Omega Rising: Part 1

by SapphoAndThamyris

Summary

Steve Rogers is a soldier, a patriot, and an omega in a world where his status makes him a second-class citizen. He never asked to be a hero. But when the world pushed him, he pushed back. Unfrozen from cryo after 65 years, he awakens to a world where not much has changed, and finds himself assigned to monitor the son of the man that made him: Tony Stark.

This epic work follows Steve Rogers and Tony Stark as the two grow together: as leaders, as Avengers, and as human beings, their lives and fates inextricably entangled.

Part 1 of Omega Rising covers Iron Man 2.
Notes

On September 9th, 2016, two strangers connected on Omegle under the interest “stony,” and the Ultimate AO AU started with a single rather innocuous prompt:

(A/B/O!Ironman2!AU Where Omega!Steve was sent undercover rather than Natasha.)

What has followed has been a daily back-and-forth roleplay that has spanned over a year, thousands of hours of writing, and has resulted in the novel-length masterwork you find before you. This work, while generally following the canonical MCU storyline, has minor differences; most notably, it is set in a world of Alphas and omegas. Also, it comes with 50% More Bucky™! Also there’s smut. Sweet, sweet, explicit smut.

This is the A/O AU to end all A/O AUs, and we invite you to come along with us for the ride.

Updates weekly. Tags will be added as we go. Comments welcomed and encouraged; let us know if you find typos or inconsistencies, as we are still in beta. Thank you for your support!
Steve knew that he was supposed to be polite and calm, the perfect employee to both Pepper Potts and Tony Stark. That was his cover. And being a subservient omega was the best cover in the world. Fury had sent him on a mission and he intended to complete it. He arrived to work every day dressed in crisp shirts and smart dress trousers; he looked the part. He got Pepper everything she needed, and more. But there was one problem: Tony Stark. Steve found him annoying: his selfishness, his playboy attitude, his brazenness... everything, really. Sure, he was clever, but Steve wasn’t sure about bringing him into the Avengers Initiative. Yet. Not that it was his decision, though he made a point of citing Tony’s many personality defects in all of his reports. He was tempted to argue with him directly on more than one occasion and had had to stop himself. Last night he almost had. They disagreed a lot on a lot of omega rights issues. For a man living in 2010, Tony was shockingly conservative. It was probably due to the daddy issues Steve had picked up on, his complicated relationship with Howard, who had dabbled in the omega rights "hysteria" of his time... but it was the rights themselves that the two had half-argued about, not the history.

Still, Steve arrived to work on time with both Pepper and Tony’s coffees in hand. He gave Pepper’s hers first before heading up to Tony’s office. He sighed, steeling himself before he knocked on the office door and stepped inside.

“Morning, Mr. Stark,” Steve greeted him, as professional as ever. He figured he would act like everything was fine. Because it was, fine, that is. Tony employed him (well, SHIELD did, but Tony didn’t need to know that, yet). They didn’t have to agree on everything.

Steve set the tablet Pepper had given him down on the table. “Your first meeting is at eleven. Your plane tonight leaves at eight PM.”

“Mmm... how about you shuffle things around for me?” asked Tony, not looking up. He reached out and pushed the tablet away with one finger. “Eleven is really close to brunch, and I sort of hate morning meetings, so if you could go ahead and change that for me, that would be great. Is that Americano? I told you already, Stan. Espresso. Not Americano. I like my coffee like I like my women, strong and bitter. Go get me another one.” He swiveled in his chair slightly, playing around on his phone.

The board was going to hate him. It was ten o’clock already and Tony knew how awful the board was to deal with at the end of the week; a last-minute delay or cancellation would send them into a frenzy. Maybe that was why he was avoiding the meeting. Or maybe he just wanted a little payback for yesterday.

Steve frowned at the tablet and picked it up. He stared down at the coffee like it had betrayed him and played out an internal battle that lasted for about five seconds.

“...Pepper told me to get you decaf.”

That got Tony’s attention. He looked up, staring at Steve over the edge of his sunglasses with a look of incredulity. His eyes were a little red, a result of staying up most of the night. He smirked after a moment, before his expression became its usual smug mask. “Doesn’t Miss Potts know I was up all night arguing with an uppity little omega about politics he knows nothing about?” He made a “shoo” motion with his hand. “Go get me some real coffee, Stan. I don’t drink decaf. Decaf coffee is like non-alcoholic beer. Absolutely no point.”
Knows nothing about?! Ha! If only Tony knew. A childish part of Steve couldn’t want to see the look on his face when he found out who he really was. He let out a long breath. You’re not here to argue with him, Steve reminded himself. He picked the coffee back up. “Okay. I’ll have it for you before your meeting.” Steve had a half a dozen things to do for Pepper, too, and he couldn’t quite justify prioritizing a coffee run. But in Stark Industries, Tony’s word was law. “...and I’m not uppity,” he muttered.

“It wasn’t an insult. I think it’s kind of cute, actually,” said Tony, propping his elbow up on his desk and smirking a little wider at Steve. He had to admit, getting under his new assistant’s skin was excellent sport. He couldn’t quite figure out his deal, but he knew which buttons to push, and Tony was someone who couldn’t resist pushing a big, red button when it was just sitting there in front of him. “Uppity omegas happen to be my favorite kind,” he continued. “I like them spirited. It’s, you know… precious. Like when you see a dog in a sweater, you know?” Tony picked his phone up again and went back to playing Tetris. He had every intention of being late for his meeting and then blaming Steve, just to see what would happen. Tony liked pushing boundaries as much as he liked pushing buttons; the best way to discover limits was to surpass them. In this sense, cars, people, and flying mech suits were surprisingly similar.

“Don’t ever compare me to a dog again,” snapped Steve. Somehow, the thought of Tony finding him “cute” made it even worse. He wasn’t there as a form of entertainment, and he didn’t like hearing Tony’s skewed opinion on his existence without even being able to defend himself.

And with that, Steve left. He didn’t want to continue the conversation any further. He knew he was being baited, and he was not going to let Tony get away with it.

He sorted out the meeting, painfully, and then completed all his tasks for Pepper just in time for the new 2 o’clock meeting.

Of course, even though it had been pushed back three hours, Tony was late. When Tony finally entered the lobby of the Stark Industries building after taking a two-hour lunch, Steve was pacing frustratedly; he sighed in relief when he spotted Tony finally waltzing in through the double doors. “You need to get up here,” he told him, holding out Tony’s double espresso with a clear look of disapproval on his face.

Tony took the coffee gratefully and sipped it with slow, deliberate motions. He checked his watch, then straightened his tie. “I’ll get there when I get there. I hate rushing through a cup of coffee,” said Tony, taking another slow sip. “Hey, this is perfect. Thanks, Sparky. ...do you like Sparky or Fido better? You know what, it doesn’t matter, you’re really more of a Sparky. Fido is Latin for loyal, you know. I took Latin back in prep school. Didn’t really retain much, though. Didn’t see the use in learning a dead language, you know?” He took another tiny, delicate sip of the coffee, eyeballing an executive walking past in a pencil skirt and heels. She caught his eye. He smiled. She smiled. He winked. Suddenly, the meeting seemed completely unimportant.

Steve rolled his eyes while Tony was still making gooey eyes at the attractive beta across the room. Nothing Pepper could have said or taught him would have prepared him for the minefield that was Tony Stark. The man was a genius and he was definitely going to change the world (hell, he had already); Steve didn’t have a doubt about that. But that did not mean he had to enjoy his company. On a personal level, Tony was awful to work with. Even Pepper had already apologized a few times; he was not, she assured Steve, normally so combative with people. She didn’t understand why he was acting like this, she said. He was often a jerk but rarely cruel.

“They’re thinking of taking your company off you, Mr. Stark,” Steve stressed, something Tony already knew. “You need to get up there. And, for the record, I don’t really need a nickname.”
Tony’s attention slid back to Steve. “Yes you do. Everyone gets a nickname. Pepper’s got a nickname, Happy’s got a nickname, Rhodey’s got a nickname. You? You’re Sparky now. Like a puppy.” He looked back over. The beta had disappeared and Tony cursed silently at himself for getting distracted. He looked back at Steve, suddenly a lot more irritated than he meant to be. It wasn’t just losing sight of the woman. It was Steve’s whole attitude. Like he was something more than what he was. “…let’s get something straight, Stan,” said Tony, using his real name to emphasize the importance of the conversation they were about to have. “You got hired as my assistant for two reasons. Pepper approved of you, and me, I can’t resist blonds. But don’t act like being my personal go-to guy makes you special. You’re not special. You’re just a smug little omega and you don’t know the first thing about this business. They’ve been talking about taking away my company for years, but you know what? I’m Iron Man. They can’t get rid of me, not without a PR shitstorm. So stop trying to tell me what to do, how to run my company. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Tony flipped out his phone and pulled up Tetris again. The truth was, Tony had nothing against omegas, as a group. Nothing at all. In a way, he respected them. But people assumed he was a bleeding heart because of his father. Howard had been fairly progressive for his time, at least with regards to omega rights, and Tony loathed being compared to the man in any way. Howard had been a real Alpha’s Alpha, and as far as Tony could tell, the only reason he knew omegas existed or cared for them at all was because of Jarvis, his butler, who was long dead and completely irreplaceable. Tony hated the politics of Alpha-omega relationships as much as he hated being reminded of his childhood and his father, and ever since his and Steve’s debate the previous night, Tony had been on edge and seeking to cause some trouble. Maybe it was immature, but he didn’t care. He was Tony Stark. He could be as immature as he wanted. Who was going to stop him? 

Stan?

“I’m not trying to tell you anything. I’m trying to express my concern,” Steve said quietly. Concern for Tony. That bit went unsaid. Did Tony always think this way, act like the whole world was against him? He bit back another sigh and glanced down at a buzz from his tablet. Messages from Pepper were popping up.

> He’s not in the meeting yet?? VP

> I’m going to kill him. VP

Steve swallowed. Working for Tony meant also working for Pepper in turn. And it was a nightmare, because each of them was constantly pulling him in entirely opposite directions.

“I know I don’t understand everything yet, but I’m trying to learn,” he insisted, trying to placate Tony. He was used to people treating him this way. Not just because he was an omega. People had often thought Captain America wasn’t all that clever, that he just knew how to hit things real hard. But over the course of the war, Steve had learned to speak German and French fluently; he had learned battle tactics, strategies, history; he had learned people, not just how to lead them, but how to work with and serve them. Steve was a fast learner. If Steve hadn’t been, he wouldn’t have made it to where he was today.

...which was watching Tony play Tetris and miss a board meeting.

...the future had disappointed him in more than one way so far.

Steve sighed. “I’ll send the board a message to let them know you’re stuck in traffic,” he said reluctantly. “…and I’m not smug.” He couldn’t help it. “What makes you think I’m smug?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Last night. You, talking about omega rights. I bet you think you’re the
luckiest little omega alive, huh, working for a Stark? Well, news flash, Sparky. I’m not my dad and I have more important soap boxes to stand on, so you’re shit out of luck if you think I’m going to help you with that, your whole omega rights thing, because I’m kind of busy with the whole, you know, renewable energy, saving-the-world hobbies. Don’t ever talk to me about omega rights again. You’re not my pal, okay, Sparks? I don’t owe you anything. This is a purely professional relationship. You’re my assistant. End of story. Speaking of assisting, I’m gonna need two white tigers for my birthday next week and a smoothie this afternoon. Double shot of chlorophyll in that, got it?”

He slipped his phone into his pocket. Playing Tetris was becoming impossible, because Pepper was texting him like crazy, and he had to admit, reluctantly, that it was time to attend the meeting, whether he wanted to or not. He turned and made his way toward the elevators, a lot more worked up than he cared to admit. Maybe it was Steve saying he was concerned. Tony didn’t like others being concerned for him. It made him feel vulnerable. He preferred to hide his weaknesses. He wanted to be the same kind of man and Alpha his father had been: unshakeable. He didn’t want people to know when he was sick or scared. Hell, when he had come back from Afghanistan, he’d given a press conference immediately, just to prove how strong he was.

He was starting to discover some unpleasant side effects from the arc reactor, but these, too, he kept hidden. Even Pepper didn’t know. Tony was managing it himself and was doing a decent job, in his opinion. The palladium was degrading into rhodium and it was poisoning him, but a cursory Google search had revealed that chlorophyll could mop up free radicals from the blood. So Tony just had to keep choking down smoothies and he’d be fine. He turned away from Steve and began striding, confidently, toward the meeting room.

Following his speech to Steve, Steve was stunned into silence. He didn’t know what to say. Tony had him pegged so wrong. Natasha had warned him of this; he was too uptight, especially for the 21st century, and it gave off the wrong impression sometimes. And soap boxes? What the hell was Tony talking about? Steve was so confused. Chlorophyll? Did people drink plants now?!

...but then there was the race tomorrow. Brilliant.

