tony's head tipped to the side. Tony looked at him, something like concern in his face. “Steve? Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He brushed a kiss against Tony's temple, letting his lips linger there for a second. “This is the happiest I've ever been, actually.” He let his eyes fall shut. “Thank you. For the dance.”

For a moment, Tony was still and silent. Then, at last, “Thank you for asking.”

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He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe. He could feel the air on his lips, on his tongue, on his throat, but he couldn't breathe, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how his body fought for oxygen.

His fingertips tingled, and he realized that his hands were flexing at his sides, spastic, uncontrolled movements. They formed fists, the bones straining with the force of it, and then went lax, twitching against his legs, against his chest, against his face.

He couldn't breathe.

Things passed in front of his vision, and he wasn't sure what were memories and what was happening now, and he kept himself steady, kept himself still, because if he started screaming at ghosts, then he was insane and if he forgot where he was that was worse. Flickers of things, in the corner of his eyes, flashes of people, sounds that shouldn't have been there.

He couldn't breathe.

The arc reactor burned, it felt hot, it ached. He tried to breathe, and he could feel it pressing in on his ribcage, could feel it pressing in on his spine, as if it was part of him, as if it was going through him, and he knew his hands were on it, covering it, clawing at it, and he. Could. Not. Breathe.

“Tony?”

Pepper's voice cut through it, cut through everything. Pepper. Calm and steady and real. Pepper. His head came up, and she was there, swimming through his vision, slowly coming into focus. She was pale, her freckles bright on the white background of her skin, but she was steady, she was real.
“Tony?” She leaned in, her hands smoothing over his cheeks. “Tony. Breathe.”

It was an order, firm and certain, and he followed it without thinking. His lips parted, and this time, when he sucked in a breath, everything worked the way it should. His lungs expanded, his shoulders flexed, and his vision cleared.

Pepper smiled. “Good. Slow. Nice and slow.”

He nodded, his head dipping forward, leaning into her hands. “I-”

“Shhhhhhh.” She leaned in as well. “Just breathe. In. Out. In. Out.” She breathed with him, her breath whispering over his hair, leading him, showing him how.

He blinked hard, trying to focus. “Where-”

“The penthouse,” she said. Her fingers rubbed on his cheeks, tingles of pressure. “You went to the penthouse. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” he said, and they both knew it was a lie. “Yes, I-” He swallowed. “Yes.”

“Okay,” she said. She maneuvered him into a chair, pushed him down. He went without a fight, grateful that someone else was there to make the decision for him. “The reception's still going on. You excused yourself and then you came up here. Jarvis called me.”

He nodded. “Why?”

“Because you were having a panic attack,” Pepper said, as if that was a normal thing. As if that was a thing that happened and it was fine. Her hands smoothed over his hair, his neck, his shoulders. Touching him. Smoothing the tension away. “And you weren't responding to him.”

Tony nodded. “Right.” He sucked in a deep breath, and it hurt. “How long have I been gone?”

“Only a few minutes,” Pepper said. “No one's noticed. I promise.” She leaned forward, the light sliding over her hair. “It's okay. You're okay.”

His eyes fell shut. “Pepper?” His breath left him in a laugh that sounded almost like a sob. “I'm not okay.”

She slid her arms around him, hugging him, her face buried in his shoulder. “What can I do?”

Tony licked his lips. “The papers.” He looked up, meeting Pepper's eyes. “Tomorrow. We're going to draw up the divorce papers.” Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, her eyes going wet, and Tony struggled to smile. “We'll-” He swallowed. “We'll wait. To file. For the full six months. But tomorrow.” His eyes fell shut. “I can't do this anymore. I can't. I'm-” He realized his fingers were fisted in the fabric of his shirt, his knuckled pressed hard against the arc reactor. “I can't do this, Pepper.

“I need to know where I stand. I need to be-” He struggled to smile, ignoring how his eyes burned. “I need to be sure. If I keep pretending-” He shook his head. “I'll forget. That it's pretend.”

“Tony-” she started, and he wasn't interested.

“Can you do this for me?” he asked. His breath shuddered in his chest. “Can you-”

“Yes.” Firm and certain. “Of course I can, Tony. But what are you going to do now?”
He stood, and he was pleased. He was steady on his feet. His hands weren't shaking anymore. He smiled, and it didn't. “I'm going to go back downstairs,” he said. “And finish my dessert.”

One more night. One more night of pretend.

He could survive one more night.

Chapter End Notes

The song they dance to, just in case anyone wants to know what I listened to ON REPEAT for like an hour while writing the final scenes is "The Night We Met," By Lord Huron.

Unless region locked (Sorry if it is!) you can hear it here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtlgYxa6BMU
Thanks for sticking with me, everyone! And thanks so much for the winner of my auction, who provided such a wonderful idea for me to play with.

I apologize, I'm finishing this at a friend's house, off of google docs. I might have missed more typos that usual, but I had promised to get this up by tonight, and my laptop died and I don't have the cord. Please bear with me, and if you read this before 11/26, please refrain from letting me know about any minors issues, they'll be fixed when I have access to the proper file.

Thanks for your patience, all!

The whole thing took less than fifteen minutes. The benefit, Tony supposed, to having a very efficient legal team.

And it wasn't like anything was actually happening today. Tony kept reminding himself of that as his pen slid across the paper, the noise somehow obscenely loud in the stillness of the conference room. He snapped the cap back on the pen. "Is that all of them?" he asked, and the pleasant, nondescript man in a pleasant, nondescript suit nodded.

"That will take care of everything for now, Mr. Stark," he said, closing the folder and adding it to the stack. "Let us know when you're ready to file."

He bit back the very real urge to say 'well, that's never going to fucking happen,' and instead, just gave the room a slight smile. "Thanks. We appreciate it."

Pepper stood. "I don't need to remind you about the importance of discretion in this case," she said, with a sweet smile. "But I will anyway." She leveled a look at the legal staff, all five of them. "The nine of us are the only ones who know this happened. If there's a leak, I'm firing everyone I can fire."

"Which is, I think, everyone other than Steve," Tony said, bracing his chin on one fist. On the other side of the broad, heavy conference table, Steve didn't respond to that. He had signed where he'd been told to sign, he'd nodded and mumured agreement to anything that was put to him, but other than that, he'd been still and silent. Even now, he seemed only barely aware of what was happening around him.

Or maybe he just didn't care.

"That's immaterial," Pepper said to Tony. "I'd never have to fire Steve, so..." She smiled. "He's not the one I'm worried about."

"We all know who the good child is," Tony agreed. He flicked his pen against the table, and tossed it aside. "Are we done?"

"We're done," Pepper agreed. "Ladies, gentlemen, if I could have a word with you later on this afternoon, I'd appreciate it." She headed for the door, herding the legal team along with her.
Only after they'd cleared the room did Marcy look at Tony. “Do you want me to start on the press releases?” she asked.

Steve shifted in his chair, and Tony's shoulders went tight. But Steve remained silent, and Toy took a deep breath. “No,” he said, giving Marcy his full attention. “We're already running the risk of a leak, there's no reason to put anything else in writing until we need it.”

She nodded. “It's a boilerplate, in any case, there's an expected format for this sort of thing.” She shifted her weight, her gaze sliding in Steve's direction. But Steve didn't meet her eyes, he just kept staring at the windows. Marcy looked back at Tony. “When you decide the specific circumstances-”

“We'll let you know,” Tony said, cutting her off. He stood. “Thank you.”

She nodded. Her eyes flicked towards Steve again, her lips going tight. But she gathered her things and headed for the door, pulling it shut behind her. It clicked shut, the sound loud in the stillness of the room.

Tony took a slow, bracing breath. “You know why we're doing this, don't you?” he asked.

Steve nodded, his face expressionless. “Of course.” The words were oddly flat. Lifeless. When he looked in Tony's direction, his eyes were dull. He smiled, anyway, and Tony hated it.

He hated everything about this.

“A couple of months, we'll figure out a time when it's convenient, and make sure we're on the low ebb of the news cycle, and Marcy'll take care of the rest,” Tony said. He kept his voice brisk. Businesslike. “Until then, you can stay in the penthouse, if you like, and-”

“Tony?” Steve didn't look at him. “If I did anything to make you uncomfortable, that hurt you-”

“No.” He couldn't listen to this, or he would lose his mind. He forced a smile on his face, light and easy. “Steve. Don't be-” He exhaled. “Don't be ridiculous.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and then uncrossed them, forcing them back to his sides. “You've been the perfect husband.”

Steve flinched, and Tony wondered if he could get through this without putting his foot in his mouth again. “But I'm nobody's idea of a good long term bet, and the longer we-”

“Don't,” Steve said. He stood, coming to his feet slowly and deliberately. He looked up at Tony, and a spark of life was back in his eyes now. “I understand why we're doing this. I know it has to happen. But if you try to publicly take the blame for this behind my back-”

“Is that even possible?” Tony asked.

Steve ignored him. “I will be pissed,” he said. He leaned in, bracing his hands on the conference table between them. “So we will get through this, and I'm going to have a good hard look at any press release Marcy comes up with before it goes out, and when it's all over, I am still going to need you to be my friend.”

He stopped, his face crumbling for an instant. For a moment, just a moment, he looked young, and hurt, and heartbroken. He straightened up, and it was gone. “I need you, Tony. I don't have many friends. And you're-” His lips twitched, trying for a smile. “You're the one I depend on.”

Tony met his gaze with an easy smile. “I'm not going anywhere, Steve.” The words were light. Easy. They ate through him like acid, and he hated himself. “I need you, too.”
Steve gave a slight nod. “I’m glad.” He looked down at the table, then at the door. “I’ve got a meeting, so, I’m going to...”

His voice trailed away, and it was so obviously a lie that it hurt to hear. But Tony knew a thing or two about lies told in a desperate attempt at self-preservation. He wasn’t about to call him on it.


Steve smiled, and Tony guessed they’d just made a silent, unspoken pact not to call each other on their bullshit lies. It was probably easier that way. “If I make anything, I’ll leave you a plate in the oven.” His head dipped in something that approached a nod, and then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

Tony subsided into a chair, letting his head fall into the cradle of his hands. He focused on his breathing, on keeping everything calm and controlled. He could control this.