Steve delivered Tony’s smoothies wordlessly that afternoon, while the man was working on something in his shop. Tony didn’t say thank you.

He met Tony at the airport later and was already waiting for him on the plane itself with a tablet in his lap, typing away. Tablets were wonderful, miracle devices: a world of information, whole encyclopedias and calendars at a man’s fingertips. Steve loved them.

Tony’s second smoothie of the day was left on the side for him as well as another shot of espresso and the BLT sandwich he had asked for.

“Good evening, Mr. Stark.” Steve’s blue eyes flicked up for a brief moment. “Breakfast has been ordered at the hotel for when we get there, and you’ll have a chance for about four hours of rest before the race itself.”

Tony eyeballed Steve. “...perfect. Thanks, Sparks,” he said softly, distractedly. His toxicity levels were up again. He took his smoothie and sipped it, wincing. It tasted like a freshly mowed lawn. He needed something to distract him. His eyes slid over to Steve’s blue ones. Steve had the audacity to look him in the eye. “...you probably hear this all the time, but you have some really beautiful baby blues. ...did you say a four-hour nap was on the schedule? Sounds restful. Any chance you want to join me? I’ve been told I’m an excellent... napper.” He stared at Steve suggestively. One of the flight attendants let out a small, knowing giggle, and Tony relaxed,
marginally. He wasn’t sick. How sick could he be? He didn’t feel sick, or look sick. No one had to know. Hell, maybe he wasn’t sick at all. Maybe the reading was wrong and his blood toxicity was down. Equipment failed, after all. It was a comforting thought. Tony made a mental note to recalibrate the blood reader when they landed. Or maybe just build a new one altogether. How hard could it be, anyway?

Steve blinked in surprise. Had Tony just…? They’d warned him that he might try something like this, but that had seriously seemed to come out of nowhere. He paused for a moment. This had caught him totally off guard. Steve was on a mission, he hadn’t even been thinking about... that. The mission came first. And besides, Tony didn’t even know who he really was, who he was really propositioning. Steve swallowed and looked up slowly from his e-mail inbox on the tablet. “I tend not to nap with my bosses, Mr. Stark,” he replied coolly, eyes narrowing a fraction to try and ensure that Tony would, in fact, drop the issue. “…and Virginia would really like you to try and sleep… sir,” he added.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Pepper’s always acting like I’m on death’s door. Do I look sick to you, Stan? Give me a break. I don’t need sleep.” He looked out the window of the plane, wishing he were out there, flying alongside it. “…kinda seems like a waste to me, honestly. Sleep, I mean. We spend, what, a third of our lives unconscious? I’d rather be awake. Living my life. Instead of wasting it.”

He gave his head a small shake to clear it. “…you know what this juice needs? Some scotch. Sparky, get me a drink, will you?” He made a point of slapping Steve’s ass when Steve stood up. He didn’t believe Steve had never slept with one of his bosses before, not for a second. Steve was gorgeous. His muscles were perfect. Actually, he was the most toned, muscular omega Tony had ever seen in his life. He half-wondered if the guy was on steroids or something. He looked like a beefalo. Tony admired the contours of his body; Steve’s muscles were always nice outlined, perfectly proportioned. He wondered at times if Steve had any idea just how good he looked. Like an omega version of Captain America.

But Tony had better things to do than ogle the help. He was dead-set on getting drunk before they landed. After all, Pepper wanted him to sleep, and what better way to have a dreamless sleep than with a few shots of liquor?

It took every ounce of Steve’s being not to snap back around and lift Tony up by his collar and ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. No one got to touch him like that, especially not goddamn Tony Stark. Howard’s son.

…but his mission.

If Tony ever ended up in the Avengers he would have to respect Steve as a leader, and the chances of that happening were growing slimmer by the day. Steve pressed his lips together in a thin line and went to get Tony his usual three (yes, three) fingers of scotch. He tried not to look as furious as he felt as he sat down after handing Tony his drink. Though he did maybe sit a little heavily, and tap a little harder than necessary on the tablet. “…all that stuff about boxes earlier. What the hell did that ever mean? I had no idea what you were talking about.”

“…soap boxes?” said Tony, sipping his drink. “Everyone has their pet causes, you know. My old man, him and Obadiah and Captain America and Margaret Carter, they were all about patriotism, God and glory and country… and omega rights, I guess. But that’s not my soap box. My cause is… I don’t know. I guess accountability? Accountability for arms dealers, and, you know, renewable energy. Those are really big causes, by the way. I’m not slacking off here. I just can’t do it all. I have to pick my battles. And I don’t even know any omegas, anyway. I mean, my dad,
he had Jarvis, so I get where he was coming from, Jarvis was a great butler and everything, and we
had Ana, too… but I don’t have anyone like that now, so what do I care?” Tony held up a hand.
“Yeah, yeah, I have you. But trust me, Stan, you’re not Jarvis. ...everyone jokes about how much
I wanna save the world, but I can only do so much, you know? I’m one guy, flying around in a tin
can, making things go boom. I can’t fix every fucking problem in the world. And it’s not like
omegas have it that bad anymore, anyway. Most of you guys seem happy enough. Accountability
in the weapons trade is way more important.” Tony nodded to himself. “I don’t want my dad’s
causes; I don’t want to pick up the mantle and fight his battle. I want my own soap box. Which
is… y’know, this.” Tony moved his tie aside and tapped his arc reactor.

He felt a tinge of pain and winced. Oh no, he thought silently. Did the core need to be changed
again? Already? It had been less than 72 hours. The palladium couldn’t already be used up, could
it? Shit.

Steve noticed Tony winced but didn’t comment on it. He stored the concern away to check up on
later. “…most of us,” Steve agreed quietly. “But not all of us.” Certainly not in all countries. Still.
It was nothing compared to the forties. The forties had been hell, especially for someone as sickly
as him. Luckily, though, Steve had usually been too sick to even have heats. His body just hadn’t
had the energy. And even then, when things got tough, he’d always had Bucky. But it wouldn’t do
Steve any good to think of him now, a man seventy years dead.

“And I never expected anything different from you, Mr. Stark. I knew what your business was
before I got into it.” He’d read the dossier four times over the day he’d received it. “And, for the
record, I don’t feel lucky to be here. I worked my ass off to get here… and speaking of my ass, I’d
really appreciate it if you kept your hands to yourself.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at this strange, unprofessional burst. But he was preoccupied with the
tinge of pain radiating from his chest. He said nothing for the rest of the plane ride. He couldn’t
imagine Steve not feeling lucky. Most people would kill to work for him. And as for his
comment… Tony was pretty sure he was just playing hard to get. He was sure Steve would come
around. If not now, then during his next heat. Tony took a small bit of vicious pleasure in
knowing that he would deny him then; Tony tended to avoid omegas, unless they were on
suppressants.

To distract himself from the ache in his chest, he played Tetris on his phone half-heartedly until
they landed, and then he let Steve escort him into the limo and to the hotel. The time zone change
and climate difference made Tony feel a little under the weather. Or at least, that’s what he told
himself. He didn’t want to think about the other possibility, that he was legitimately ill.

Steve helped carry all of Tony’s things up to his hotel room. No one paid him any mind; the scene
of an omega scuttling after an Alpha, carrying his bags for him, was perfectly normal. One
suitcase in particular, a metal briefcase, was a little heavy, even for him, but he didn’t ask what was
in it. He set everything down on the floor of their penthouse suite. A full breakfast had been laid
out for Tony; Steve’s mind was wandering to the toast and fruit salad he’d ordered that would be
waiting for him in his own room. God, he was starving after that flight. It was tricky to keep up
with his metabolism sometimes. “The event starts in six hours, so we should head off in five, at
the latest,” Steve said pointedly as he straightened back up. “I’ll leave you to rest now, Mr.
Stark…”

Tony was staring at the full breakfast with a strange expression on his face. “Stan,” said Tony
softly, reaching out and catching his arm. “Stay with me?” He paused, then, against his better
judgement, added, “Please?”
Steve hesitated. Tony looked… off. His usual swagger was deflated. Had the plane ride really taken that much out of him?


“Of course not,” said Tony, who was yanking his tie loose and walking into the bedroom to flop down on the bed. “Just rub my shoulders, will you? You can leave once I’m asleep.” He closed his eyes. He didn’t want to admit it, but he needed some comfort. He felt tired and uncomfortable, and the full breakfast in the room made his stomach turn. He wanted to pull his shirt off because he was too hot, but he didn’t dare. The last thing he needed was Steve seeing the veins on his chest. Besides, who knew if he’d go and tell Pepper? After all, Steve technically worked for both of them, and he sort of seemed like a squealer. Tony didn’t want Pepper to know. She had enough on her plate already.

“…sure,” Steve hummed, trying not to feel weird about all this. He knelt on the bed carefully near Tony’s head and curled his fingers around the other’s’ shoulders. At least he knew how to do this. After long sparring sessions with Natasha they often tried to ease each other’s sore muscles. Whilst they did they would talk and sometimes she would teach him Russian, a little more every time. She wanted him to be fluent by the end of the year. Said it was a useful language to know. And it was good to have goals.

Gently, Steve rubbed Tony’s shoulders, using his thumbs to try to ease out the tension. Tony’s muscles were surprisingly stiff. He imagined that the Tony Stark lifestyle was a tense thing in and of itself, sometimes.

Tony sighed, relaxing slightly. He closed his eyes. “Hey, Stan? Do you ever feel like life’s too short?” asked Tony quietly. “We dragged ourselves all the way out here for what? To watch some asshole drive my car for me? …seems pointless, doesn’t it? Kind of allegorical, too. Watching people go nowhere desperately fast for no reason... I don’t know. Maybe I’m just jetlagged.

Yeah. That’s probably it. Hey… you’re doing a great job. I’m not just talking about the massage. I’m talking about everything else. You’re… okay. I’m glad Pepper picked you.” He reached out and patted Steve on the head. “Let me sleep now, okay? Wake me up when it’s time to hit the club. I hear Musk and Hammer are gonna be there. God, I hate that guy. Hammer, I mean.

Elon’s great. Anyway, wake me up in a few hours, ‘k?” Tony rolled over, thinking. Why was he here in the first place? Why was he at some stupid resort in Monaco when he could be out fighting bad guys, or at least sticking his dick in some cute, wild little beta? It seemed like a waste of his time, to be rubbing shoulders (ha!) with guys like Stan, who was a nobody, and Hammer, who was a somebody who was insufferably annoying. Yeah, it seemed like a waste, especially if… no. Tony didn’t let himself think it. He was fine. Perfectly fine.

…seventy years ago, Steve would have said yes. That life was too short. But now it kind of felt like life was too long, for him, anyway. All of his friends were dead or dying. He didn’t know anyone here. Natasha and Clint were good friends, and Phil was certainly… attentive. But that was it, really. His old life had been too short, certainly, but Steve wasn’t so sure about this one.

Sometimes it felt like he was running on borrowed time.

“I’ll wake you up in four hours, Tony,” Steve assured him softly as he slipped down off the bed. He resisted the urge to tug the duvet up over Tony’s shoulders. “Sleep well,” he whispered before he slipped out the door. Tony didn’t respond.

Steve stole a few hours himself. Then he showered, sorted through his emails, and got dressed. Today it was black dress pants with a white shirt and a blue waistcoat on top. That was the general style for omegas; waistcoats. Back in the forties Steve had never had the money, he was
always poor and Bucky had always struggled to just scrounge together rent. Now he had the money and as Tony Stark’s omega assistant, he was expected to dress the part.

He fixed his hair in the mirror, neatening his appearance before heading into Tony’s room. He arrived with coffee and set it down on the bedside table before reaching out to squeeze the man’s shoulder. Tony had fallen asleep in his clothes. His jacket was rumpled. “Tony? Time to get up.”

Tony snapped awake in an instant and for a split second felt confused, defensive, on edge. Then he realized where he was. A five-star hotel room. Not a cave. He relaxed with a sigh, dragging his fingers through his messy hair. “Okay. Okay, okay, I’m awake. So help me Tesla, that better be an espresso and not an Americano, Sparky… oh.” He blinked, eyeing Steve. He was in a blue waistcoat Tony hadn’t seen before, one that brought out his eyes magnificently. His mouth was watering. “Stan. I need you to do me a favor. Put out your hand,” commanded Tony.

Tony looked cute. Almost. His bedhead was really quite sweet. Steve was slowly-- slowly--beginning to understand why Pepper was so fond of him. He gave Tony a quizzical look when he asked for his hand. “Er, yes, it’s a double espresso, Mr. Stark,” he said, then slowly put out his hand. There was something different in Tony’s tone. Something that made Steve not want to question him. It was a strange, unfamiliar sensation. One Steve was sure he’d experienced before but not for a long, long time. “You… need help getting out of bed?” he asked, somewhat confused. “No. No, no, no. I need something important,” said Tony, jumping out of bed without taking Steve’s hand, and smoothing down his rumpled shirt. He walked over to the pile of suitcases still in the center of the suite’s main room, digging through his luggage before producing a pair of handcuffs. He snapped one of the cuffs onto Steve’s wrist before he could even ask what the hell Tony was doing, then dragged him over to the small, heavy metal briefcase. He attached the other cuff to the handle. “…there. Need you to just carry that around for me. Probably won’t need it, but better safe than sorry. …you okay, Sparky? You looked a little worried when you saw those handcuffs. Or should I say… excited?” Tony patted Steve’s cheek. “Just making sure my suit’s taken care of. …suitcase, get it? Because it’s my suit, in a case! Never mind. I swear, I’ve never met an omega with a sense of humor. …it’s not too heavy for you, is it?” A brief look of concern flitted across Tony's face. A tiny glimmer of humanity behind the over-the-top playboy attitude he was always putting on.

Steve shook his head. "Great. Now. Where’s my blue tie?""

Tony was rambling, his brain and mouth moving too quickly for Steve to keep up. It was heavy, the suitcase, and now it was attached to him. Steve swallowed. Okay. But why would Tony want his suit at the race? That didn’t make sense. Were they in some kind of danger Steve didn’t know about?

Then again, lately, Tony had been hauling around helmets and gauntlets and things to work, as if convinced he might get kidnapped again. It had only been two years since his ordeal.

Or perhaps it was simpler even than that. Perhaps Tony just wanted to show off. There were going to be quite a few celebrities at the Prix, and Tony loved bragging about the suit. The case was eye-catching, shining with a metallic, racecar red.

“Blue tie’s in the medium brown bag,” he told Tony. He knew where he’d packed everything off the top of his head because, yes, Steve was a damn good PA. Just because he was undercover didn’t mean he wasn’t taking his job seriously. “Happy is waiting for us downstairs. There’s sandwiches and sushi in the car, if you want them.” Steve had noted that Tony hadn’t touched his
breakfast. Tony’s weird range of tastes in food was something that Steve would never get used to. “Anything else I can get you, Mr. Stark?”

“Yes. Go downstairs, grab me another smoothie. Don’t care what kind. Just make sure they throw a few shots of chlorophyll in it. …don’t give me that look, I’m on a juice cleanse, okay?” snapped Tony, tucking a few hundreds into Steve’s pockets. “Get yourself whatever you like, too. Meet me downstairs.” He resisted the urge to give Steve’s ass a slap. He was feeling oddly grabby. Maybe Steve was about to go into heat, though Tony couldn’t smell it, yet Maybe that was it. Or, hey, maybe Tony just liked how good Steve was at his job. It reminded him of Pepper. Tony had always found organization irresistible. He loved people who had their shit together. Opposites attract and all that.

He waited until Steve had left the room to pull out a digital blood analyzer. He pricked his finger and checked it. Toxicity: 19%. That seemed high. He gave the analyzer a small shake, as if that might change the number, but of course, it didn’t. He tucked it away. 19%. He forced his hands to be steady as he tied his tie. It was where Steve had said it was, neatly folded in the medium brown bag. Tony took a deep, steadying breath before going downstairs to meet Steve, his face a carefully controlled mask, hidden behind both his expression of fixed neutrality and a pair of aviator sunglasses worth several thousand dollars. “Let’s rock and roll,” he said, smiling broadly. The paparazzi had already crowded around outside the hotel.

They maneuvered through the press with well-practiced ease. No one paid Steve any mind. He handed Tony his smoothie once they were in the car. He’d eaten about four bagels himself before they left. It didn’t matter if some random kitchen staff noticed his super soldier appetite, but he tried to reflect at least semi-normal eating habits in front of Tony. Tony looked almost nervous for someone who was just going to be watching a race. The Monaco Grand Prix was supposed to be a relaxing bit of time off for him, but Tony seemed distracted and worried. Steve frowned a little, then quickly composed himself, knowing Tony hated when people acted concerned for him.

Happy, pleasant in his own gruff way, wished Steve a good morning, which Steve returned with a polite smile. But then Steve was glancing over at Tony again as Happy pulled the car away from the hotel’s entrance. Tony’s bad mood was too obvious to ignore. “…are you alright, Mr. Stark?”

“What? I’m fine. Peachy. Just… just had too much sugar. That’s on you, Stan. You oughta make them put less fruit in these things,” snapped Tony, wincing as he tasted his smoothie. God, slugging down this disgusting green crap was going to kill him, if the decaying palladium didn’t. Tony wondered which would be more painful and found himself chuckling at the morbidity of the thought. He caught Steve’s eye, and reached out to pat his leg reassuringly. “Sorry, I was thinking about… well, never mind, you wouldn’t understand. I’m fine. Really. I always am. I’m, you know, invincible.” He winked.

"You don't always have to be," Steve pointed out quietly, suddenly seeing the mask Tony was putting up. The way his smile didn't quite meet his eyes. Something tugged in Steve's gut. Every time he thought he had Tony pegged, he suddenly didn't anymore. "Figured you didn't just want cucumber and kale," Steve pointed out but then Happy was driving them up the racetrack entrance. More press outside, wonderful. Steve stepped out of the car after Tony, cameras flashing and he was suddenly hyper-aware of the case attached to his hand by cuffs. A bad feeling settled in his gut, something rotten.

What was Tony so afraid of?

Tony's eyes narrowed at the look of concern Steve shot his way. He could feel his heart pounding uncomfortably in his chest. He didn't like how intuitive Steve was, didn't like how the other man
was reading him like a book.

He forced himself into a state of exaggerated calm confidence. Tony had spent his life trying to be the same sort of Alpha his father and Obadiah had been. Even though he generally felt inadequate, no one else seemed to notice. Tony was an exceptional actor. He grinned at the cameras, throwing up peace signs and reaching out to sign photos, occasionally flinging an arm around Steve just so that everyone could get a good look at him. People expected Tony to be seen with beautiful people, and Steve really was gorgeous. On top of that, he had the case and everyone loved Iron Man just as much as they loved Tony. Tony had discovered that the mere presence of any suit component was enough to get the press to cream their pants, and he used it to his advantage as much as possible.

"Mr. Stark, any comments for us today about your stance on nuclear proliferation?" asked a reporter, shoving a microphone into Tony's face.

"Well, Stark Industries has actually never made nuclear missiles, but if I ever enter a nuclear-powered car into the Prix, I'll make sure you're the first to know," said Tony, grinning and throwing up another peace sign for another camera.

"Mr. Stark, does Iron Man have any intention of getting involved in the current unrest in Turkey?"

"Right now my current intentions revolve madly around grabbing a scotch," replied Tony.

"Mr. Stark, do you consider it irresponsible to take a week off for Formula One racing when you could be out further stabilizing the Middle East?"

"I consider it irresponsible not to take a week off. I wouldn't want to burn myself out. Saving the world, it's, you know, kind of a high-stress job," said Tony, shouldering through the crowd. He threw up a hand to wave to Pepper; she was climbing out of an SUV about ten meters away. The two of them gravitated toward each other and made their way toward the clubhouse; they exchanged a kiss on the cheek and the reporters went absolutely crazy.

"You brought the suit?" asked Pepper, smiling broadly, her lips barely moving.

"They love it, they love the suit," replied Tony, also smiling and talking under his breath. "Makes me feel good to have it around, just in case. That was a pun, by the way. In case? Get it? In case?"

Pepper barely managed to conceal an eye roll.

Tony was handling the press like a pro, as always. Steve honestly didn't know how he dealt with it all his life. It would have driven him insane.

When Pepper spotted Steve she turned to kiss his cheek, too. Steve felt closer to Pepper than he did to Tony, admittedly. She was more open towards him. She was a cool and collected beta, and he admired her. "We did okay," Steve murmured to her, and she knew that meant that Tony hadn't drunk too much. But that he'd still drunk something. She was worried about his drinking habits, understandably so.

"Tony, we need to go take our seats now," Pepper breathed and squeezed his arm, giving him a serious look. "They have food and drinks ready. Come on Steve, we have seats for you too..."

"Sure, sure," said Tony, scribbling one more autograph before letting Pepper and Steve drag him off. He eyeballed Pepper as she and Steve murmured to each other. He liked Pepper a lot, more than he cared to admit, and it didn't sit well with him, the idea of her and some uppity, unpaired,
too-independent-for-his-own-good omega ganging up on him. Tony loathed feeling like he was nothing more than some little performing show dog who had to be directed and coached. He'd run the company fine before Steve, before Pepper, even. Sure, he had fun, he liked to drink and schmooze, but it wasn't like he was a moron. He knew what he was doing. He'd been groomed since birth to take over Stark Industries; even as a child, he'd been used to the press, to the delicate world of sound bites and headlines. He'd practically been a mascot for the company: Howard Stark's genius boy, the prodigy, the wunderkind, the soon-to-be heir of the biggest weapons manufacturer in America, bar none.

The thing that rankled Tony was the idea that Steve was being elevated above his social status. Steve was competent, sure. He spoke multiple languages and he seemed like he was excellent at scheduling. But he was still just an omega in a business that attracted scores of Alphas and Tony disliked seeing Pepper treating Steve like he was already in their inner circle. Howard had always treated Jarvis that way, but hell, Jarvis had been with him since the forties. The two were practically pair-bonded. Jarvis's loyalty to the Stark family was legendary. At times, he was like a second father to Tony. But he'd earned that. Jarvis was special, irreplaceable. Steve had bullied his way into the position of Tony's assistant and now he was acting like he'd been there forever. Tony knew very little about him and he didn't trust him. Tony had learned the hard way that you couldn't ever really trust anyone, ever. He'd known Stane for thirty years, had trusted him, and look at what had happened.

He tuned in to eavesdrop on Pepper and Steve.

"Okay, Steve, all you really need to do is tail Tony and pretty much keep him in line. Piece of cake. That means no more than four drinks an hour--" Pepper was saying.

Tony let out a small noise of protest; Pepper ignored him, handing Steve a tablet and a couple of folders.

"--no sneaking out, no business, remember, this is a social function, it'll look crass, I took the liberty of preparing a simple schedule for you, Tony... Tony , pay attention... there's a speech on the last page on the goldleaf paper, just in case anyone has questions about Iron Man, front page, here's the itinerary for tonight, the guest list is on the back, names in blue are ones Tony has to talk to and actually be nice to, obviously you won't know everyone, Steve, but try to start learning names because part of your job is giving those names to Tony, because he's hopeless when it comes to that, you take his phone and get any contact numbers he might need, and on page two, there's a list of--"

Tony snatched away the tablet to look at Pepper's itinerary and groaned. "Lots of buddy-buddy photo ops. Gross."

"Lots of buddy-buddy photo ops," confirmed Pepper. "--page three, a list of media coverage, highlighted in red are ones that Tony pissed off recently and blue are ones we're on good terms with, make sure he gets in a sound bite with any of the blue ones, they're alphabetically ordered, yellow is secondary to blue, only talk to yellow if you've already covered blue, make sure Tony doesn't go near anyone from Variety , you've got fourteen pre-prepared sound bites on the next tab for any--"

"I'll be honest, I always just thought you were doing crosswords, I had no idea you went to all this work," said Tony. "Oh, look, there's Elon. HEY, ELON!"

Pepper reached over and grabbed Tony's suit jacket to keep him from running off without breaking her monologue. "--any potential controversies or hostile reporters, they're divided into political on top in green and social on bottom in orange, plus two generalized statements in yellow, back
pocket, extra business cards, page six has dossiers on everyone seated at Tony's table, make sure he gets the seat farthest from the bar, if you need to, steal someone else's, allergies on page seven--"

"I have allergies?" asked Tony in amazement, plucking a flute of champagne off a tray from a passing waiter.

"--yes, you're allergic to morphine, but the allergies section also entails all dietary restrictions as well, he's on a no-corn diet--"

"Wait, I'm still doing that?"

"Yes, you are, you insisted two weeks ago you were on an elimination diet that included cutting out any corn byproducts!"

"I forgot about that. Eh, I'm over it, you can lift that."

Pepper reached over and began crossing out items on the list. "Thank God, that was worse than your no-gluten phase. Okay, so if you're okay with corn, just make sure to avoid these, if anything's offered to him, you take it, he doesn't like being handed things, page eight is a summary of--"

"Yoink," said Tony, pulling the tablet away from them again. "Lighten up, Pepper, I've done this a thousand times. Stan just has to look pretty. Hey is that Jeff? HEY, BEZOS! BEZOS, HEY!"

Tony managed to shrug Pepper off of him and slip away to talk to Jeff, but got distracted by the scent of an omega in heat; he managed to grab another glass of champagne and cut through the crowd toward the alluring smell. He had absolutely no intention of making this easy for Steve. Frankly, he had every intention of making it hell for him, cutting him down a few pegs... showing Pepper that she couldn't just hand him off to some inexperienced blond brat and expect everything to go smoothly. He was Tony goddamn Stark. He refused to be bossed around by an omega with an itinerary. Steve wasn't Jarvis, and he wasn't Pepper, and Tony wasn't going to let him think he came even close to replacing his old assistant. Steve and Pepper were incomparable and it rankled Tony to see Pepper treating Steve like he was her equal.