He absolutely could control this.

“Tony?”

He didn't bother to lift his head at Pepper's voice. He heard the door shut, and the familiar sound of her heels. “I can't do this,” he said. “I know it's not fair. I know it's cruel. But Pep. I can't do this anymore. I can't-”

She was next to him now, and Tony lifted his head. “Want to know why I can't do this anymore?” he asked.

Pepper leaned against the table. “Tony-”

Tony stared, unseeing, in the general direction of the windows. “This morning, there were sunflowers on my kitchen table,” he said, his voice quiet. “Damaged sunflowers, half of their leaves gone and with crooked stems. I bet he fished them out of the trash and then insisted on paying for them, just because he couldn't bear to see them end up that way.

“He leaves pieces of the newspaper in every room of the penthouse. In case he wants to reread something, or maybe in case I do.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “He laughs at stupid old movies. He stacks up books on every flat surface. He folds laundry while he watches the news and grumbles at his shirts when the news isn't good.”

Tony took a deep breath. “He leaves his shoes in piles at the door. He makes ridiculous sandwiches. He compares sales fliers for grocery stores.” The bubble of laughter caught him so off guard that it hurt. “He buys organic milk.”

“So do you,” Pepper pointed out.

“Yeah, but I thought he’d have more sense, and more frugality,” Tony said. “I dropped a glass in the living room once and he came running out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel, ready to fight whatever villain had managed to hide under the piano.” He scraped a hand over his face. “And that... That didn't break me.”

His hand fell into his lap. “Know what did?” He took a breath. “When he picked up my coffee cup, and asked me if I was done. And when I said I was, he just...” His fingers worked at the fabric of his pants, his nails scraping hard against the fabric, desperate for something to hold onto. “He drank the last of it before he put it in the dishwasher.”
He stopped. “I don't know why-” He blinked hard. “I guess, I guess that's the most comfortable anyone's ever been with me.” He would've cried, if he hadn't been so numb. “I don't know. I can't explain it. It's just-”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I can't do it again, Pepper. I can't. You get used to the weight, the pressure. Of, of life. You get used to it and then you don't even feel it anymore, because it's always been there and it has to be borne, so fuck, just handle it, just bear it, and don't think about it.

“And when something fucks with that, something changes that,” he managed, the words tripping out, faster and faster, “when someone else is there and slips under your guard and manages to take on some of that weight, you don't notice that, either. It's like sunflowers on the table, it's a shock at first and then you fucking get USED to it, and that's the problem.

“Because they're not always going to be there,” he said, and it was vicious, it was broken. “One day, you're going to get up, and the table's bare again and you're alone, and the weight you used to be able to handle? Now, it's enough to break you, because for a minute, for a fucking SECOND, it wasn't there, or at least...”

He gave his head a sharp shake. “At least, you weren't alone.”

A soft, almost inaudible sound brought his head up. For a second, he didn't understand. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

Pepper was staring at him, silent tears rolling down her pale cheeks, and that was a body blow he wasn't expecting. His shoulders slumped. “Oh, God, Pep, don't-”

Her mouth worked. “I'm sorry,” she said, and he hated himself.

“Don't,” he said, holding his hands out. “Pep, don't, it's not-” He smiled, and it hurt, but it that was fine, that was right. “Pep. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. You never-’’ His smile stretched. “You never left me. Not really. Not in any way that matters.”

She took a step forward, then two, wobbly and off-balance, and then she was throwing herself into his arms. Tony caught her, needing the comfort of her more than he wanted to admit. She was familiar and warm and strong, her grip almost painful.

She'd always been strong. Stronger than him.

“I love you,” he said, and he was smiling and crying all at once. “And I miss you, and I know we made the right decision.”

Her fingernails dug into his back, even through his jacket, through his shirt. He smiled. “I just can't do this again, Pep. I can't- Believe someone loves me like that.”

She nodded against his shoulder. “I know.” She looked up at him, her eyes wet, her nose red. “I know.” She leaned her forehead against his chest, against the arc reactor. “I'm sorry,” she said.

Tony tucked his cheek against her hair. “Me, too,” he whispered back. “But I don't regret it, Pep. I'll never regret you and me.” He tipped his head to the side, brushing a gentle kiss against her copper locks. He took a step back, tugging her along with him. “I don't regret much.”

Pepper hopped up, taking a seat on the edge of the table. “I regret your fashion choices,” she said, and Tony laughed, the last of the strain bleeding out of him. Pepper's head tipped in his direction. “So much regret, Tony.”
He grinned, boosting himself up to sit next to her. She leaned her head against his shoulder. “You loved that shirt.”

“I love that you say 'that shirt' like there's only one.”

“So I can wear the burnt umber silk-”

“No.” Pepper held up a hand. “No. You cannot.” But she was smiling as she scrubbed at her cheeks with the heel of her hand. I miss a lot of things about being in a relationship with you, but that shirt is not one of them.”

“It's the sex, isn't it?” he asked. She gave him a look, and Tony huffed out a sigh. “Humor me.”


“Excellent. I expect you to say that at my funeral. It's in the will, if you want to inherit, you need to saw some nice things about my lovemaking skills,” he said. “Also my ass.”

“Do I get extra points for bringing up the oral sex?”

“Well, I expected that would be your opening,” Tony said. He spread his hands. “Tony had a tongue, and he sure knew how to use it.”

“Wow,” Pepper said.

“It's just a starting point,” Tony said. “You can work from there.”

“I'll start somewhere else,” she said.

“Why do you always have to be so difficult?” Tony asked. Pepper leaned against his side, her arms wrapped around his elbow.

“You like it,” she said, and Tony laughed.

“Maybe,” he admitted. “A little.”

Her eyes flicked in his direction. “Just a little?”

He leaned over, kissing her hair, her temple. “Maybe more than a little.” He let his cheek rest on her hair, looking out over the city. “Thanks.” He exhaled. “For staying.”

She smiled. “I've regretted a lot of things in my life, Stark.” Her head dropped back to his shoulder. “That was never one of them.”

“Know what?” Tony nodded, his eyes falling shut. “Same.”

*  

“Steve?”

Steve didn't look up from his sketchbook. “Out here.” He dragged the tip of his pencil across the page, barely noticing the mark he'd left behind.

A moment later, the door opened, and Jan leaned out. “Hi,” she said, her voice quiet.

Steve managed a smile. “Hi,” he said.
Jan looked out, squinting at the view. The landing platform was sheltered by the building, giving a full view of the city without having to brave the full force of the elements. “I thought you'd be in the gym.”

“No, this is my favorite spot in the penthouse,” Steve said. He looked down at his sketchbook. “Thought I'd enjoy it while I could.”

Jan sank down next to him, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around him. “We were worried,” she said, her voice soft.

One of Steve's shoulders rose in a half shrug. “I'm fine.”

Jan's teeth sank into her lower lip. “You don't seem fine.”

His breath came out in a sound that was nearly a laugh. “You'd think that you'd be experienced with a polite social lie, Jan.” He glanced in her direction. “I will be fine.” He tossed the pencil aside, sending it clattering across the balcony floor, and reached for another one. “Eventually.”

She leaned her chin on her knees. “I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I shouldn't have pushed. I just...” Her lips pursed. “I just wanted you to have an actual wedding reception. With the people who love you. Who want you to be happy.” Her eyelashes fluttered against the pink curves of her cheeks. “But I should've listened, when you told me no.”

Steve smiled at her. “I never told you no,” he said. He tapped the tip of his pencil against the page. “I encouraged it.” He glanced at her, his expression going wry. “You might've come up with the idea, but I was with you the entire way.”

She nodded. “Tony wasn't.”

Steve took a deep breath. “I don't think anyone has ever forced Tony Stark to do anything he doesn't want to do,” he said. “At least, not without some serious firepower involved.” He dropped the pencil into the pile, just to hear it rattle. “If he wanted to stop you, he would've, Jan.”

She nodded, folding up into herself. “Steve?” He looked at her, and she arched her eyebrows. “Did you ever tell him?”

He flinched. “I meant to,” he said, not needing her to be more specific. He knew what he was supposed to have told Tony. “I was going to. I guess it's good that I didn't, huh?”

Jan took a deep breath. “So your plan,” she said, her voice taking on an edge, “was to stand around and look as hot as possible in the vain hope that he'd break first and throw himself into your arms?” Steve opened his mouth, and Jan just kept going. “In the hope that he'd declare himself first so that you wouldn't have to take any sort of an emotional risk at all?”

Steve went still. Jan's eyes pinned him in place with a glare that could've flash frozen ice. He cleared his throat. “Well, when you put it that way, it seems like a really stupid plan,” he managed.

Jan nodded. “Steve?”

“Jan?”

“That's because it is a really stupid plan, and I think I tried to warn you, in as delicate a way as I could manage, that it was a really stupid plan that was never, ever going to work.” Jan's shoulders slumped. “Steve. This was never going to work. You can't just-”
“Steve?” Sam's voice echoed out from the penthouse, and Steve was very grateful for the interruption.

“Out here-” Steve started, before Jan cut him off.

“Come out here right now so I can fire you!” she yelled.

Sam poked his head out the door, his brows drawn up tight in confusion. “Fire me? How can you fire me, I don’t-”

“At any point, did you remind Steve that he needs to use his words?” Jan said, her arms crossed over her chest. “Did you point out that verbal communication is the basis of a stable relationship?”

Sam blinked at her. “I'm not his therapist,” he said.

“And that's a no,” she said. She made an inarticulate sound of frustration. “Sam!”

“How am I the one-”

“You're FIRED,” Jan said.

“What the hell am I fired from?” Sam asked, and Steve was laughing. He didn't know why he was laughing, but he was. Sam glanced at him, his expression worried. For some reason, that only made Steve laugh harder. “Steve? Buddy? You okay, man?”

Steve clapped a hand over his face. “You're both ridiculous,” he said, tossing his sketchbook to the side. “You are both the most ridiculous people, and I'm giving you a run for your money.” He leaned back. “Okay. I fucked this up, didn't I?”