The information washed over Steve like a tidal wave. There was so much of it was almost suffocating and Steve was almost taken back to before a battle, when one of his men would go over every possible situation and all the possible numbers. It took him a moment but he thought he had it down. Pepper wouldn't have hired him if he couldn't cope with it, after all. Tony seemed be distracted by something off the bat though: searching for someone, maybe? Steve politely waved past many of the 'reds' Pepper had highlighted who were apparently bad news.

When a waiter offered him some wine he took the water off the tray instead, downing it. He felt hot in the small viewing room. Maybe it was just the crowd of people, all excited and giddy due to the race being prepared for outside. "Jesus Christ-" Just as Steve was putting his glass down he realised Tony had already slipped out of his view. Fuck. He was being difficult on purpose. The ass. Steve was about to go after him when he felt a hand tap on his shoulder. "Rogers, right? Tony Stark's new PA?"

Steve briefly glanced down at the tablet.

"I'm Justin Hammer," the Alpha grinned wolfish and stuck out a hand. Steve instantly didn't like him. He remembered the name from the list. Avoid- Pepper had added the note of 'annoying' on top of that. Steve returned his handshake reluctantly.
"Good to meet you sir, now if you'll excuse me-"

But Justin wouldn't let him go. Wouldn't let go of his hand. "I was wondering if I could steal a moment of your time. I wanted a meeting with Tony, you see, and he's ignoring my emails...." Steve laughed awkwardly.

"Yes, well, Mr. Stark is very busy..."

"Pretty little thing, aren't you? Tony always had good taste." Steve cleared his throat. Justin still wouldn't let go. He wanted to wrench his hand out with super strength but he also couldn't risk breaking Justin's wrist. "You're looking a little flushed, are you sure you're alright?" He was trying to unnerve him, maybe? Steve didn't know. Didn't care. He just needed to find Tony.

"Please, sir." He pressed. "I really must be going."

Unaware of the tiny drama occurring between Hammer and his PA, Tony managed to ditch Steve and down four drinks in the first fifteen minutes. He mentally congratulated himself and slipped off to the bathroom. The drinks had helped take the edge off, and Tony was certain that he'd misread the analyzer earlier in the morning. 19%? Probably 9%. It would be easy to think he'd seen a 1. A 1 was just a straight line, after all.

He pricked his finger and looked down at the digital monitor.

24%.

Tony felt a catch in his throat. Up five percent since that morning? Impossible. Unless the core was already rotten, but he'd changed it, what, four, five days ago?

"Fuck," he whispered. No. This had to be a mistake. He pricked another finger, trying to keep his breathing steady.

26%.

Shoving his tie aside, he unbuttoned his shirt to check the arc reactor. Several dark red streaks were emanating off of his chest. Tony felt sick to his stomach; he buttoned his shirt back up, trying to control the shaking in his hands, and splashed some cold water on his face.

Okay. Okay. This wasn't a big deal. He'd change the core when he got home. He was going to be fine.

"You're going to be fine," he told his reflection in the mirror. "Go get 'em." He forced a smile and, with a deep breath, went back out into the crowded club.

"Anthony?"

Tony's head snapped around. The last person in the world he wanted to see right now was Justin Hammer, but there was he, smiling at Tony, and... one hand was gripping Steve's. Tony immediately felt his hackles rise, the hair on the back of his neck standing. He wasn't sure why. Steve was just his assistant. Who cared if Justin was shaking his hand?

"Justin," said Tony.

"How you doing, how it's shaking, buddy?" asked Justin, grin widening. "You're not the only rich guy here with a fancy car. Just met your new boy, he's great... oh, and you know, this is Miss Everhart. I call her Christine, she's from Vanity Fair."
Tony found himself wondering if he was asleep and having a nightmare. He knew Christine, all right. They'd screwed like weasels about a year or two ago and he'd been ducking her calls ever since. Justin was still holding Steve's hand; Tony watched a finger slide up Steve's wrist and he could feel anger coursing through his veins. It took an enormous amount of self-control not to lunge at the other man.

"Yes, hi, we've met," said Tony sharply.

"Heard you passed off the company, got a new CEO... big story, huh, Christine... maybe we could set her and Pepper up, I think I just saw her... you know, I just wanted to throw her a bone, she's a sweet kid--"

"Yeah, no, she's great," said Tony. "Is she covering how your contract got canceled?"

"Put on hold," said Justin quickly. "Just a small, temporary--"

Christine was pulling out a tape recorder. "Is this the first time you two have seen each other since--"

"Hammer, let go of his hand, already," snapped Tony, unable to stop himself.

"Hm?" Justin looked down. "Oh, I didn't even notice." He didn't let go, still stroking the skin on the inside of Steve's wrist.

"--since Stark's hearing last week?" asked Christine.

"Oh, I'm Stark now, huh?"

"Sorry, Mister Stark."

Yes, Tony was definitely in a nightmare. Christine was out for blood and he was watching Justin touch his omega, his hand gripping Steve's, his fingers lacing through Steve's, their skin brushing--

Tony growled without meaning to and a moment later he and Hammer were inches from each other's faces. He didn't even realize he was doing it until he was there, teeth bared, ready to tear Justin limb from limb. Justin dropped Steve's hand in a flash.

"...Tony," said Justin softly.

"Justin," replied Tony.

The two of them both stepped back with an embarrassed smile, but it was too late; Christine was watching them with un concealed journalistic delight.

"We kid around, we're buddies, you know," said Justin, smiling at her.

"Yeah, he's a real kidder, I mean... look at his company," said Tony, smiling back.

"Ha ha... see... always joking," said Justin. "You know, just friendly-- friendly competition, hey, no, I love this guy--"

"--ha ha, yeah, like, when he was testifying against me in the Senate, you know, that was great," agreed Tony. "Hilarious, really... I mean, I wouldn't really call us competitors, you know, my inventions actually work..."

"You know, I'm actually showcasing one of them at your Expo. Did you know that, Tony?"
"Wow, that's great, Justin, really, we could always use some comic relief... Stan, does Justin have a slot? Can you fit him in?"

"I'm sure Stan can accommodate me," said Justin, giving Steve a predatory smile.

Tony moved unconsciously in front of Steve, blocking him. Not that Steve needed help. Steve was enormous, bulging with muscles. He could probably take Justin himself. But Tony wasn't thinking. He was reacting. Steve wasn't even his. But the way Justin was eyeing him made Tony want to get into a down-and-out brawl with the other man. And Christine was watching the whole thing.

When Pepper showed up suddenly, Tony could have kissed her.

"Oh, hi, Tony," she said, bullying her way between Tony and Justin. "I was just looking for you, Erica is here from Natick Labs and has some interesting ideas on synth fibers for your newest project. ...oh, Ms. Everhart, how do you do? ...please excuse us for just a moment..."

"We're kidders, we like to kid around, Tony's my buddy," explained Justin. "He's great, he's a great guy, he's gorgeous, you know... a gorgeous mind..."

Pepper put a hand on Steve's arm and grabbed the label of Tony's jacket and dragged them both away.

"Steve," she hissed. "He was on the no talk list! What the hell was that? The two of them nearly got into a scuffle; everyone saw--"

"That guy drives me crazy. I swear, someday--" snarled Tony, his hands balling into fists. He stopped suddenly, his eyes lighting up. "...drives me crazy," he repeated. "...drives... Pepper, I gotta go!"

"What? No! No, you're going to sit down this instant, Tony--"

"No, it's fine... take Steve... I just need to go do something real quick, get some fresh air... please, Pepper, I gotta, he got me all worked up, you don't know what it's like..." begged Tony. He was itching to leave, itching to go do something wild and reckless. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins and if he didn't leave he was positive he and Justin would end up in a fight before the end of the day. It didn't help that the faint aroma of an omega in heat was floating around the room. Tony doubted Justin would have had the balls to touch Steve at all if it weren't for that.

"...fine, but please, please, behave yourself," said Pepper after a moment.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah," said Tony dismissively, waving a hand at her and leaving. "I'm just gonna go down to the pit, check on my car, you know, get some air... I'll be fast, don't worry."

Pepper sighed and watching him go, then rounded on Steve. "...what was that about?"

Seeing Tony almost fight Justin goddamn Hammer because he wouldn't let go of his hand...that was a weird, surreal moment. He didn't think Tony cared. Sure, he seemed to like Steve physically but Stark was a famous guy who was surrounded by good looking people on a constant basis. Steve was his type, a blond. But his personality evidently drove Tony up the wall. And yet there his boss had been, in the face of another Alpha, just because he wouldn't let go of his hand. Steve had been about to wrench away when Tony had appeared and then Steve really couldn't risk the other catching on about any super strength abilities he might have. And that reporter had seen the whole thing; Tony getting right up in Justin's face- not ideal. Would Pepper sack him over this?
Shit... had he just compromised the whole mission?

"I'll see. Might be hard to squeeze you in though," Steve told Justin on the top of 'accommodating' him, his eyes narrowing at the Alpha passive aggressively before Pepper pulled him away. He wanted to see Justin's face when he realised Steve was Captain America. That he'd been lightly fondling the hand of Captain America, thinking he could rile Tony up by touching his PA- he would probably shit his pants. Steve often had that effect on Alphas, actually.

He watched Tony disappeared onto the track with a frown on his features. Tony had been off all day and that display with Hammer was just plain weird. He swallowed thickly. This was the first time he'd disappointed Pepper. Ever. And it felt horrible.

"I was trying to get away, but he wouldn't let go of my hand," Steve said quickly in explanation. "I think....I think he might have been hitting on me. Or just trying to piss off Tony. I'm so sorry Virginia, I just didn't know what to do. I panicked. I didn't want to be rude." Or ha, break his arm, wouldn't that have been funny? "Tony was kind of being weird earlier too...sorry. I'm so sorry. It won't happen again."

Pepper pressed her fingers into her temples, rubbing them. "This is our first vacation in two years and the last thing I need is to come home to bad press, Stan... the way Tony was acting back there..." She shook her head. Tony may have been spoiled and impulsive but he was rarely out of control. He and Justin had, for a split second, both looked completely feral.

She took a deep, steadying breath. It was over, now. If they could just get through the rest of the day without Tony causing any more drama, then they would be fine.

"It's fine, just... try not to let Tony get into any more tiffs. You're not a piece of meat, Stan. Feel free to be rude to people if they're treating you that way. Tony will stand up for you. He acts like he doesn't care about omega rights, but I know he does." She reached for a flute of champagne, sighing softly, trying to calm down. Tony's actions didn't just reflect badly on him, but on her and on the company. As a new CEO, and a woman, she had a vested interest in presenting herself well.

Steve looked rattled. "You okay?" she asked, more gently. "You look flushed... Have some champagne..."

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me," Steve brushed her off, though he did pull at his collar. He felt a little hot. Maybe it was the whole situation; it had him flustered. He ran a hand over his face and downed another glass of water as a waiter passed them by. It didn't help him feel any less overheated though.

"I'm sorry if I seemed like I was snapping at you earlier. You're doing fine. I know he's difficult. Maybe once he gets some fresh air, he'll calm--" She stopped and all then color drained from her face. On the television, Tony was grinning in front of several microphones, wearing a racing jacket emblazoned with his name. "I mean, what's the point of owning a racecar if you don't drive it? I doubt it's as fast as the suit, but..." Tony was saying.

"Oh no. No!" gasped Pepper. "No, no, no, no... no... this is not happening..."

"Is he driving?" asked a woman next to Steve with undisguised curiosity.

On the screen, the lineup had changed. Tony's driver's name was replaced with his own. The driver was throwing a tantrum in the background while Tony casually talked to the reporters on the track. Every eye in the club had turned to the televisions.
Pepper looked seconds away from a heart attack. "This cannot happen... oh, no... no, Tony, no..."

"...I mean, cars are really just two-dimensional suits on wheels, if you think about it," Tony was explaining on the television. "Hey, did you know that racecar is a palindrome? ...I mean, no, obviously, I don't know the track offhand, but my reflexes are fantastic, I'm pretty sure we're going to do great..."

Pepper was getting up and grabbing Steve's arm. "We have to stop him, he can't-- oh my God, what the hell is he doing, Stan, come on--"

Then Tony was up on screen and saying he was racing and Steve wasn't even surprised. He just stared, dumbfounded as Tony disappeared from view with a laugh and a wave as he headed towards his potential doom. Tony wasn't a professional driver (no matter how much he might like to be). The chances of him getting hurt were high. That was an important part of Steve's mission, too- keep Tony from being an idiot and, oh yeah, getting himself goddamn killed.

He and Pepper rushed down to the racetrack, but by the time they got to the sidelines it was too late. The cars were lining up and Tony was in one of them and a countdown was starting. Steve heard Pepper swearing next to him and she gripped his arm tightly, her nails digging into the flesh of his forearm. It hurt but Steve didn't complain. "He's going to be okay, Pepper," Steve said, more to comfort her than anything else.

"He's going to get himself killed," Pepper disagreed and a real kind of fear shone in her eyes. Steve held her gaze as he heard the cars whizzing off from the starting line.

"We can't protect him from himself, Virginia," Steve said quietly and he was sad to say it, too. "I'm sorry." *I'm sorry I wasn't good enough today.*

Pepper's grip on his arm loosened a fraction and she gave him a sad smile as if to say *I know*. Then the cars whizzed past their place among the crowd and they were drawn back into the race, Steve frantically searching the cars for Tony, the Stark Industries car emblazoned in a blue-and-white color scheme.

Tony had to admit, he wasn't *entirely* sure what had gotten into him, but he didn't really care. He needed to get some energy out and as he settled into the seat of his car, he felt much calmer than he had inside, facing off with Hammer. He checked the gauges and sighed contentedly. Here in the car, he felt at home. He didn't feel sick at all. The seat was comfortable and low to the ground and inside the helmet he felt not unlike he did when he was Iron Man. Hell, he felt more comfortable here than he ever had inside. He revved the engine experimentally, enjoying the sense of power it gave him. For some reason, he hoped his PA, the omega, was watching.

The moment the flag waved, Tony hit the accelerator and he was off. All his talk about a racecar being like the suit immediately evaporated; he was going two hundred miles an hour only a few feet from the ground and, unlike in the suit, he had no ability to maneuver if something got in his way. Tony found himself laughing, a combination of hysterical nervousness and joy and reckless abandon. Knowing he was one false move from death made him feel... *alive*. His mind was blissfully empty and he was completely, utterly focused on the slight movements of the steering wheel, twisting around curves, avoiding other cars, the only sound the buzzing roar of engines. This had been a good decision. A *wonderful* decision. Tony felt invincible and he loved it.

He'd just rounded a bend and was starting to think he had a fighting chance at actually holding his own when he saw it. There was a person on the track. Pit crew? Tony couldn't tell, didn't have time to tell. He didn't even have time to react. The car in front of him was suddenly in two pieces, and then there was a massive, body-shaking crash. Tony couldn't have said exactly what
happened. He saw the man, saw the car in front of him spin out, and he could've sworn that the
guy flung something at him...but what the hell could he have done to stop a car going over two
hundred, anyway?

Maybe Tony was just confused; he was utterly disoriented; at some point he'd realized he was no
longer actually upright but was upside down, sliding along the pavement in a blur of hot tarmac
and metal and fire. Interesting, although time had sped up outside his head, inside of it, it had
slowed. His thoughts were surprisingly calm.

*What the hell was that guy doing. I wonder how many other guys spun out. I bet Pepper's going to
to be spitting mad. ...she's cute when she's mad. ...I think I'm going to throw up.*

Tony reached up-- no, down; he was hanging upside-down-- and pulled off his helmet so he
wouldn't vomit in it. The air was cool and welcome and smelled like oil and metal and something
else, something sharp and electric.

Tony looked up. No, down. The world was upside-down still.

Yes. There was a man. Or maybe an angel. Tony didn't believe in such things, but the man
approaching him had wings, wings of electricity. No. That didn't make sense. Tony's brain tried
to figure it out. Was he dead? That couldn't be right. If he was dead, why did he feel nauseous?

Okay, so he was being approached by someone, or something, and its arms were impossibly long,
but not wings. Jumper cables? One of them snaked outward, flickering a jagged bolt of lightning
from it, and Tony considered the possibility that he was hallucinating. He definitely might have a
concussion. Seemed likely, really. The man in front of him had a large, glowing circle in his chest,
an arc reactor just like Tony's, and both his arms were coursing with jags of lightning. Tony was
almost positive he was experiencing some sort of weird head trauma.

Supposedly you weren't supposed to move after an accident. Nonetheless, Tony was pretty sure
that you were supposed to get out of the way when you were on a live track. He reached up,
unbuckled his seatbelt, fell onto the pavement unceremoniously, and scrambled around the remains
of the car, still trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Twisted metal, fire, rocks, heat... it
was Afghanistan all over again. Tony's heart jumped into his throat.

There was a sudden sound, the shearing of metal, and the car in which Tony had been sitting fell
apart into two pieces, a snaking piece of metal severing it like a hot knife through butter. Tony
stared. Whoever the guy on the track was, he wasn't a friend. He was a threat. And against every
sensible thought Tony had ever had, he knew he needed to take him down.

He crouched behind the overturned vehicle, head throbbing. The world was so loud it was quiet.
Tony could hear nothing but his own blood rushing through his veins. And suddenly, there he
was, up close and personal.

Not pit crew. Not anyone Tony had ever seen. Tall and lean and tanned, Tony realized in an
instant, with horror, that the man was wearing an external mech suit. The arc reactor on his chest
was real, as real as the one embedded in Tony's skin, and he wasn't holding cables; the cables were
attached to him, attached to the elaborate system of hydraulics surrounding his arms, electrified,
powered by that reactor, impossibly heavy and yet flung around easily because of the powered
exoskeleton wrapped around his arms and shoulders and chest.

Tony wasn't sure what prompted the following act of incredible stupid bravery, but he picked up a
sheet of metal that had fallen off the car in front of him, stepped up behind the man, and swung it
as hard as he could at the other's head.
Incredible reflexes, this new stranger. He swung up with an arm, one of the whips dangling from his hand ribboning out in an elegantly spiral of electricity. Tony took a piece of his own metal in the face, stumbled back, fell, and rolled without thinking, watching as one of the electrified cables slammed onto the ground where he'd just been.

Somewhere in the back of his head, he wondered if this was how he would die; if it would be less painful than slowly being poisoned by his arc reactor; if Pepper and the omega were watching him. He hoped not.

He twisted to the side, yanked back, operating on pure instinct as the other man tried to bring down one of the cables on him. Tony managed to get to his feet and tear away, only to slam into another overturned car and drop to the ground. He lay there, breathing heavily. The world was frozen.

*I'm in a nightmare,* he thought with surprising clarity. *This isn't real... this is a nightmare... I should've known, the moment Justin started putting his paws all over my omega...*

Tony watched a bead of gasoline drop from the car in front of him. A perfect, beautiful bead of liquid. The life of the car, draining away, leaking all over the tarmac... *engine blood,* thought Tony... *Well, Car, that's it... you and me... dying together... leaking all over the track...*

...wait a moment.

Gasoline was flammable.

Tony looked up at a broken shard of mirror. Behind him, the man was approaching, an angel of death, all sparks and shocks, twisted snakes for hands.

Tony was up in an instant, flinging himself out of the way as one of the cables came down where he'd been lying. In an instant, the whole car was up in flames, a fireball erupting behind Tony.

"Ha!" he said. His triumph was short-lived. His sleeve was on fire. He slapped at it. "Euler's ghost, the fuck," he said. His whole world had become a narrow, surreal fight for survival. In front of him, the damned man was still, somehow, alive, grinning, walking toward him, his skin shiny with burns and abrasions, and Tony was crouched, staring at him, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do next, because so far, he'd been lucky, but unless something changed, and fast, Tony was pretty sure he was going to lose this fight. He stared, wide-eyed, still not ready to stop. It wasn't his nature. Tony had always been a fighter, a stubborn ass who didn't know when to quit. The cables crackled ominously, dangling from the man's hands; the two of them made eye contact, but neither spoke. What was there to say? Their lives had both been distilled to this single, simple moment of survival. They were nothing more than mortals, animals, fighting. Tony didn't know why. Didn't care, either. He just didn't want to die.

On the sidelines, the crowd was frozen with panic, watching with shrieks and gasps at the suddenly gladiatorial battle they were being treated to. And Steve had never been so torn in his life. Break cover or save Tony's life? Fury would kill him if he broke cover. But he'd also kill him if he let Tony die. Steve couldn't win in this scenario, but he also couldn't just watch Tony die. No fucking way. The man who was attacking him, and his creation (a deadly addition to his body), looked fearsome, but with a well-timed kick Steve was sure he could bring him down. Before he knew what he was doing he was bending the railing with his bare hands, the chaos meaning no one had noticed his super-human strength. Steve swallowed thickly before stepping onto the track.

"Stan! What are- Stan, don't! It's not safe!" Pepper hollered after him, Happy holding her back from joining Steve out on the track. He knew it was dangerous. Reckless. But everything was just white
noise around- the roar of the crowd a distant sound. All he could see was Tony. And Tony was in danger.

But Pepper calling his name was a mistake and the man with the electric whips snapped around to watch Steve with his fiery gaze. Tony had actually already seen Steve in the ring- he sort of knew what the blond was capable of. Within limits- *human* limits.

The man muttered something foul under his breath. No doubt something rude. Steve stepped around, edging towards Tony so he could deliver the all important suit to him. But then a whip hissed and lodged into the ground between him and Tony. Hm...awkward. Steve ducked out of the way as the man swung another whip at him, growling before he spun back around to aim another at Tony. Steve dived out of the way of the blow with relative ease. The man was an Alpha, a strong, dominant one, too. He was *built* like one and looked a little feral in that moment.

But then he was zeroing in on Tony again, stepping closer... whips smacking into the tarmac... and Steve could do nothing without blowing his cover, except--

He grabbed the handcuffs on his wrist and banged it, as hard as he could, against a concrete divider. It snapped. He threw the case.

"Tony!" he called, before having to twist out of the way as a whip was flung towards him.

Tony heard Steve before he saw him, and suddenly, whatever self-preservation instinct he'd had evaporated. He had to protect Steve. He whipped around just in time to see Steve dodge with almost miraculous reflexes out of the way. He heard Steve yell his name.

And then--

Tony made a noise of gratitude as he saw a flash of red. *The suit.*

Tony dove for it, silently thanking whatever gods there might be. One moment he was a mere mortal, lunging for the suit and suddenly he was being enveloped in it. Suddenly the world made sense again. He could hear again, whirring gears, the click on perfectly interlocking plates, and just like that, Tony was no longer helpless; he was wrapped in a two-hundred pound suit of armor capable of flinging a Jeep across a football field. He stared at the man, and the man stared at him; for a split second there faced off, eye to eye.

Then the face plate came down.

Suit was on. Charged. Ready to rock and roll.

Tony put a foot on the nearest car and kicked it away, then reached out, scruffed Steve by the back of his shirt, and flung him away. He hoped he hadn't been too rough but he didn't want Steve here. Didn't want him to get hurt. He hoped Steve had the sense to get up from where ever he had landed and get the hell away.

Steve grunted as he'd hit the ground near the crowd and rolled onto his front. He was half aware of Happy and Pepper around him, the two betas hauling him up. Fuck, Tony could really throw with that thing. Steve supposed it was designed to deal with things a lot heavier than him.

He had to watch the fight from the sidelines with Pepper grabbing his arm like a vice again. At least Steve had gotten the suit out there, given Tony a fighting chance. That had been worth the risk of having his cover blown and/or dying.

"Go to hell, Whippy Longstocking," muttered Tony, holding up one of his palms out to fire; the
other man flung out one of the cables and it hit the suit with an electric jolt that Tony felt all the way down to his bones. His teeth itched. He could smell singed hair. The digital readout Tony was staring at within the suit scrambled and Tony felt a renewed sense of panic. The Mark IV had never been designed for this sort of battle. He fired off two shots, but both missed; targeting was down.

A moment later he felt something snake around his shoulder and he was yanked off his feet by the other man, just as effortlessly as Tony had yanked up Steve seconds earlier.

He hit the ground, hard. If he hadn't been in the suit, he probably would have broken all his ribs. As it was, the impact left him winded.

He didn't have time to recover; he was yanked back up and slammed down again. Augmented reality was down; the screen was mostly static. The suit couldn't handle the amount of electricity that was being dumped into it; the other man's reactor was, at a glance, probably producing about as much power as the Three Gorges Dam, and unless Tony could deactivate it, he was royally screwed.

"Fuck," hissed Tony. "Fuck... fuck... fuck..." He'd never before felt so helpless in one of his suits. He looked up. His enemy was all smiles.

Tony raised a hand, slowly; the power was flickering and the suit, normally supported by the power output, was heavy, weighing him down.

Teeth gritted, Tony wrapped his arm around the cable, watching sparks fly, listening to the metallic grinding as his suit failed him. He took a staggering step forward, the cable twisting over his shoulder, the electricity scrambling the suit's circuits, burning him out.

The other man was still smiling. By the time he realized Tony was reeling him in, it was too late; Tony wrapped the cables around his arms, his torso, yanking them closer, entangling them. They were face-to-face; Tony yanked, pulling down the other man's body, then fell to his knees on top of him, reaching up and grabbing the reactor on his chest.