“The results weren't optimal, no,” Sam said, wandering over to take a seat on Steve's other side. His shoulder bumped Steve's, and Steve leaned into him.

“Everything is falling to pieces and all of those pieces are on fire,” Jan said. “I guess we're calling that 'not optimal.'”

“I guess we are,” Steve agreed. He glanced back over his shoulder, back at the penthouse, a feeling of melancholy, of loss, sweeping over him. “But he's made his choice. I need to respect that.”

Jan and Sam exchanged a look around him. Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do not do the silent communication thing,” he said. “When the two of you are on the same page, it's... It's not good for the rest of us.”

“Yes, but it's good for us, and that's all that matters,” Jan said, crossing her arms over her chest. “You need to tell him, Steve.”

He shook his head. “Jan-”

“Yeah, ordinarily, I'd say that you're doing the right thing, that you're respecting another person's choices and boundaries,” Sam said. “But-”

“But he's made this choice without all the information,” Jan said. She huffed out a breath, blowing her hair away from her forehead. “Steve? Do you trust me?”

Steve stared at her. She did her best to look innocent. “I love you, Jan, but I don't trust you as far as I can throw you,” Steve told her.
“Luckily for you, I can be very small and have wings, so you can throw me a very long distance,” she said cheerfully. She leaned in, her mouth curving in a slight smile. “Steve? If I didn't think that he felt the same way, I'd be giving you the shovel talk right now.”

Steve blinked at her. “The... Shovel talk?”

“Yes, you know, the-” She straightened up. “I have a shovel and no one will miss you’?” Steve stared at her. Jan looked at Sam. “He's never gotten the shovel talk.”

“What's worse, he's never given the shovel talk,” Sam said. He waved a hand in Steve's direction. “I mean, would you give him the shovel talk?”

“He seems so wholesome, it's true,” Jan said.

“You'd never know he had, like, six sketchbooks of naked pictures of-”

“I will throw you off this balcony, Sam,” Steve said, through clenched teeth. “I will- Straight off.”

“Wait, go back, naked pictures of what?” Jan said, her eyes going wide. “Where? Where are the-”

“I'll throw you BOTH off,” Steve said, dropping his head into his hands.

“Okay by me, my wings aren't stored ten floors down,” Jan said. To Sam, she mock-whispered, “Show me later.” To Steve, she said, “Darling, it's your choice. But if I didn't think he didn't want to hear it, I wouldn't be here. Encouraging you to say what you should've said, before you said 'I do.'”

He managed a smile for her. “Well, I kind of forced him into that, so, I think it's only right that I let him walk away from it without any other pressure, Jan.”

She stood up, dusting off her skirt with quick, efficient movements. “Steve, I think you said it best at the beginning of this conversation.” She met his eyes, a slight smile on her lips. “I don't think anyone has ever made Tony Stark do anything he doesn't actually want to do.” She leaned over, pressing a soft kiss to his hair. “I love you both, but you're both dumbasses.” She braced her hands on her hips. “You're goddamn Captain fucking America. Start acting like it.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” Sam asked her.

“Steve knows what I mean,” she said, and Sam looked at Steve.

Steve looked down at his sketchpad, at the scribbles and lines that had somehow become Tony's face, the line of Tony's jaw and the slope of Tony's brow, the curve of Tony's lips and the arch of Tony's throat. He reached out, his fingers sliding over the picture. “I think I do.” He looked up. “It means, it's time to get things done.”

“Ominous,” Sam said, with a bright grin. “What do you need?”

He grinned back. “Like you said, Jan. Time to start using my words.”

* *

"Pick up pens before you come in.”

Ellen squinted down at her phone, her other arm wrapped around her bag. She hipchecked the front door of the lobby open, ducking around a few guys from the financial pages and nodding at John the security guy. He waved back.
"Where's mine?" he asked, waving at the cruller she was holding between her teeth.

Ellen juggled her bag and phone, managing to get a hand free. "Probably back at the coffee shop," she said, grinning. "Hey, have you seen Jesse?"

"Nah, but I just got on shift a few minutes ago," he said. "Place is going nuts, but I don't know what's up. Why?"

Ellen scowled down at her phone. "She sent me a weird text." With a shrug, she jammed it into her pocket. "I'm ahead in the pool."

"You are full of lies, Ning, your offense fell off a cliff last weekend," John said.

"Yeah, but they took all the points with them," Ellen said, wiggling her fingers at him as she headed for the elevator. "Gonna take your money."

"Keep dreaming, Ellen!" he called after her.

Ellen managed to balance everything as she got into the elevator, and stabbed the button for her floor with her elbow. There were crumbs on her chest, and she brushed at them with the back of her wrist. Which might have helped, or might've just ground the grease into her shirt. She wasn't really sure.

The elevator came to a stop with a soft ding, and she slipped out, bracing her bag on her hip. "Hey, Celia," she said, pausing halfway to her desk. "Have you seen-"

"NING!" Duck's voice rang out over the newsroom floor. She glanced over to find him standing in the door of his office, one hand braced against the wood. "My office. Now."

"Okay, give me a-"

"Now," he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Ellen stared at him. "Can I-"

"No."

"OOooookay," she said, trying to hide her cruller behind her back. Without looking up, Celia shoved a napkin across the desk at her.

"Leave it," she mouthed. There was an odd look on her face. "Don't." She shook her head. "Leave it all."

Ellen gaped at her. "What is wrong with-"

"NING."

"Oh my God, he is in a mood," Ellen grumbled. She dropped her bag and straightened her jacket. "How do I look?"

Celia didn't look up. "Doomed."

"Yeah, well, that's normal." Ellen strode across the newsroom. "Okay, bossman, what have I done now?"

"You got me into this," Duck said, his voice dire. "And you're going to get me out of it." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at his office. "Get in here."
“What the hell is going on?” Ellen asked, ducking around him. “Are you-” Her head came around and she stumbled to a stop, her heart in a throat.

Steve Rogers was sitting in the visitor's chair next to Duck’s desk, a tea cup and saucer held in one bit hand.

“Al made tea,” Jesse said brightly. “While we waited for you. Wasn't that nice of him?”

Ellen's mouth opened. “Oh, fuck me,” she said, and it came out so fast that it was almost one word.

Rogers blinked at her, his cup hovering in front of his mouth. “Smooth,” Jesse said, under her breath. She was holding her cup with both hands. She didn't seem inclined to drink from it.

“Want some?” Al asked. Ellen was pretty sure he hadn't been this animated since the first season finale of Great British Bakeoff. He held up the pot. “Enough for one more.”

Rogers took a sip of his. “It's really good,” he said, and Al's smile was beatific.

Duck shut the door, his hand braced on the knob. “Ellen, I think you know Captain Steve Rogers. Captain Rogers? Ellen Ning.” He headed to his desk, his tread heavy. “Seems Captain Rogers thought it was the time of you met, Ning.” He dropped into his chair. “And so he came to visit us.”

“Aren't we lucky?” Al asked, hugging his teapot.

"Definitely,” Ellen said. She cut a hard look in Jesse’s direction. “You could’ve let me know we had a guest.”

“I sent you a text,” Jesse said.

She raise her eyebrows at Ellen. “Remember our code?”

Ellen stared at her. “No. What code?”

“You’re being rude,” Al said. “To Captain America.” Ellen could hear the capitol letters implied in the words.

“Yeah, that’s true. Thanks. Now, go away, Al,” Duck said, his cheek braced on one hand.

Al blinked at him. "But-"

"It was very nice to meet you,” Rogers said, his eyebrows tipping up, just a bit. Just enough to make him look quizzical. Or worried. "I don't want to keep you from your work any longer, though." He stood, holding out one broad palm, and Al took it, a pleased smile slipping across his features.

"Oh, I understand," he said, his bow tie bobbing along with the words. He gave Rogers’ had a single, strong pump. "Duty calls, and all that?"

Rogers smiled, his head tipping forward. "We're all just fighting the good fight,” he agreed, and when Al left, it was with a euphoric expression of pleasure on his face.

"Shut the door," Duck said, and Jesse shut the door. He looked back at Rogers. "Wanna stick around? That's the quickest I've ever gotten him to stop talking."

Rogers let out a slight chuckle, lowering himself back into Duck's ragged visitor's chair. "He seems like a very nice fella," he said, reaching for his cup. “He makes a mean cup of tea, that's for sure.”

"And you seem like a master of diplomacy,” Duck said. He flicked a hand at the other chair. "Sit, Ning.” Ellen considered arguing. Or running. Duck turned to look at her, giving her the full force of
his gaze. "Ning. Sit down." It was calm. It was almost gentle. She wasn't sure why, but she found that more terrifying than if he was yelling.

Ellen sat.
"Thanks for agreeing to see me," Rogers said.

"I didn’t," Ellen said. "I came to work. And you were here." Her shoulders were tight, her back straight. "Why are you here?"

He blinked. "I wanted to ask you something, actually." He rolled his cup between his hands, his fingers flexing. "Why you wrote that story."

Her lips felt numb. Cold. "Because it was the truth."

Rogers nodded. "Yes. It was." He leaned back. "I read it, you know, it was very well done." He smiled. "I liked it, actually. It was..." He looked up at her. "Kind."

"It wasn’t." The words came out, hard and sharp. "Why are you here?"

"Because I need a friend in the press, and I thought it might be you."

Ellen gaped at him. "I outed you."

Rogers blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

She tried to swallow and it was like trying to swallow a baseball whole, her throat closed up, her breathing hitched. "I outed you," she repeated, her teeth clipping the words. "You..." Her lips went tight. "I printed that you were in a relationship, and you had never confirmed that, let alone defined your sexual orientation. I outed you."

"Technically, I printed that," Duck said, rolling his pen between his fingers. The light glinted across the worn silver finish. "You just wrote it."

Ellen ignored him. "I outed you," she said. "And that's not something that should be forgiven."

His lips quirked up in a slight smile. "I got married," he said, his eyebrows arching. "That's about as public record as you can get. It was going to come out."