Tony pulled it, and just like that, the other man was merely a man, the cables merely long wires. Tony's fist closed, crushing the reactor, and he staggered back, staring at the man lying on the pavement, spitting out blood. Police and medics were swarming them. Tony stood in the suit, wanting nothing more than to drop to his knees, but not daring, all too aware that the whole world was watching him.

Slowly, deliberately, he reached up to remove his faceplate to get a better look at the man. He'd never seen the guy before in his life.

The man grinned maniacally as he was hauled to his feet. "...you lose, Stark!" he said, laughing hysterically. "Not-so-invincible Iron Man! ...you lose!" He burst into a fit of laughter and Tony stared at him, completely and totally lost, the beginnings of a killer headache starting behind his eyes.

But people were watching. He had to be tough.

"I'm not the loser here, Rudyard Whipling. Go to hell," spat out Tony, kicking the remains of the other man's arc reactor that were scattered over the ground. The other man, though, didn't seem upset. He giggled uncontrollably as he was dragged away, and Tony stared down at the crushed and melted pieces of his arc reactor, wondering how in the fuck he'd been able to construct it in the first place.
When the fight was finally over Steve let out a sigh of relief, eyes on Tony and not on the attacker as the man was pulled away. He was vaguely aware of Pepper telling Happy to bring the car around. But Steve just had his eyes on Tony. The man looked strangely isolated out there on the racetrack, as his adversary was being dragged away, as Tony stared down at the makeshift arc reactor in his hands. Something ached in Steve's chest. He still felt hot and strangely shivery, but he pushed it away.

"Tony?" His tone was cautious as he stepped in front of his boss. "Tony? Are you...are you okay?"

But before Tony could respond Pepper was with them. "We have to get out before the press swarm us," she stated. "Let's get back to the hotel, pronto. We'll give police statements tomorrow. I'm not-Jesus Christ. I'm not dealing with this today."

"...so, uh, I guess I didn't win the race, huh?" asked Tony, looking up from the devastation on the track.


The slap barely registered. Tony ached all over. He was just glad that he was alive, that Steve was okay, that Pepper was okay... but... his arc reactor. Only he should know how to build that.

And, while he was thinking about it: fuck. The reactor!

The one he had was running on nothing. If the levels of toxicity it was dumping into his blood was any indication, it had already suffered heavy neutron damage before powering the suit. The thing was probably a wreck now. Tony needed to change it immediately, needed to get back to the shop and fix it.

The thought sobered him enough that he was able to let Pepper drag him away before the press attacked them, but the moment they were in the car, Tony felt like someone had punched him in the head all over again. The thing is, it wasn't a bad feeling. Tony suddenly felt sharp, alert. His heart was pounding; his head was swimming.

He let out a groan and put his face in his hands. Thank Tesla for tinted windows.

"Tony?" Pepper put a hand on his shoulder.

"I-- sorry-- I think it's catching up to me," he mumbled. He caught a whiff of something underlying grease and blood and singed hair.

...sex?

He looked up at Pepper, confused. Betas didn't go into heat. Yet she was the one closest to him. And she was staring right at him. Bright green eyes, eyes like sea glass, and a cute little constellation of freckles across her nose...

Tony leaned in to kiss her without thinking.

" Tony! " Pepper slapped him again. "Get ahold of yourself! ...oh my God, you have a concussion... who's the president, Tony? When's your birthday?"

"Ellis. The president is Ellis, uh... Matthew," said Tony head throbbing. "My birthday is... it's next week..."
"Give me a date, Tony."

"May..." Tony trailed off. He couldn't remember. Panic rose in his throat. "I have a concussion," he repeated. "I don't know my birthday. Pepper. Pepper, I don't know when--"

"Tony, calm down. It's okay. It's the twenty-ninth, you're okay--"

"I don't remember my birthday. Oh my God, my brain, Pepper, my brain's my second or maybe even my first best feature-- top three, definitely--"

"I'm scared to ask what the other two are. Tony, calm down, you've had concussions before, you're fine--"

"I'm not fine, I'm freaking out!" exclaimed Tony. "I... I don't feel good, I want to throw up, I keep smelling sex, I don't remember my birthday--"

"Hey, look at it this way, boss," said Happy from the driver's seat. "If you lose a hundred IQ points, you'll still be smarter than the rest of us."

"Not now, Happy!" snapped Pepper, tearing a piece of cloth off the arm of her dress and dumping a bottle of water on it. She pressed it onto Tony's head. "Tony, calm down, you're fine... you just need to relax, okay, everything is taken care of..."

"Who was that guy? He had my design..." moaned Tony, leaning back. His body had started shaking. Shock was setting in. Tony's body wanted a million things at once. He wanted to scream and run and fight and also to sleep and also to fuck something and also to eat something and also to throw up. In the end, he didn't do anything; he let Pepper drag him up to the hotel room, where the police were already waiting, along with the Minister of Defence, the head of RAID, the head of GIGN, and a guy Tony vaguely recognized from two years ago.

"Phil Collins, right?"

"Coulson."

"Phil Collins was a singer. He wrote In The Air Tonight," corrected Happy helpfully.

"Well, whoever the hell you are, scram," said Tony. "Allez-vous en," he said to the head of GIGN. "J'ai un... how do you say concussion in French? Je ne peux pas me souvenir mon anniversaire, d'accord? So get out."

He threw himself onto the nearest couch with a groan of misery.

"Would you mind if I questioned your assistant, at least?" asked Coulson, staring pointedly at Steve.

Tony, face-down on the couch, reached up and made a non-committal hand-waving motion. "...I need a drink..."

"On it," said Happy.

"I'll give some preliminary statements, if I can get a translator, neither of us speaks French very well," said Pepper. Tony felt a surge of affection for all three of them for dealing with the aftermath. His body was sore beyond all reason; he never wanted to move again.

"I can handle French," Steve assured her quickly but Pepper wasn't really listening. She just had her
eyes on Tony. This moment exposed how close they truly were. Though Pepper insisted on several occasions that they weren't together, but maybe they had been once? Or they would be. Steve wasn't entirely sure, but either way wouldn't surprise him. And either way their friendship was obviously a precious thing.

The car ride back had been chaos and Steve felt feverish. He downed too more bottles of water but there was no improvement. Maybe he was going to be sick. Maybe...but then Phil was tapping on his arm. Phil Coulson. The man Steve had woken up to. The man who had approved him ready for field work. The man who had assigned Nat and Clint to train him back up, get him ready for combat and espionage. He was an omega too, which was why he such a goddamn fanboy.

"Shall we?" Phil asked and Steve nodded. He shared a reassuring glance and nod with Pepper too before he slipped out of the door and lead Phil to his hotel room.

Phil shut the door after Steve and then turned around to face him. "You're going into heat," he stated.

Steve frowned. "Not possible."

The doctors had told him the ice had fucked up his biology. No more heats (he'd been too sick for his body to have them in the thirties anyway). No children (not that he really wanted any). He'd had no hint of one for the five months he'd been awake.

"You've been spending your time around an Alpha 24/7. It's possible," Phil said. "We knew by the chip. Your heart rate is going through the roof, as well as your core temperature. And then that disaster on the track-" Steve opened his mouth to speak. "Not your fault. Didn't see it coming. You did the right thing."

Steve let out a breath of relief he hadn't known he'd been holding. The chip was in the watch they've given him, the one he always wore on his left wrist, so they could track him/Tony in case of a disaster.

Phil produced a needle from a small case in his jacket pocket. Presumably to try and stop Steve's heat. Gently, Phil took one of Steve's arms and trailed his fingers around, finding a good vein.

"Those...blueprints you sent us Steve. They were...interesting."

Steve was supposed to send as much information as he could on Tony's designs. But after everything that happened in court he made the personal decision that SHIELD didn't have the right to it. He would write his Avengers report, but that was all. So Steve had sent in his own hand drawn diagrams of the suit labelled with stuff like 'shooty things' and the 'magical part.' He mainly did it just to piss off Fury. Steve didn't like the man much- he didn't like people with agendas. He had a sense he wasn't being told everything. So why should he tell them everything? He'd hoped that the future might be more open to treating omegas like people, but in his (admittedly limited experience), that was not the case. It had made him bitter. And working for Tony hadn't helped.

He met Phil's gaze and couldn't help but smirk a little. The agent gave him a fond look. "This might hurt a little," he warned before pressing the needle into his skin, squeezing the blue liquid into his veins.

And then it burned. Suddenly the whole of Steve's body felt like it was on fire. He collapsed onto his knees and groaned. The pain, it was unbearable, he couldn't- Steve sucked in a shuddering breath, the shocking pain gone as quickly as it came. Phil knelt down beside him and pressed a hand against Steve's forehead. "It didn't work," he murmured.
Steve was left shivering and clammyer than he had been before.

"Shit," Steve muttered into the floor. "What was that?"

"Emergency suppressants. But it was a long shot, with your metabolism, anyway."

"What am I gonna do, Phil?"

"Whatever you want," Phil told him and stood. "It's your heat Steve," he said as he offered him a hand to pull him up. Steve stood a little shakily. "Just be careful. Don't blow cover."

While Phil and Steve had slipped off to speak, in Steve's room, Tony had given up on glasses and drank straight from the decanter. The head of RAID was smoking and it turned Tony's stomach. His French was limited to getting deals made and women in bed (it was the language of love, after all) and he didn't have the vocabulary to explain what had happened. Even if he had he wasn't really sure.

He let Pepper manage it, watching her admiringly as she moved people around, a tablet in one hand and a Blackberry in the other scheduling interviews and debriefings, her speaking broken French while everyone else spoke broken English. Tony was pretty sure alcohol was the worst possible thing for him but he needed it; he polished off nearly an entire bottle of liquor while Pepper was distracted with the others and let the liquid warmth flow through his veins comfortably.

She shooed them out one by one; Tony lolled his head back on the couch, taking deep, steadying breaths.

"You still have to kick out Phil Collins," he said. "...I think he's with Stan."

"Coulson," she corrected, striding across the room. "I'll take care of him; we have a flight booked for this evening; Tony, do you need to go to the hospital?"

"Absolutely not," said Tony immediately. He hated hospitals. Hated the idea of being poked and prodded, his arc reactor stared at. Pepper knew it and she didn't push it; Tony certainly had head trauma but he was conscious and seemed, for the most part, lucid; it would do more harm than good to forcibly drag him to the doctor.

"Tony... Tony, you could have been killed."

Tony shrugged, not moving. "Life's too short, Pepper. Life's short and... and... what's the point of living it if you're not going to live it?"

"Tony, you act like you're dying. Is this some sort of midlife crisis?"

"Having a midlife crisis is hard when you already own, like, eight red convertibles," joked Tony with a small smile. "...go get Coulson out of here, will you? I need my beauty sleep."

Pepper rose obediently and went to escort the last of the agents out. She walked out of Tony's suite and down the hall to Steve's room, where Coulson and Steve were huddled together, talking in low voices. He was a likable man, and Pepper admired omegas in powerful positions, but Tony needed rest. The two of them, Steve and Phil, looked... conspiratorial together and for some reason she felt an intuitive sense of unease. She looked between Phil and Steve carefully and her eyes perhaps narrowed a fraction. "Everything okay in here? I managed to get statements pushed back to tomorrow morning. Tony won't stop drinking with them breathing down his neck."

"I do believe your assistant is going into heat, Miss Potts," Phil said abruptly and Steve shot him a
glare. He got to decide, huh? What kind of goddamn play was this?

"Oh, no," she said quietly, automatically looking over her shoulder. "...no... are you sure? Can't you stop it?" Tony was impulsive and reckless and posturing on the best of days; around an omega in heat, he was sure to be unbearable. Suddenly, Tony's actions made a lot more sense, especially his overly aggressive confrontation with Hammer. "...just now? ...today? ...does Tony know?"

Her mind was spinning, trying to figure out the best way to handle this new problem. She felt a small sense of guilt for thinking of Steve's biology as a "problem," but she couldn't afford to be politically correct right now. An omega in heat in Steve's position, surrounded by Alphas, was like a piece of meat in a dog kennel.

"Tony doesn't know. No one knows." Steve couldn't hide the tremor in his voice. When had he even last had one? He could barely remember. He had half heats before the serum and during the war his body had been in survival mode. He'd only had one fully fledged heat, ever. They'd locked him in a safe house and Dugan had sat outside the front door with a shotgun the entire time.

He was shaking. He was scared. Steve knew he could defend himself. But would he? Suddenly, he felt internally horrified on top of everything. The way Pepper was looking at him...was this his fault? Could he have avoided this? He didn't even want this to be happening.

"I didn't think I was due." Ever. "I'm so sorry Pepper," Steve breathed, brow knotting into a frown.

"I believe Mr. Rogers is too far along. It wouldn't be safe," Phil offered quietly to cover up the fact that Steve's metabolism wouldn't allow it. The needle was already tucked back away into his jacket.

"Just lock this room and leave me with loads of water. And some food. And I'll be fine," Steve said. It was all he could think to say. But it wouldn't be fine. It would probably be agony.