"It doesn't matter." The rage sat in the pit of her stomach, hot and caustic, and she focused on that. It was easier to handle than the shame, the self-hatred. She sucked in a breath. "There's no excuse. There's nothing that makes that right. That was not-" She squeezed her eyes shut, ignoring how they burned. "It wasn't my story to tell, and I did it anyway, and that's-" She shook her head. "I outed you. And there's no excuse for that. Ever." She chewed her lip, telling herself that she didn't taste copper, didn't taste iron. "Not ever."

"Ms. Ning?"

She opened her eyes to find him considering her, his expression unreadable. She gave him a tight smile. "I think you can call me Ellen."

"Thank you." Rogers shifted forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. "All right. Ellen." His head tipped to the side, a bare flicker of movement, his eyes sharp. "You clearly believe that. So..." He straightened up. "Why did you write it, then? If you're so opposed to that particular story being told-

"I don't object to the story being told, I object to it being told without the express permission of the
person it's being written about,” she said.

“Right,” Rogers said. “So why did you do it?”

Ellen took a breath. “Because every time someone who looks like you, someone as famous as you, joins the queer kids at that 'weird' table in the high school cafeteria of life, you make things just a tiny bit easier for everyone who doesn't look like you.” She tossed a hand through the air. “You buy us space. You buy us a measure of protection. Your existence normalizes us.”

“So to speak,” Jesse said, sipping her tea.

“So to speak,” Ellen agreed. “By being you, and being...” She shook her head.

“Gay?” Rogers said, with a slight smile.

“Being gay, yes, you make it okay. For people who are walking a knife edge right now.” She leaned in. “You use 'my husband' in public, on camera, and it's not going to change the world, but it alters the perception of who we are, what we can be. Does it really change things that much? Probably not.”

“But enough,” Rogers said. He shifted in his seat, one foot sliding across the floor, as if he was bracing for something. He looked at her. “You get used to keeping things to yourself. Things that are dangerous. Things that always go unspoken. You tell yourself it's a private matter, it's no one's business but yours. Back then, it was true.” He gave her a tight smile. “Straight white soldiers go on posters. Gay art students make them.”

He leaned back. “I didn't care about being a symbol, back then. I just wanted to do something big, something important, I wanted to make a difference.” He smiled. “Now, I guess that means being a symbol.”

“I think,” Ellen said, very careful now, “all you have to be is yourself.”

“Wouldn't that be a refreshing change?” His eyebrows arched, and she caught herself smiling. “No one ever asked me, Ellen. And I never volunteered the information. What you did? Was save me from having to make up a press release, and I understand why you're conflicted about it, but...” He nodded. “I'm grateful to you.”

She nodded. “Thank you for not suing us.”

“Yes. Thank you for that,” Duck said, his head cradled in his hand. “Very much.”

“You told the truth, and telling that truth couldn't result in me getting evicted, getting fired, or putting my life at risk,” Rogers said. “So I don't see the problem.”

“Journalistic win,” Jesse said. She toasted Rogers with her tea cup. “So does that mean we can ask you for an interview?”

Rogers nodded. “As it turns out, I'm here to cut a deal.”

“Is that the sort of thing you say that ends up with people joining super hero strike teams?” Ellen asked.

“Occasionally,” Rogers said. He smiled. “Don't worry. This plan's just a little less dangerous.”

She took a deep breath. “Imagine my relief.”
"We've got a problem."

"Uh-huh." Tony stabbed the 'speaker' option on his phone and went back to squinting at the section of circuit board he was working on, wishing that he'd left just a tiny bit more buffer space in the design. Sure, it was cheap and efficient to produce, but it was a bear to repair. He straightened up with a groan. "Past Tony was an asshole, you know that?"

"I've heard that about Past Tony, Current Tony, and Future Tony," Marcy said. "Mostly from you."

"Well, I'd know." Tony rubbed the small of his back, trying to get the kinks out. It was not going to happen. "Anyway-"

"Anyway, we've got a problem," Marcy repeated.

"Yeah, well, that should probably be our company's new motto," Tony said. He reached for his coffee cup. "StarkIndustries: We've got a problem. It's catchy. Get me some workups, let's see what we can do with that."

"Mr. Stark-"

"Okay, got it, it's serious, what-"

"NYNN just announced that they're going live with a round table discussion with Steve and a panel of journalists."

Tony froze. "Oh, fuck."

"Yes, that was my reaction as well."

"When?"

There was a pause. "Today. This afternoon."

"Right. Fuck." Tony threw back the cold dregs of his coffee, ignoring the way his stomach had started to churn. "Who-"

"Victor Aimsbridge-"

"Okay, he's fine," Tony muttered, rubbing his forehead. "He's... He's good. Who else?"

"Joy Van Dieter-"

"She's an idiot," Tony said.

"Martin Morrison."

"And he's a right wing, homophobic twit," Tony said, ignoring the spike of panic that shot through him. He stared at his phone. "Marcy, what the hell-"

"And Ellen Ning."

It took him a second to place the name. "The woman who WROTE THE STORY?"

"The woman who wrote the story," Marcy agreed. Tony made a noise, air forced out through
clenched teeth, and she paused. "Are you all right?"

"I think I'm having a stroke," Tony said. "I'd say heart attack, but I actually know what one of those feels like and this is way, way worse." He scraped his hands over his face. "So. Steve is." He braced his hands on the edge of the bench and leaned into them. "Is doing a live press conference. With the reporter that got us into this mess, a reporter who came out because a magazine threatened to reveal his relationship with another man, and an idiot who tried to imply that the recent spate of tornadoes in the midwest was because God was angry that Target did an ad campaign featuring a gay couple."

“And Joy Van Dieter.”

“Yeah, Pepper made her cry last month, and she wasn't even trying, I... Do not care about her,” Tony said.

“She's good at getting her followers in a lather,” Marcy said. “You can discount her, but I'm not about to.”

“Oh, so, Steve is doing a live teleconference. With this...” He mouth worked. “Group.”

“So it would appear.”

"And you aren't stopping him, why?" Tony bit out.

"Because he doesn't work for us," Marcy said. "And thus, I have no power over him, Mr. Stark. I can say, 'do not do the thing, you idiot,' and he then says, 'thank you for the advice, ma'am, but this is something I've gotta do.'"

Tony pushed away from the workbench, snagging his phone as he went. "This sounds like an actual conversation that you have had."

"I did do my best," Marcy said. He wasn't sure if she sounded apologetic or just exhausted. Possibly both. "He's..."


"Committed," she said.

"Yeah, well, we're both gonna end up committed if he goes through with this, because I give him about three and a half minutes before he tosses Morrison out the damn window and into New York traffic," Tony said. He stripped his shirt over his head, throwing it in the general direction of the couch, and grabbed his phone. "What're the chances we can stall them until I get there?"

"Approximately zero," she said.

"Approximately?"

"It might be less. The news director over there is not your biggest fan, Tony."

"He holds a grudge, it's true," Tony said. Jarvis, anticipating what he was going to do, had the elevator doors open, and he jogged through. "I look like I was dragged through a grease trap backwards; I have to shower, when is this shitshow happening?"

"Less than an hour." He opened his mouth, and she headed him off. "And you're only hearing about it now because I'm only hearing about it now. I don't know when it was set up, but everyone involved played it very close to the vest.”
“Probably to keep us from interfering,” Tony said, staring at the doors as the floors rushed by as the elevator sped towards the penthouse.

“In all likelihood, yes,” Marcy said. She paused. “Please tell me that you'll be interfering.”

“As quickly as I can,” Tony said. “Call him back and stall.”

“I tried. It's going directly to voice mail,” Marcy said. “I notified SHIELD, Coulson's reporting the same thing. You could try, but—”

“But he's not going to pick up,” Tony finished for her. “Right.” The doors opened, and he slid out. “I'm on my way.”

“Shall I send a car?”

“It's so cute that you think I'm risking New York traffic,” he said. “I'll be out of here in ten.”

“I'll see if I can run interference,” Marcy said.

“I'll take any help I can get,” Tony said, dropping his phone next to the sink. “Thank you.”

“Good luck,” she said. “I think we're going to need it.”

She disconnected, and Tony kicked off his shoes. “Jarvis, can you try to get Captain Quixote on the phone for me?” He stripped off his jeans. “Captain Tilts-At-Windmills. Captain Lost Cause. Captain—”

There was a faint beep from his phone, and then Steve's voice. “Hi! I'm either out of range, or not available. Please leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks!”

Tony's eyes rolled up towards the ceiling. “Steven Grant Rogers, pick up this phone,” he said, which was ridiculous, Steve couldn't hear him. Tony didn't feel like being rational, though. “Or call me when you get this. As SOON as you get this.”

That wasn't going to happen, but he felt better for having tried. Tossing his shorts, he stabbed at the surface of his phone, disconnecting the call before he headed into the shower.

He might be going down, but he was going to go down swinging.

*

“Your phone's ringing again.”

Steve didn't even look up. “I know.”

Ellen paused. “You... Planning on picking it up?”

Steve pretended to think about that. “Nope.”

She nodded. “Ah. Gotcha.”

Steve frowned down at the ends of his tie. “I hate these things.”

“This is a universal feeling, I think.” Ellen glanced at him. “Didn’t wardrobe tie that for you?”

“Yeah, but I took it off,” Steve said. She stared at him. He shrugged. “I hate ties. Feels like I'm
“Everyone hates ties,” Jesse said. She raised her camera, snapping a sequence of photos before Steve could school his face into something approaching a smile.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked.

She was studying the shots on the camera's display. “I'm trying to find a bad angle for you.” Her mouth went tight. “I'm starting to think it's impossible.”

“I think-” The shutter clicked again, and he stopped, sighing. “Want me to make a face or something?”

“Look at this.” Jesse held the camera out to Ellen. “He looks like he's been filibustering congress over health care for children for twelve hours. Exhausted and frustrated, but resolute. Stoic.”

“Oh my god, he totally does,” Ellen said, frowning at the picture. “How-”

“It's the unfastened tie,” Steve said. He made another attempt at the damn thing, but his fingers were not obeying him. He gave up, frustrated. He had no desire to go back to the makeup and wardrobe department, but that was starting to look like his only choice. “Can you tie this?” he asked Ellen.

“No,” Ellen stared at him. “You can't tie a tie?” she asked.

Steve gave her a look. “Can you?” he asked, his voice polite.

“No, I'm a useless lesbian who never managed to attract a proper butch girlfriend,” she said, and Steve choked on a laugh. “I thought WWII Army uniforms had ties.”

“Only the dress uniform,” Steve said, trying again. He was going to end up tying his hand to his neck. “I didn't like the dress uniform, and the dress uniform didn't like me, and there were a lot of people who could just tie my dang tie if it came down to it, so...” He looked at Jesse. “Can you tie this?”

“I can tie you up like seven different ways,” Jesse said, and every head in the room swung in her direction. She didn't so much as change expression. “None of them involve a Windsor knot.”

“Right,” Steve said, because otherwise, that was just going to sit there. “Okay. Right. I can-” He frowned down at the ends of his tie. “This is-”

“You look like you could use a hand.”

Steve glanced up. Victor Aimsbridge was walking across the green room, a tablet tucked easily under his arm. He gave Steve a slight smile, his eyes bright behind the lenses of his glasses. “May I?” he asked, his pale eyebrows arcing.

Steve let his hands drop to his sides. “Please,” he said, his head falling forward “Please help me.”

Aimsbridge let out a soft chuckle. “Chin up, Captain.” He paused, a puckish glint in his eyes. “Figuratively and literally.”

Steve laughed, some of the strain going out of him. “Thank you.” He tipped his head back, and Aimsbridge took the strip of silk out of his hand. He made quick work of the knot, his fingers light against Steve's throat as he tightened the tie.

“There,” he said, taking a step back. His eyebrows arched. “How's that?”
Steve adjusted the tie. “It's perfect. Thank you.” He held out his hand. “Steve Rogers.”

Aimsbridge took it with a smile. “Victor Aimsbridge. I'm honored to meet you, Captain.”

“Thanks for agreeing to join us,” Steve said. He waved at Ellen. “Have you met?”

“I don't think so,” Ellen said. She offered a hand. “Ellen Ning. New York Now magazine.” She nodded at Jesse, who was fiddling with her camera. “This is Jesse Delgado.”

“I take pretty pictures,” Jesse said. “And I'm not going out there. Just to make that clear. I am not going on TV.”

He shook both their hands. “Thus making you the smart one in the room,” he said, with a slight smile.

“I'm here under duress,” Ellen said. Her chin came out at a stubborn angle. “Gonna make the most of it, though.”

“And I appreciate it,” Steve told her.

“I'm here because apparently this is where the queer kids are,” Jesse said. “Like high school. We all hide in the drama club room.”

“We're not hiding,” Steve told her.

“I'm hiding,” Aimsbridge told him. “I can't believe I got talked into this.”

“How did they talk you into it?” Jesse asked.

“I think the turn of phrase was, 'Captain America,’” Aimsbridge mused. “There was probably more. But I stopped listening at this point.”

“Are we ready?”

Martin Morrison's voice preceded him into the room by about two minutes. By the time he caught up to his bombast, everyone was staring in the direction of the door. He was, Steve admitted, a handsome figure of a man, everything sharp and clean, from his well-cut hair to the tips of his polished shoes. He barely glanced in their direction.

But when his eyes slid over them, there was something flat and disdainful in their depths. He gave Steve a smile, his capped white teeth flashing. “Captain. Thanks so much for including me in your invitation. I'm...” His smile stretched. “Honored.”

Morrison didn't offer a hand, or introduce himself. Steve nodded. “Glad you could make it,” he said, as the news director walked into the green room, the chic and pleasant figure of Von Dieter right behind him.

He was a tall, reedy man with a shock of white hair and a startling resemblance to Mark Twain, and an easy smile. “All right,” he said, clapping his hands. “We're going live in twenty minutes, let's find our places, people.”

“Worry about them,” Morrison said, waving at Steve and Ellen. His smile was condescending. “They're going to need a crash course in how to be on tv.”

“Can't hurt,” the news director agreed. “If you'll follow me?”
“I hate you,” Ellen said to Steve under her breath. They fell into step after the news director.

“For getting you into this? Or making you share a stage with Morrison?”

“I'm never going to get the smarm out of this jacket.”

Steve smiled, just a little. “I'll pick up your dry cleaning bill.”

*

“So, Captain Rogers, what's it like being the new poster boy for the LGBT movement?”

Steve paused in the act of reaching for his water glass. He'd been sure he'd be safe to get something to drink; Victor and Morrison had been debating constitutional law. But Morrison, keen to keep from admitting defeat, had turned out to be a master of turning the conversation on his head at a moment's notice.

“I've been poster boy for a lot worse,” Steve said with an easy smile.

"Is there anything you regret, from this little escapade of yours?" Joy asked. She seemed glad that the conversation had turned from legal matters and journalistic ethics. Steve wasn't sure if he was or not.

"I regret letting Tony make up a registry after the fact," he said, taking a sip of water. "Some of that stuff is just horrible. Who needs a chafing dish in this day and age?"

"Oh, you don't have two already?" Ellen asked, utterly deadpan. She leaned an elbow on the arm of her chair and braced her chin on her hand. "I have two."

"Actually, they're quite useful for entertaining," Joy said, and Steve didn't like her, but he could almost admire her utter sincerity about everything she said.

"That's it?" Victor asked. "That's your only regret?" He was trying to hold back a smile, his lips twitching. "Chafing dishes?"

Steve made a face. "Okay, I regret that I married the man without telling him I love him," he said, and it came out so easily, so naturally, that he barely recognized that he'd said it. Telling the truth, it turns out, was remarkably freeing.

Ellen recoiled in her seat. "You didn't tell him?" she asked, so appalled that Steve started to laugh.

"Listen, have you met him?" he asked. "No. Seriously." He looked at the assembled group. "Has everyone met him?" He shook his head. "He's very intimidating. If we're out in public for more than five minutes, someone's professing their love for him."

“I think it might be a bit different when it's not someone leaning out of a speeding taxi,” Victor said.

“I take it you speak from experience,” Steve said.

“Welcome to New York,” Victor agreed. “Our people are pretty open about their love, and their hate.” He tapped a finger against the arm of the chair. “Still. It's a little different from someone you know.” One eyebrow arched. “Someone you live with?”

“That's part of the problem,” Steve said. “Living in Avengers tower is...” He paused. “Like living in a very affectionate frat house, honesty. For the most part, everyone's fully invested in everyone else's business. So you try to make a date and somehow it ends up being twelve people yelling at each other over bowls of popcorn and containers of takeout.” He shrugged. “Did you ever try to flirt with
someone in front of a sibling? They are going to make sure you fail. It's not even malicious. It's just instinct.” He spread his hands. “It's a lost cause, honestly, it's not going to work.”

“So what did work?” Ellen asked.

“Desperation,” Steve told her. “I mean, I'm hell to live with. I've been reliably informed that last week I went into a twenty-three minute rant about food waste in New York restaurants. I probably would've gone on longer, except Tony distracted me with a SHIELD briefing.” He smiled. “Which was probably the right choice.”

“Has SHIELD given you any problems about this arrangement of yours?” Morrison asked.

Steve smiled at him. “By 'arrangement,' you're referring to my marriage?” he asked. “My marriage to my husband, Tony?”

Morrison's face twitched. “You know what-”

“Just curious about your choice of words,” Steve said.

“And we all knew what I meant, what I was referring to, so I don't see what the difference my word choice really makes,” Morrison said. “It was implied, and you're-”

“A more cynical person would think you were attempting not to acknowledge that it is, in fact, a legal marriage,” Ellen said. “By implying that it really isn't.”

"Because 'marriage' has a very specific meaning for a lot of people,” Joy said. “And this arrangement might be acknowledged as legal by some entities-”

“Such as the US government,” Victor said, his eyebrows arching.

“But it used to be that we didn't discuss things like this, these kind of-” She winced, her face drawing up in distaste. “Sexual arrangements.”

“We weren't, actually,” Ellen said. “You're the one who brought sex into this.”

“But it's implied, when two men enter into these arrangements, and I don't think that there's any harm in wanting to keep certain things private,” Joy replied, her voice sharp.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Steve said, his brow furrowing. "How old are you?" She blinked at him, and he tipped his head forward. "Because you're talking like you've been around for a hundred years, and you're confused by the rapid change to social norms." He stopped. "Wait, that'd be me.”

Her lips twitched, something almost like a smile. "Still, my point holds, Captain, there's certain things that didn't used to be talked about in public, and I don't know why everything has to now be-" Her hands fluttered through the air as if she was attempting to ward something off. "Why everyone has to know everyone's business now.”

He settled back in his chair. "Yes. There is a lot of things we didn't used to talk about." He met her eyes square on. "Like how Mrs. O'Malley up on the third floor always had a split lip or a black eye, and it wasn't because she walked into doors. Sure, folks talked about how the Ferguson kids across the block got picked up by the cops for stealing, but no one wanted to mention it's because their parents couldn't feed 'em all.” He looked up, squinting into the lights. "We didn't talk about the people getting lynched down in the South. We didn't talk about how you couldn't get a job down on the docks unless you were willing to kick back half your salary to the fixer who got you the job.
"We didn't talk about the people who preyed on the new arrivals, the people with literally nothing to their names and everything to lose. We didn't talk about the race lines in the city, the way the cops'd take a kickback from just about anyone to look the other way. We didn't talk about the political machines that ran the city, that ran everything, and stole from everyone. We didn't talk about the graft and the protection money and the kids working in dark, cramped, hot rooms and women doing piecework by inadequate light at all hours of the night for starvation wages."

Steve stopped. "There's a hell of a lot we didn't talk about, Ms. Von Deiter. Things people didn't say because they were afraid, or resigned, or didn't even know it was wrong. And that silence, it didn't help anyone who was suffering, who was marginalized, who was being used or abused. It helped two groups of people." He held up a finger. "One, the people who perpetrate violence, the users and those in power, who are using that power to maintain the status quo." He held up a second finger. "And two? The people who feel uncomfortable hearing about the pain and suffering of others. The ones who prefer not to know that there are issues, because it doesn't affect them, and so...