Pepper shook her head quickly. "No, don't apologize, Stan. We can handle this." Pepper took a deep breath. "...when we get back to America you can take some time off, if you need to. But we can't leave you here. Our flight leaves tonight; we have to get back to deal with the press." She wondered if it would be rude to tell Steve he should take another flight. She had never worked directly with an omega before, and being Tony Stark's assistant wasn't really a job that came with personal days. She'd never considered Steve's omega status when considering his application; Stark Industries was an equal opportunity employer and, due to Howard's progressive stance on omega rights, they had always worked hard to give everyone a fair shot. But heats were a reality of being an omega and the last thing Pepper needed was for Tony and Steve to be flinging themselves at each other in the middle of a PR nightmare.

Tony didn't know yet, not consciously, but he was already acting reckless and strange, even for him.

In the other room, he was texting, trying to get in. He needed to talk to the man who'd nearly killed him. Needed to find out who the hell he was, where he'd gotten the arc reactor design. He was calling in every favor he could to go see him and he was pretty sure he was in.

He got up to let Pepper know he was headed out. He flung open the bedroom door; Pepper, Phil, and Steve all looked up guiltily.

"Sorry to interrupt the pow-wow. I'm going to go talk to our little friend, I'll be back in time for..." Tony trailed off, staring at them. All three looked.. magnificent. Pepper's hair was shining with a coppery gleam and Steve's muscles were taut and even Phil had a certain sort of understated charm. Tony's mouth went dry.
"Tony?"

Tony shook himself out. "Sorry. I'll be back in time for the flight, I mean," he said, trying not to stare. He'd never noticed before but Coulson was actually a good-looking guy. Not as good as Steve, though. Steve was a work of art. Carved from marble. Even though his clothes were messy and dirty and his face was flushed, Tony couldn't help but feel a sharp pang of attraction.

He must've hit his head harder than he realized.

Still, he would only have one chance to talk to the guy with the whips.

"Tony?" repeated Pepper. Tony was just standing there, staring at Steve and Phil.

"Huh? Oh. Right. ...right, I'll be back," said Tony, shaking himself out again before leaving.

Pepper looked at Phil and Steve helplessly. This was worse than she thought. Even though Tony and Steve were both intelligent, capable people, they were still at the mercy of their own bodies, and clearly, the air was thick with pheromones she couldn't sense. She didn't trust Tony anywhere near Steve. And she knew it was going to get worse before it got better. "...do you think... do you think you can handle the plane ride back?" she asked delicately.

*I can handle anything*, Steve wanted to say. But he just nodded and gave a somber swallow. "I'll be fine, V, honestly. I'm a big boy." Steve waved her off and reached for another bottle of water in the fridge.

For a moment there he'd wanted to throw himself at Tony. He'd wanted to drop to his knees and beg. Jesus. Captain America didn't beg to anyone. Steve could feel himself heating up. He wanted to take off his waistcoat. He wanted to take off goddamn everything. Shit. It had been too long since he'd experienced this. "If you just keep me locked in my own cabin then it'll be fine," Steve said. "I've dealt with worse."

Well, that much was true, at least.

After sixty-five years of being frozen in ice, how bad could one heat be?
They wasted little time in leaving the country. Tony disappeared to speak to his attacker; he returned quiet and morose and refused to talk to Pepper or Steve, who were too busy making arrangements for statements with the various security agencies to pry too much.

Pepper made it clear that she wanted Steve to get settled in his cabin before things got bad. They gave him a crate of water bottles and a handful of energy bars. Steve practically sighed in relief as he staggered onto the plane and the cabin door was shut behind him. Pepper locked it behind her as she left, keeping the key as Steve couldn't trust himself. And JARVIS was authorized to prevent Steve from leaving, or Tony entering; JARVIS was as neutral of a party as any beta would be.

The plane was sleek, a marvel of Stark technology. Steve would be perfectly comfortable, aside from the whole heat thing.

Before the plane was due to set off, Steve took the opportunity to shower. He collapsed in the sheets naked after that, downing two bottles of water and sighing as he tried to ignore the burning sensation that was beginning to rise in his gut. Why was this happening to him? Why now?

Worse, it was embarrassing to know that Phil knew and, by extension, probably a dozen SHIELD agents. In Steve's time, heats had been a private thing. He was at least grateful for the privacy of the small cabin in the back of the plane. Pepper had agreed to distract Tony.

"How was your meeting?" asked Pepper pleasantly, sitting down in one of the leather seats near the bar.

Tony stared out the window gloomily. "...shitty," he said honestly. He didn't really feel like talking about it with her. He'd gone and talked to Ivan, a brief, five-minute encounter that had been five minutes too long. He had learned nothing, aside from the man's name. Ivan Vanko. And that he knew how to build an arc reactor. And then he knew what an arc reactor, placed into a human body, did.

Ivan's parting words will still ringing in Tony's ears.

_Palladium in the chest... painful way to die._

Tony reached up to rub his chest. His blood toxicity had skyrocketed to sixty percent after using the reactor to power the suit. He needed to change the core, immediately.

On the television, a senator was commenting on the events of the Prix.

Tony closed his eyes, trying to focus on the hum of the engines beneath him instead of the words coming from the news. "... at a hearing just last week, in fact, where Mr. Stark _insisted_ , was _adamant_ that these suits can’t exist anywhere else, _don’t_ exist anywhere else, that he’s the only one and here we are in Monaco watching--"

"Oh, God, mute it, I fucking hate that guy... I can't deal with this... where's Rogers? I need a smoothie."

"Tony, you know I support your fad diets, but this juice cleanse... how much of that stuff are you drinking? I don't know that it's healthy," said Pepper.

"I'm not drinking that much. JARVIS, how much chlorophyll--" began Tony.
"Between seventy and a hundred ounces a day, averaging eighty-six," said JARVIS.

"...Jesus, Tony, that's insane. I'm putting my foot down," said Pepper. "No more juice cleanse."

"Fifty shots a day is what I call Tuesday," joked Tony, trying to grin. "And if he's right, if I'm drinking eighty-six ounces a day, I'm way behind. Where's Stan?"

Tony hadn't realized how much he was drinking. And... it wasn't doing a damn thing. He was getting sicker. The veins on his chest were creeping up to his neck, ugly red-purple bruises and streaks appearing, hot and painful, under his skin. He shoved his concerns aside. He would be fine, probably. He just needed to swap out the core. Then he'd be fine.

He got up and started pacing. He was halfway across the aisle when he stopped, lifting his head. He'd caught a whiff of something tantalizing. He wasn't sure what. It made his mouth water. It was a comforting smell, but also musky, sexy. Oddly familiar. It was the smell of a juicy steak when he was hungry and the smell of his bed when he was tired.

He took a few steps back, wanting to find its source, but it was gone. He took a few steps forward, turned, cocked his head. Nothing. He took a step to the side. Had he imagined it?

"Tony?" questioned Pepper, watching him move back and forth in the middle of the cabin, a slow waltz with himself.

Tony blinked. "What?"

"What are you doing?"

Tony looked at her. What the hell was he doing? He wasn't sure. "I thought... never mind. I... I was... trying to find Rogers." Tony was suddenly feeling a lot more energetic.

_Palladium in the chest. Painful way to die._

Who said he was going to die, though?

"Pepper, let's get out of here," blurted Tony. "Let's be spontaneous. I don't wanna spend the week doing press statements, let's go to Italy, or... or we could hit up Amsterdam... we're in Europe, let's live a little, be healthy... we can get a little place in Venice, relax, have a real vacation, you know just... recharge..."

Pepper stared at him. "...what?"

"Y'know, take a break, recharge our batteries."

"Tony, you're the only one here who runs on batteries. You're welcome to shirk your duties but Stan and I have to deal with the fallout from--"

"_Shh!_" hissed Tony suddenly, his head snapping around. There it was. He hadn't imagined it. "...do you smell that?"

"...why did you shush me to smell--" Pepper stopped. Her eyes widened marginally. "...Tony, sit down," she commanded, forcing her voice to be calm.

"I can't, I can't sit, I'm too wired--"

"--you're the only one here with wires--"
"--land the plane, I wanna get out, I'm serious, let's go crazy, let's go to Paris, let's go to Oslo, I just... I need a break, come on, Pepper, you and me, it'll be a blast," insisted Tony, looking a little more wild than usual.

"Tony, sit down, I'll make you a martini."

Tony cocked his head. Pepper? Offering to give him alcohol? ...something wasn't right.

Tony forced himself to sit down, even though his skin was crawling. He felt jittery, like he'd had too much coffee. His leg jiggled impatiently; he was finding it hard to sit still.

Stress, obviously.

Whilst the two of them were arguing about smoothies Steve was pawing at the door. He was naked as the day he was born and pink all over. He was both sweating and shivering, eyes glazed over as he tugged at the door handle uselessly. He couldn't think. He had caught a whiff of an unbonded Alpha, and he wanted it. Steve whined as he leaned his head against the smoothed down wood and groaned as he felt his entire body jolt. How could the doctors have not predicted this? His body was aching for it, almost dying for it. 'No heats' Steve's ass. This was awful. This was torture. If he'd at least had warning he could have arranged for an Alpha or taken time off or something.

Steve's nails dug into the wood of the door. JARVIS said something but he didn't hear it. All Steve was aware of was the slipperiness between his thighs and the longing ache in his chest which made him feel almost sick. He felt wrong. Incomplete. He needed... something. Someone. Steve's nails began to cut into the wood, maybe it hurt. He frowned. He wasn't sure. He couldn't feel it and he didn't much care if it did.

In the front of the plane, Tony was watching Pepper with a steely-eyed expression. There would be no hiding the absence of his new PA from him, clearly. He was already aware something was up. As Pepper pressed the martini glass into Tony's hand she gave him a serious look. "Tony. Stan is out of action for a little bit. You won't get to see him for a few days."

Tony looked up in alarm, remembering how he'd tossed the omega aside once he was in the suit. "Did I... did I hurt him?" he asked, trying not to sound too concerned. After all, Steve was merely an assistant. Merely an omega. Tony didn't even know him that well, but the idea of accidentally hurting him worried him.

Deep down, he liked Steve. He liked his moxie. He liked how Steve was stubborn and headstrong. He liked how Steve had thrown Happy to the floor the first time they met. He liked how Steve didn't seem to even know he was an omega, how he strutted proudly around, head held high. Howard would've loved him. Tony begrudgingly admitted he cared about Steve.

"...he can't just take a bunch of personal days," added Tony, trying to cover up his worry with annoyance. "My birthday's in a week and in the meantime we have, you know, a lot of statements to give, and also, you heard JARVIS, I'm drinking eighty-six ounces of chlorophyll a day. I'm sure as hell not blending that much kale myself."

"No more juice," said Pepper firmly.

"...I need it."

"No, you don't, Tony. Pick a different fad diet. Why don't you go vegetarian or something?"

"No. I want--" Tony stopped mid-sentence and rose, head up. Like a wolf that had just caught the scent of a particularly juicy deer.
"Tony. Sit."

"I am sit--" began Tony before realizing he was on his feet. He sat but was up again and pacing almost immediately. His heart was pounding in his chest.

"Drink," commanded Pepper.

Tony threw back the drink obediently without breaking from his pacing and handed her the empty glass wordlessly. He couldn't calm down. The ticking time bomb in his chest... the thing with Vanko... Steve hurt, probably because of him... and on top of all that, there was something else... something wrong... Tony wasn't sure what but it made him feel jittery and anxious. He wanted to hit someone. Hit someone hard. Pin them down. Sink his teeth into flesh. Sink his--

"Tony, what are you doing?" cried Pepper in alarm.

"Huh?" Tony looked down. He'd begun shredding the nearest thing he could get his hands on: a sweater Pepper had draped over the back of a chair. He was surprised to see how easily it had torn. "...the hell?"

Pepper looked thoroughly alarmed. Tony wasn't merely distracted, but dangerous. And he wasn't even anywhere near Steve.

"Tony. Please sit," she said softly.

Tony didn't hear her. He was stared toward the back of the plane. His arms had broken out in goosebumps. He felt like he was under some sort of mind control. He was practically panting; he reached up to loosen his tie. He felt hot.

"Tony! Tony, sit down, please, right now--"

Tony ignored her. He was stalking toward the back of the plane, toward that scent. It was beckoning him, calling his name, he was certain of it. Nothing mattered but following it. To hell with palladium and Vanko and arc reactors and journalists and everything else. Tony's priority list had shifted dramatically. He knew that smell. It was the smell of an omega who needed him. He'd smelled it earlier, in Monaco, but it had been faint then. Now it was almost overbearing. He'd never wanted anything more in his life.

Tony had been around plenty of omegas right before and right after heats, but had only ever been around a single omega in full heat. Jarvis had holed himself away in his father's study whenever he was in heat, but Tony remembered the first time he'd been near him after puberty. If he recalled correctly, he'd somehow ended up dislocating his own shoulder trying to impress him. Not his proudest moment. After that, he'd avoided Jarvis, hating the confusion he'd felt during those times.