He spread his hands. "They'd prefer to maintain their ignorance. Because it's easier. It's so much easier." His hands fell into his lap. "But the health and safety of a person who needs to be recognized as a human being, worthy of love and respect, trumps your need to not be bothered."

"That's not really a fair assessment of the situation," Morrison said. He braced a hand on the arm of his chair, leaning into it. "There has to be a consensus, in a society, about what should and should not be discussed publicly. You can't just force your opinions on other people, as to what you can tell their kids."

"Society can reach a consensus," Steve agreed. "But anyone locked out of that consensus, who didn't get to be in on the decision making process? They're not required to hold to it. After all, silence that is chosen by a person, for their own protection or privacy, is different than silence that is forced on a person, or a group, via social pressure."

"Yes, one person has the good taste to handle their private matters privately, and the other has to be shamed into doing it," Morrison said.

"One is a choice. The other is an act of oppression and aggression," Steve corrected.

"Why is it that you people bring up oppression every time you're told you can't have your way?"

Steve smiled at him. "You know, you're right," he said, relaxed and easy. "I'm the last one who should be complaining about oppression. As things go, I get off light." He shook his head. "The other day, someone said something..." He paused. "Is 'horribly homophobic' the right turn of phrase?" he asked Victor.

"Not having been part of the discussion, I'm going to guess it is," Victor said.

"I like getting expert advice," Steve said. To Morrison, he said, "It was a shock. It caught me off guard. One of my teammates asked me, if it hadn't happened before. And the truth was, it hadn't."

"Since the serum."

Morrison frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"


"Perception. When I was small, when I was undersized and underweight and generally the runt of the litter?" He smiled. "Man, did I hear things like that a lot. Slurs. Insults. Threats. It might shock you, but some of the citizens of 1930's New York made certain judgments about five foot nothing,
angry art students. The moment I didn't fit the image of what a 'gay man' should be, then... I was exempt from that kind of judgment. The perception shifted.”

"And doing this, making this public, that changes the perception again, doesn't it?" Morrison asked. "You've altered your legacy here, Captain. Your war record is going to take a backseat to your personal life."

Steve considered that. "Maybe," he said, with a slight, wry smile. "And maybe that's for the better."

"Really? You want your legacy to be tainted by this?"

"I want my legacy to be changed by this," Steve said. "Because I did the things I did. I fought for my country, I sacrificed." He shook his head. "I sacrificed everything for my country, and more than that, for an ideal. Not for what we are, but what we can be. And in the end, I fully expected to die for that, Mr. Morrison. Nothing can change that."

"But people will see you-"

"And with all due respect, I can't do anything about how people see me. That's on them. I just exist, and you put your judgments on me," Steve said, the words cutting. "And you don't matter."

Morrison's mouth gaped open. "Excuse me?"

"You don't," Steve said. "If you decide, right now, that the fact that I'm married to another man invalidates everything that I've done, everything I've tried to do, then I can't do anything to change your mind." He leaned in. "You don't matter. You've got enough history. You've got enough heroes. But there are people out there, there are kids out there, who need to know that people like them exist, and have always existed. Despite the efforts of people like you to erase them."

Morrison's chin came up. "People like me? And what, exactly, are 'people like me'?"

Steve smiled at him. "Bullies. Bigots."

Morrison leaned forward, a finger stabbing at the air between them. "People like me are why America is the greatest nation on earth, Captain. If it were up to people like you, we'd all be sitting around, trying to make sure everyone feels good before we bother making any progress."

Steve leaned back. "See, here's the thing," he said. "This country's always had an obsession with forward momentum. With being the greatest, the best, the first. We care, so deeply, about being in the lead, and then, when that first guy's across the line? We lose interest and forget that everyone else is struggling to catch up."

"So what's your plan, Captain?" Morrison asked, with such disdain that Steve almost burst out laughing. "How're you going to make this a country to be proud of again?"

Steve looked down, and then back up. "We make it a nation of lasts."

There was silence. For a long moment, everyone just stared at him. And then Joy said, "I'm sorry, what?"

He smiled. "We spend all this time, watching for firsts, celebrating firsts. Know what? The firsts will take care of themselves. We need to focus on the lasts. The last case of AIDS. The last victim of domestic abuse. The last act of racial violence we tolerate. The last use of conversion therapy allowed, anywhere in the country. The last cross burning." His voice was vibrating with it, with the force of it, and he felt his hands go to fists against his thighs. "The last time anyone vandalizes a
mosque, or a Jewish cemetery. The last time we, as a country, allow police brutality or sexual violence to go unnoticed, let alone unpunished."

His chin was up, his shoulders squared. "I believe, I know, we are moving forward, every day. Towards the last child thrown out of their house for their sexual orientation. The last murder of a sex worker or undocumented person that gets thrown in the cold case files because no one cares. The last time someone has to fear not being allowed to use a public bathroom, or simply exist in public."

The studio was quiet now, and he kept his seat by a force of will. "Let's let that 'last' already have passed us. Today. Yesterday. Last week. One more is too many, one more is something we should not bear." He looked at Morrison. "My goal, Mr. Morrison? So that we can all be proud to be here? To call ourselves Americans?

"Is to find every thing that should not be, and say, this is the last time we will stomach this. This is it. This." He stabbed his finger down. "This is where we draw the line."

He leaned forward. "You can focus on looking back, if you insist. But I'm looking at what is yet to come, and the things we have to leave behind, if we want to move forward. All of us." He smiled. "Together."

The words echoed in the room, in the silent, still space of the studio. And somewhere, far in the back of the room, in the shadows behind the cameras, someone started to clap. It was slow, deliberate, hands coming together with a great deal of force. One person clapping, and then, two. Three. Ellen was pounding her hands together, her head down, and Victor was clapping, his eyes bright behind the lenses of his glasses. Even Joy, giving into the peer pressure, tapped her palms together, a smile on her face.

Morrison looked out at the cameras, his smile so tight that it looked like it could crack at any moment. "And we'll be right back after these messages, stick around for a discussion of the historical context of our discussion."

The commercial sign flashed, and Morrison surged to his feet. "Well, that was quite a piece of grandstanding," he gritted out, and Steve smiled at him.

"Sorry I didn't turn out to be the easy mark you thought I was," he said, and Morrison's face turned an unfortunate shade of brick red. Steve smiled, and somewhere in the background, he caught the glimpse of light flashing off of a camera lens.

"Great, this is great, the viewer engagement is through the roof." The news director bounced towards the edge of the stage. "We've got one more break, let's bring it back around to the latest legal rulings of the state supreme court, I think-"

"No one cares, Ed," Morrison said, collapsing back into his seat. He looked petulant. "You can take your suggestions and shove them up your ass, really, I don't-"

His phone buzzed in his jacket pocket, and Steve glanced up at the commercial countdown as he reached for it. Next to him, Victor was sipping from his water glass. "Well, that was a hell of a thing," he said, and Steve gave him a lopsided smile.

"I'm told I rant," he said, flicking his thumb over the surface of his phone.

"And it is a thing of beauty," Victor agreed, his lips curling against the rim of his glass.

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but never got that far, his attention suddenly completely caught by his phone. The text was short, simple, and to the point. "That's your only regret?"
Everything seemed to slow down, the world whiting out on the edges, the thud of his pulse loud in his ears. Steve sucked in a breath, slow and careful, his fingers hovering over the surface of his phone.

“I’ve got a few more,” he texted back. “None about you, though.”

There was barely a beat of pause before his phone vibrated again. “Should’ve started clapping then.”

Steve's head snapped up, squinting against the stage lights. He could see the techs moving things, camera operators and sound techs making adjustments while they could. Behind them, a few execs, clustered around a tablet, checking numbers and talking in low tones.

And behind them, Tony was looking down at his phone, his thumbs bouncing over the surface. Steve's phone vibrated, and he looked down. “Say nice things about my ass,” the text said. “Should put that in prenup. During media appearances, you have to compliment my ass.”

He sucked in a breath, warmth sweeping over him. When he went to reply, his hands were shaking. “Not sure how I can work that in.”

Tony's head came up, and his eyes met Steve's across the length of the studio. He was smiling, that familiar, perfect half smile. Steve's phone buzzed again, and he glanced down at it.

“I've got faith in you.”

“Captain Rogers?”

He looked up at the news director, who had a hand on his headset. “We're back in five.”

Steve nodded. “Thank you,” he said, putting his phone back in his pocket, and straightening his jacket.

Ed moved off the stage, and Morrison shifted in his seat next to Steve. “Done pandering to the social justice crowd?” he asked, his lips barely moving.

Steve stared across the studio. Tony was leaning against a console, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression amused. Steve loved him so much it hurt.

“Mr. Morrison?” Steve looked at him. His teeth flashed in a brilliant smile. “Be glad you're only dealing with me.”

* 

“What do you want for those photos?”

The photographer never lowered her camera. “I'll trade 'em for a solo photo shoot with you.”

“Done.” Tony rocked his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet, desperate to move and yet unable to bear leaving the room. One of the network suits glared in his direction. Tony ignored him, because, seriously, fuck that guy. He was lucky Tony hadn't stormed the stage and tackled Steve to the ground.

And that was still on the table. He could still do that. He was actively thinking about it.

“You okay?” the photographer asked, her eyes sliding in his direction.

“Probably not.” On stage, Steve seemed to be about three seconds from tossing Morrison out of the
nearest window. Tony wouldn't have blamed him. “I married that.”

“Congratulations,” the photographer said. “How's that working out for you?”

“Far better than I had any right to expect,” Tony said. Because Steve loved him. Steve loved him. He realized, a bit too late, that he was holding onto his phone like it was a lifeline. He forced his fingers to relax.

Steve loved him.

On the stage, they'd finished up closing statements, or arguments, or whatever the fuck it is what they were doing. Tony hadn't really been paying attention. Tony didn't care, he was just watching Steve's mouth, his throat, his hands, his body, and slowly losing his mind.

“And we're clear!” the news director said, and Tony realized he'd been holding his breath. He exhaled, his head bobbing in a nod.

The photographer swung her camera over her shoulder. “You going to the green room?” she asked.

“Probably,” Tony said, trying to sound undecided about that. “Why?”

“Cause I wanna load a fresh memory card if you're going to do something interesting.”

Tony nodded. “I was thinking of ripping his shirt off.” He shrugged. “Licking something.”

“Cool. I'll get the big card.”

“Be prepared to replace it at least once,” Tony said. “Show me where to find the green room and I'll give you something to publish.”

“In New York Now or Out magazine?”

“At this point, it's a tossup,” Tony said, and chuckling, the woman lead the way through the back corridors, throwing open the door to the green room.

There were a half a dozen people there, maybe more, PAs and techs, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Joy getting her hair touched up, saw Ellen talking to Victor, but really, there was only one person who mattered, only one person he really saw.

Steve looked up when he walked into the room and Tony forgot anyone else existed.

“So.” Steve ran a hand over his hair, undoing the hair and makeup department's careful work with one swipe of his fingers. “Uh. When did you get here?”

Tony struggled to keep a straight face, despite the way his heart was pounding. “Why, is there something you wanted me to hear?” He arched an eyebrow. “Or something you didn't want me to hear.”

“I honestly don't know,” Steve said, half under his breath, so disgruntled that Tony started to laugh.

“You're determined to make me insane, you know that?” Tony asked, because the alternative was to crawl up his chest and kiss him until one or both of them passed out.

“Oh, this is my fault?” Steve asked, but he was grinning now, his face relaxed, his eyes bright.

“Well, yes, you set this up, you-” Tony waved a hand back at the soundstage. “This certainly wasn't
my idea, buster, and now we're going to be dealing with press requests for the next year or so, really, what was that, that was just-

Steve caught his elbow, tugging him back around. “I love you,” he said, and Tony could swear his heart stopped beating. Steve grinned at him, wide and bright. “I love you, you make my life better, you make it easier, you-” He stopped, a flush sweeping up his cheeks. “You make me happy, and no matter how this works out, no matter what happens between us?” He smiled and it was beautiful, he was beautiful. “I'm always going to be grateful that when I asked you to marry me, you said yes.”

Tony's eyes fluttered shut, his breath leaving him in something like a sigh. “Right,” he said, with a firm nod. “Let's go.”

Steve let out a little laugh. “Go? Go wh-”

“I'm going to blow you in the bathroom, so let's GO,” Tony said, and Steve choked on whatever it had been that he was about to say.

“Oh for Christ's sake!” Morrison said, his face twisted into an expression of disgust. “Have you no shame?”

“I absolutely do not,” Tony said, smirking at him. His fingers tangled in the front of Steve's jacket. “So point us towards the nearest men's room.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Victor said, holding up a hand. “This is a place of business. We need to be professional.” He gave Tony a slight, wicked smile. “You can use my office.”

Tony offered him a hand. “You, sir, are a man of class and breeding.” Laughing, Victor shook it.

“You're all perverts,” Morrison said, stalking past them and out of the green room.


Steve dug his heels in. “We're not having sex in a public bathroom,” he said. But his face was flushed, his eyes huge and dark.

“Right,” Tony said, because this was rapidly becoming his favorite game. “Victor said we could use his office, so-”

“Thank you, that's very kind, we won't be doing that, either,” Steve said to Aimsbridge, his voice thin. “We're just going to-” He cleared his throat. “We're going to go now.”

“You do that,” Aimsbridge said, giving them a little wave with one hand. “And I expect to be the one to interview you on your first anniversary.”

“We'll pencil that in,” Tony said, and his head was spinning, heat and something like euphoria rolling over him in a wave. It was a possibility. It was something that could happen. A first anniversary. If he played his cards right, he could actually-

Steve was still staring at him, his face flushed, his lips parted, and Tony realized he was still clutching the front of Steve's jacket, the fabric twisted between his fingers. Tony pulled him down, and Steve met him halfway, their mouths colliding with more force than grace. Tony couldn't ever remember being this desperate, this needy, and despite that, he was laughing, or maybe Steve was.

The kiss stretched on until he felt his head spinning from lack of air, and when they broke apart, he didn't go far, his head just falling against Steve's chest, laughing against Steve's shirt, against his
throat. Steve's hands were on his waist, on his hip, and he was laughing into Tony's hair.

The sound of a camera shutter barely registered, but Steve pulled back, just a few inches. “Would you stop, Jesse?” he asked, but his voice was warm and full of humor.

“I'm angling for a staff position,” Jesse said “He's already agreed to pose for me.”

“Naked,” Tony said, just to watch Steve's pupils dilate.

“Well, fuck, I'm down for it if you are.” She leaned in. “Have you considered-”

“Do not bring up your charity calendar idea,” Ellen Ning said grabbing her by the elbow. “Jesse. No.”

“Your ideas are interesting to me and I wish to subscribe to your newsletter,” Tony said. “Take a card.” He managed to get a hand between his body and Steve's, pulling a card out of his jacket pocket. “Here.”

She took it. “This just says, ‘Google me,’” she said.

“I thought we threw those away,” Steve said. To Jesse, he added, “I'll email you.”

“Cool,” she said, and her camera came up, one last shot before Ellen was dragging her away.

“So,” Tony said. “Bathroom or office, or-”

“No here,” Steve said. He sounded like he was strangling. “Not- Not here, Tony.” He grabbed Tony’s hand. “Let’s go.”

“You're thinking about it,” Tony said, and dear God, but that was the hottest thing he'd ever seen. “You're thinking about me shoving you into a bathroom stall and-”

“Please stop talking,” Steve said, and there was a note of desperation to his voice. Laughing, Tony let himself be towed along through the building, his feet almost flying over the carpet as he struggled to keep up with Steve.

“We're going to end up in an expose, you know that right?” he asked.

“Ask me if I care,” Steve said, as they bypassed the elevators.

Tony glanced over his shoulder at the elevator doors, nonplussed for a second. “You know we're on the twelfth floor, right?” he asked.

“You know they've got stairs, right?” Steve shot back. He was breathing hard, and Tony grinned at his back, loving him so much it hurt.

“I'd object, but damn if this amount of eagerness isn't very good for my ego,” Tony said, as Steve shouldered the door open and headed through, Tony right on his heels. “So, what, we're going to run down eleven flights of stairs?”

“Twelve, actually, the parking garage is under the building,” Steve said. He glanced over his shoulder at Tony, and his smile was wicked and hot and worth everything. “I love you.”

“Yeah, if you don't want blowjobs in inappropriate locations, you need to stop saying that,” Tony said, his feet flying over the stairs.
Steve hand caught his, dragging him to a stop. “I love you,” he said, his grin so wide that it was barely contained. “I love you, I—”

Tony lunged for him, knocking him back a step, the kiss hot and deep and all consuming, one hand sliding along the length of Steve's neck, up into his hair. “You're going to make me insane,” he whispered against Steve's lips, and Steve shuddered, his body pressing close.

“Only fair,” he whispered back. “You've been making me nuts for weeks.”

“I've been making you nuts?” Tony asked, incredulous, because Steve's hands were on his waist now, smoothing up to cradle his ribs, then down to the small of his back, tugging him close. “You're the one who suddenly decided it was acceptable to walk around in a towel.”

“It was one time,” Steve said, his face flushing. “It was. One. Time.”

“And now I know what you look like, wet and in a towel, and Jesus CHRIST,” Tony said. Steve's hands kept slipping down, and then jerking back up. Tony grinned at him. “Steve? We're married, and you just told the entire country you're in love with me. You can touch my ass if you want.”

“I really, really do,” Steve said, and Tony burst out laughing.

Tony kissed him, hot and hard, and Steve's hands were on his ass, dragging him in, dragging him up. Tony wrapped his legs around Steve's waist, letting Steve take his weight. Steve barely seemed to notice, and God, but that was hot. “Car,” he mumbled against Steve's mouth. “Going to do dirty, filthy, depraved things to you in the car.”

“We're not—”

“I called Happy,” Tony panted against his throat. “He came and took the suitcase suit from me and he's waiting downstairs. With the limo.” He arched into Steve's body, need sizzling through him. “Limo. Big. Plush. Bench seats.” He grinned at Steve, who was looking like he'd just taken a hard blow to the head. “I've slept back there. You can sprawl out. And it's completely soundproofed.” His eyes met Steve's. “I made sure of that.”

Steve made a thin, strangled sound, and then he was moving, fast, almost running down the stairs, carrying Tony with him. Tony buried his face in Steve's shoulder and enjoyed the ride. It was hard and rough, just the way he liked it.

Steve hit the bottom landing and dropped Tony back to his feet. “Let's go,” he said, his hand catching Tony's, holding on tight.

“Right behind you,” Tony said, laughing.

Happy was waiting in the loading area right next to the elevator. “Glad to see you guys are finally on the same page,” he said, holding the back door of the limo open.

“Hi, Happy,” Steve said, and Tony mumbled something that might be a greeting or a curse against the skin of Steve's throat. “We're- I mean-”

Happy grinned at them. “I'll take the long way back, you kids have fun,” he said.

“We're not going to have sex in the car,” Steve said.

“We are absolutely going to have sex in the car,” Tony said, his head lolling back on his neck. “Take the long, long way back.”
Happy flicked him a salute that wasn't nearly as mocking as it should've been. “Right you are, boss.”

“We're not-” Steve started, and Tony snapped the collar of his shirt.

“Get in the car,” he said.

“Could you tell him we're not going to have sex in the car?” Steve asked, and Tony leaned in to kiss him, hard and fast.

“Happy, we're not going to have sex in the car,” he parroted.

“Right-O,” Happy said, still holding the door open. “I'll go straight home.” He leaned in. “Might hit traffic though. You know how New York is at this time of day.”


“We're not going to-” Steve started, and Tony planted a firm hand on his back.

“Get in the car,” he said, and Steve got in the car.

Tony followed him in, pausing in the doorway for a moment to take in the sight of Steve, half sprawled across the plush bench seat, his jacket askew and his hair a tumbled mess. “God DAMN,” he said, dizzy with it.

“There's a bottle of champagne chilling in the stand,” Happy said. He held up his phone. “Internet's going nuts, you did good, Cap.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, remarkably polite for a man who was about to get ravished.

“Yes, thank you,” Tony said, climbing in. “If we accidentally ended up on Long Island, I would not be upset, Happy.”

“Time for a tour of the boroughs,” Happy said. Whistling to himself, he shut the door after Tony.

“We're not having sex in this car,” Steve said, and Tony stripped off his jacket and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Right,” he said, a finger sliding under the silk of Steve's tie, his knuckle smoothing against Steve's throat. Steve swallowed, and Tony felt his throat flex. He smiled, slow and hot. “Steve. There is nothing you can say or do to convince Happy that we didn't have sex back here. He'll humor you, he'll nod and smile and say of course he believes you.”

Tony leaned in, his hand braced on the seat next to Steve's head, his body arched over Steve's. Steve was staring up at him, his pupils blown wide, his lips parted. His face was flushed, his breathing hard. Tony smiled at him. “So if the only thing keeping you from taking my pants off is the fact that Happy's going to judge you?” He leaned in, his lips just brushing against Steve's. “Might as well take my pants off.”

He ducked his head, his lips ghosting over Steve's throat, and Steve made a sound that was straight out of his hottest dreams. “Now,” he whispered against Steve's jaw, “if you want to spend the next hour making out back here, that's just fine with me.” His eyes flicked up to meet Steve's. “Really. That's just fine.”

Steve's fingers fluttered against his arm, his shoulder, his fingertips reverent against Tony's cheek. Tony tipped his head to the side, kissing Steve's fingers, affection bubbling through him. “Otherwise,
I'm going to make every single one of your fantasies come true.”

Steve blinked at him. Cleared his throat. “I've got a lot of those.”

Tony shuddered, heat sweeping over him. “I'm going to start taking clothes off now,” he said, his voice measured and even. “Maybe yours. Maybe mine. Don't know. Don't care. As long as someone ends up naked, and I get touching privileges.”

Steve's eyes fluttered shut. “We're... Going to be here for a long time?”

Tony grinned at him, even as he brought his knees up to straddle Steve's hips. “As long as you want,” he whispered.

Steve nodded. “Clothes off. Now.”

Tony sat up, making sure that his hips ground against Steve's as he did. “Good starting point,” he said, sliding his tie off.

*

Steve opened his eyes, and stared, uncomprehending, at the plush expanse above him.

It took him a moment, a moment where he took in the solid, warm weight of the body tucked against his, sprawled half over him. Tony was curled against him, one arm thrown over Steve's chest, his hair tickling Steve's jaw. Something was thrown over them, a blanket, and he didn't know where it had come from, he didn't know where they were, but he remembered the weight of Tony's leg against his, the way Tony's breath eased over his skin, slow and even. The smell of Tony's hair was already familiar, the warmth of his skin, the lines of his shoulders, his arms.

Steve stared at the roof of the limo, his chest aching.

He stirred. “Tony?” He smoothed a hand over Tony's hair, pushing it away from his slumbering face. “I think we're home.”

Tony reached up, batting his hand away with a mumbled sound of frustration. “Mmm. Yes,” he said, dragging the blanket over his shoulder.

“Where did you even get that?” Steve asked, his lips curling. But Tony's breath had already evened out, going slow and deep. Steve heaved a sigh, so happy that he couldn't bring himself to care. “Okay, we're clearly back home, because we're not moving,” he said. “And it's-” He fumbled for his jacket. “Where's my phone?”

“I apologize for speaking out of turn,” Jarvis said, his voice coming from a speaker in the ceiling. “But yes. You have returned safely to Avengers tower. It is nearly eight pm.”

Steve winced. “Right. Okay. Right.” He huffed out a breath. “We're in the parking garage?”

“Yes. Happy has long since left, you may take your time.”

“Yeah. We have to-” Steve rolled upwards, taking Tony with him. When he was upright, Tony in his lap, leaning against his chest, he started fumbling for whatever piece of clothing he could reach. “We can't stay in this car forever.”

“Yes, we can,” Tony mumbled against his throat, making Steve laugh.

“Oh, are you going to wake up now?” he asked, his fingers smoothing over Tony's cheek. “Hi,” he
Tony blinked at him, big dark eyes gleaming in the low light. “Hi,” he said, his lips twitching. “We had sex in the car.”

Steve felt his face flush. “You're very persuasive,” he agreed. “Can we go upstairs now?”

Tony snuggled down, his arms looping around Steve's neck. “Does that require me moving?” he asked.

“Yes,” Steve said, rubbing a hand up and down Tony's back. He was learning the lines of Tony's body, the hard ridges of his spine and the arch of his ribs. He hated the scars, every one he found, every white line and pucker of the skin. But it was Tony, and Tony was everything he'd ever wanted. “Just a little bit.”

“I did move a little bit,” Tony said. “I moved this far. And that was far enough.” He smiled, and Steve felt that against his skin, and his arms tightened. “This... This is good.”

Steve chuckled. “Right. We're just going to stay here. In this car.”

“Good idea.”

Steve shook his head. “You need to get dressed so we can go upstairs.” He tipped Tony's head up, brushing a kiss against his lips. “You promised to fulfill my fantasies. And I've got a major one about you. And your bedroom.”


“No, not later, Tony-” Steve's head fell back. “Tony.”

“If you don't mind,” Jarvis said, his voice amused. “The garage floor is currently empty. When you are ready to move, I can seal the doors to make sure there is no further access. Escort sir to the elevator, and I will make it an express straight to the penthouse.”

“So I need pants and he needs to-” Steve gave him a once over. Naked was a good look on Tony. Naked was a very, very good look on him. He sucked in a breath. “Tony needs to keep his pants.”

“I like my blanket,” Tony said. He grinned. “I really like my blanket.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, a little breathless. “I like your blanket, too.” He shifted Tony to the side, grabbing a random piece of dark cloth. “Give me a second, and I'm going to take it back off of you.”

“I accept this plan,” Tony agreed, languid. He opened one eye, his lips curling up as he watched Steve fumble on his pants. “Do you feel like a real American now? Having had a sexual encounter in the backseat of a car?”

“Technically, I'd done that before you,” Steve admitted. He got his pants zipped and didn't bother to button them. He looked up, and Tony was staring at him, his mouth hanging open. “Peggy,” he said. “Staff car.”

“In a war zone?” Tony asked, grinning. Steve gave him a shrug, one shoulder rising and falling, his face flushing. Tony laughed. “You're perfect, you know that?”

“I'm not, but I'm glad you think so.” Steve rolled over, pushing the door open. “Jarvis, I'll come back down and get our clothes. Don't…” He shook his head. “Just quarantine this car.”
“Jarvis, call the cleaning service,” Tony said, allowing Steve to drag him out. He wrapped the blanket around himself, an improvised toga. “I think I make this work.”

Steve grinned at him. “I think you do,” he agreed, reaching for Tony. “C’mere, your feet…”

“You’re barefoot, too,” Tony pointed out, but he let Steve pick him up, looping his arms around Steve’s neck. “I’m humoring you,” he said, as he tucked his cheek against Steve’s shoulder.

“I appreciate it,” Steve said, amused. He headed for the elevator. “Jarvis-”

“I love you.”

Steve froze, his heart stuttering to a stop. When it started up again, it was going double time, his head spinning. “Tony?”

Tony didn’t raise his head from Steve’s shoulder. “I love you,” he whispered, and it didn’t matter, Steve had needed to hear that so badly that he would’ve heard it from across the room. Tony’s arms tightened around his neck. “I don’t know if I told you.”

Steve swallowed. “You didn’t.”

Tony nodded against his shoulder. “I do,” he said. His eyes met Steve’s. “I love you.” His lips kicked up. “I thought you should know.”

Steve nodded. “And we’d just had sex in a car,” Tony said, still laughing.

“Excellent, that’s a great soundbite, we can put that in my Smithsonian exhibit,” Steve agreed. Jarvis opened the elevator for them, and Steve slipped in. “I love you.”

“I heard something like that,” Tony said. He let his head fall onto Steve’s shoulder. His eyes fell shut. “We’re going to make a spreadsheet. Your fantasies. All of them. And we’re going to go down that list, one by one.”

“All of them?” Steve asked, half amused, half aroused.

“Well, I mean, if ‘pitching for the Dodgers’ is on there, we’re going to have some trouble, or maybe not, I’m rich enough that i can probably make that happen,” Tony mused. “Not officially, the serum has to count as a performance enhancing drug, so there’s no way-”

“Let me rip up the divorce papers,” Steve said, the words rushing out of him, and Tony stopped. Steve took a breath, staring at the doors of the elevator. “That’s… Been a reoccurring one for me, the last couple of days.” He looked down at Tony. “If things don’t work out, I understand, I won’t blame you, but for right now-”

“We can burn them,” Tony agreed. He nodded against Steve’s shoulder. “I’m fully in favor of this.”

A tension that he didn’t even know was there bled out of him. Steve nodded. “Thank you,” he said, as the doors opened, and Tony twisted in his arms. Reluctantly, Steve lowered him to the floor.
Tony took a step forward before he turned back towards Steve, one hand reaching him. “Welcome home,” he said, and Steve caught his fingers.

“Sir, there’s a note,” Jarvis said, and together, they looked at the wall opposite the elevator.

It was clearly a photo printed off of a social media site. Steve and Tony, in the green room of NYNN, both smiling as they kissed, their hands tangled together. Written below it, in heavy black letters, it read, “Good job, both of you! P.S. Dance class is now on the official team calendar. See you on Tuesday!” It wasn’t signed, but Steve knew Jan’s handwriting by now.

Steve reached for it. “That might be the best photo of me she’s taken,” he said.

“I like it,” Tony said, leaning his chin on Steve’s shoulder. “Jarvis? Can you inform Ms. Van Dyne that we are on our honeymoon and will inform her when our schedule opens up?”

“Very good, sir,” Jarvis said.

Tony took the photo out of Steve’s hand. “Let’s go. My bed or yours?”

Steve grinned at him. “Yours.”

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