Deep down, logically, he felt like he ought to get a hold of himself. That he was acting crazy and embarrassing himself. But he'd never felt this before and he was desperate, desperate, to get closer. He didn't care who it was; he just knew they needed him and he needed them and that they were probably perfect for each other. They were probably in love.

That's just your instincts... fight it, Stark... you look like an ass, thought a small corner of his mind, trying to get control of him. But God, it was getting strong and Tony was shaking with desire.

"Tony!" Pepper was calling him.

Tony tried to respond to her but just made a noise, a noise he didn't even know he was capable of making, a half-growl, half-moan of longing.
"Happy!" Pepper snapped in desperation and the driver was among them in moments. He stood between Tony and the door to Steve's cabin. The small sliver of space between professionalism and the point of no return.

"Now come on Tones. Stan needs his privacy right now," Happy said in a slow, easy tone whilst Pepper dared to step closer to Tony. But she didn't touch him.

"Tony... Stan is going through his heat," she said gently. "Stan. Your PA, remember? Your employee. You're his boss and you can't do what you want to right now. I know it's hard. I know you're hurting, and so is Stan. But you have to step back and think." Pepper urged. It didn't help that Steve was Tony's type to a T— blonde and fiery and with a sharp dress sense. God. Keeping them apart would be hell. How many hours was this flight?

"I won't let you into his room, boss," Happy said. "Sorry. But it's for your own good, sir."

Tony stared at Happy. His mind was moving sluggishly. He processed what Pepper was saying. Yes. Stan was his PA. Good old Stan Rogers of Queens, New York, who had a BA in business administration and had been personally recommended to him by a couple of his pals at the Department of Defense.

...Stan was his PA. His.

"...he needs me," said Tony hoarsely. He tried to shoulder past Happy, but Happy blocked him. Tony felt a surge of anger at him. Happy wasn't even an Alpha. How dare he try to take what was rightfully Tony's. Tony had won him, Tony had stood up to Hammer; Stan was his.

Before Tony could stop himself, he snapped and bit Happy on the arm. Happy yelped.

The taste of blood was a surprisingly good wake-up call. Tony yanked away. "Oh, shit... Happy, I didn't mean to-- I'm sorry, I-- I thought you were--" Tony was too embarrassed to finish. He'd thought Happy was trying to take his omega. Happy, who was a beta. Happy, who was straight. Happy, who was one of his closest friends and would never dream of doing such a thing.

Tony knew all about Alphas who went feral if they thought their mate was threatened, but Tony was not pair-bonded to anyone and he was uncertain as to why he was acting like this. Aftermath from the concussion, maybe?

"...I need a bottle of water," he demanded. He felt hot and flushed and on edge, and, yes, he could still smell Steve, he desperately wanted him, but he couldn't. Tony loved fucking his assistants but he didn't want to do it like this. He didn't want to feel like he couldn't control himself. Tony had never slept with an omega in heat and never planned to. Frankly it was kind of disgusting, how it turned perfectly reasonable people into hysterical messes.

Pepper handed him a bottle of water and Tony dumped it over his head, gasping at the cold water. Okay. Okay, he was fine. He was okay.

He rounded on Pepper. "This is your fault! You hired an omega! This is why I only deal with betas... because they do this shit and it makes me go crazy!"

Pepper's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Fire him. Get me a new one," demanded Tony. "Don't care if it's not politically correct. I can't work with an omega. I'm not my father." His whole body was shaking. He couldn't take this. He
was having a breakdown in front of Pepper, of all people, his best friend, the one woman in the whole world he'd give anything for... and for what? Some blond he met ten days ago? Just because of how he smelled?

And how he smelled. Oh, God. Rich and ripe and velvety and luxurious and eager and willing and juicy and--

Tony threw himself at the door again. Happy grabbed him and the two crashed to the floor, limbs flailing. Tony let out a strangled yell of anger, trying to shove Happy away, trying to get past him to his omega. "Stan!" he cried, clawing towards the door, Happy trying to pin him down.

"Tony!" Pepper cried out in distress as the two men wrestled together on the floor of the plane. Pepper would have stepped in if she thought she could of done anything. But right now she would just make things worse.

Steve just groaned from the other side of the door and slammed his fist against it. The wood creaked. He knew Tony wanted to have him. And he wanted to give himself to him. He needed to. His body ached for it.

But... he couldn't. Tony couldn't join the Avengers then. How could Steve lead a man, order him around, if he'd let said man have his wicked way with him? No. No way. Steve could hear the sound of a scuffle outside but backed away to the other side of his cabin, making his scent as weak as possible as he pressed against the opposite wall.

"Tony!" Steve called out. "Tony! Don't do this! You're better than this!"

Tony gritted his teeth. Was Steve telling him what to do?

"...I told you you were uppity!" shouted Tony. He felt angry and frustrated and confused. He wanted it, but he didn't want it. And he knew Steve wanted it, but now Steve was saying he didn't want it.

How dare Steve say he didn't want it! Tony had won him, fair and square, and if Steve didn't want it, then why did he reek like desire?

Pepper knelt on the floor in front of Tony, not touching him. "Tony. Tony, listen to me. He's your assistant. He's on payroll. You don't really want him. He's just in heat. Tony, your father--"

Tony's teeth gritted. Again, this bullshit with his father and omega rights. Tony growled and thrashed.

"Tony, it's okay. It's going to be okay. Calm down," whispered Pepper.

Tony glanced up. His eyes met his green ones, and slowly, his body went limp under Happy's. "No. No, you're right," he said, panting. "I don't want him... you're right, Pepper..." Oh, God, but he did... Steve was so lithe and muscled and blonde and--

"...Pepper, pour booze into my face until I pass out," demanded Tony. "I can't deal with this. I can't. You don't know what it's like. I can..." God, this was embarrassing. She had no idea. "...I can smell him. I'm losing it. Liquor me up, will you? I can't be conscious around him, he smells..." He smelled like everything good in the world. He smelled like sunshine pouring through the window on a late, lazy morning, one where he and Steve would lie tangled and sweaty and spent on the bed together, fingers laced together, smiling silently at each other, finally satisfied. The smell was a promise. A promise of utter, complete pleasure and comfort and fulfillment. That scent was mouth-wateringly alluring and Tony ached for it. He wanted to taste
Steve.

Briefly, he wondered if he could convince Pepper and Happy to just... just let him taste. Just hold Steve. Not fuck him. Just a quick cuddle... one little lick of his back or his neck, just a *sample* ...

He let out a desperate whine at the thought and squirmed under Happy.

"I can't let you up yet, boss," said Happy.

"Thanks, Happy. ...I'm serious, Pepper, liquor me up," demanded Tony, eyes locked hungrily on the door.

Pepper's eyes were wide and her brow was knotted into a frown. Even in this proximity, a heat shouldn't be doing this to Tony...not with just an employee. Not unless Tony was actually and consciously attracted to him. No, not even then. The only thing that would explain this is if they were scent-mates, a rather rare but not unheard of situation.

"Tony. Just breathe for me. In for two and out for two, in for two..."

On his side of the door, Steve stood on shaky legs and moved to pull on a pair of boxers. He needed to gather himself up. He downed a bottle water. Then another one. He still felt hot all over. Before he knew what he was doing he was trying to open the door, and then-- shit. Steve blinked. He'd broken the door handle off. Oops? He stared down at it in his hands and then dropped it to the floor.

"JARVIS? Let me out..." He whined and pushed against the door. JARVIS said something. Steve didn't listen. He just knew it meant no. He grunted in discontent and slammed a fist against the door and the wood creaked. His Alpha was hurting. Tony was hurting. He needed Steve.

"Please..." Steve pushed against the door. "Please let me through, Jarv...."

Tony matched Pepper's breathing, trying to calm himself down. "...is it always this bad?" he asked, feeling like a child. Tony couldn't ever remember feeling this out of control. Not that he had much experience, but he was certain Jarvis never prompted quite this strong a reaction from him.

"No," said Happy and Pepper together.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, trying to focus on anything other than Steve, but it was impossible.

"Okay... maybe... follow me here..." mumbled Tony, cheek pressed into the floor of the plane. "...you know how the little sick ones don't have heats? Maybe this is the reserve. Maybe he's like... having a super-heat. I mean, he's like the Captain America of omegas."

"According to the *Enquirer*, Captain America was an omega," said Happy.

"Happy, why do you read that trash? ...you know my theory?" Tony was finding that rambling was helping him get his mind off of Steve. He was struggling to get control of himself. Supposedly, he was the third smartest man in the world... and yet near Steve he'd become a wild, feral mess.

"What's your theory, boss?" asked Happy, even though he'd heard it before.

"...there was more than one Captain. I think it was just a title. I think there were like, three or four different guys who threw on the mask and picked up the shield--"
"Tony, didn't your father know Captain America? Why didn't you just ask?" demanded Pepper.

"Well, that would've required Dad to talk to me, and he preferred to pretend I didn't exist," said Tony flippantly. Anger surged up in him again. It had always pissed him off how people, omegas in particular, worshiped Howard. Sure, he'd been smart, but he'd also been a lousy father and, near the end of his life, an abusive drunk.

From the other side of the door, Tony heard a crack and a thump.  "Rogers, you better not be breaking my plane! " he hollered, writhing under Happy. But the reminder of Steve's body, so close, separated from him by one little door... Tony was literally sweating. He'd never wanted anything more in his life. He heard another whine bubbling out of his throat and before he could help himself he was calling Steve's name again, unable to keep the desperation out of his voice. My omega, he thought, mouth watering. It was the sexiest thought he'd ever had and he couldn't get rid of it once he began thinking it. My omega... my omega...

God, the things he wanted to do to Steve. He wanted to mate him, wanted to knot him, wanted to plow him until both of them were exhausted, sweaty messes and Steve was filled with his seed... the thoughts circling through his head were ones that made Tony feel deeply uncomfortable but also ridiculously aroused... "Please..." he found himself begging. Begging. Him. Tony Stark. Even worse, he was too aroused to care.

"Tony, tell us more about your theory," said Pepper, trying to redirect him.

"I want Stan," said Tony stubbornly.

"Stan, who's breaking your plane?" prompted Pepper.

"I'll build a new plane. I want Stan," insisted Tony, his earlier anger forgotten.

Steve was edging towards feral more and more by the minute. He was flushed and pink all over and he was essentially climbing up the walls. He had one leg braced on either side of the doorway as he tried to find a weak spot on the top of the doorframe. But there was none. He just scrabbled at it uselessly. Goddamn Stark planes. Too well designed.

Then Steve felt a wave of heat through out him and his legs gave way and he landed on the floor with a loud thud. Steve groaned, both at that and the shiver that drew up his spine. He felt his boxers growing wet and his member growing hard. Steve arched up off the floor and whined loudly. He could hear them talking outside- had someone just mentioned Captain America? Ha. No way. When Tony finally found out things would be interesting, wouldn't they? He might kill Steve.

He might not forgive him.

But Steve's brain didn't let him linger on that thought as another wave rippled through his body and he cried out, curling onto his side as he pressed his clammy forehead to the cool flooring.

"JARVIS!" shrieked Tony when he heard Steve's cries on the other side of the door. The sounds Steve was making were like a wire that went directly into some very primal, primitive part of his brain. "JARVIS, open this door!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I was instructed not to," said JARVIS.

"Override!"
"Miss Potts disabled the override command."

"Well, override the override! You answer to me, not her!"

"I was informed that, for your own safety--" began JARVIS.

"Override, damn it, sierra echo foxtrot four eight eight nine!"

"JARVIS, don't you dare!" shouted Pepper. Could she gag her boss? Too late. She hadn't known Tony had a lockdown mode that was kept secret from her and she would have felt hurt if she wasn't dealing with their current crisis.

"Orders overridden, sir," said JARVIS.

"OPEN THE--"

Happy did what Pepper couldn't; he stuffed the end of his shirt into Tony's mouth. Tony let out a muffled growl, thrashing. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark," said Happy.

"Let's get him out of here, he's just torturing himself by being so close to the door," said Pepper. Happy half-dragged, half-carried Tony away; Tony was literally clawing at the ground. It wasn't the first time Pepper and Happy had manhandled Tony; he'd been fall-down drunk on plenty of occasions. But he'd never been like this. Pepper was so used to Tony being just Tony that she never thought of him as an Alpha, just like she never thought of really anyone in that sense. But there was no denying that right now, Tony and Steve weren't in their right minds.

"Tony... Tony listen to me..." she murmured as they dragged him away from Steve's room. "I know this is bad, but you have to fight it. It's worse because we're in a plane and the air is re-circulating, but once we're out, you'll feel better. You'll regret it if you do this, Tony. You need to try to get control. I know you can do it. I know you're in there."

Tony whimpered through Happy's shirt. Steve's scent wasn't as strong here and he couldn't hear Steve's cries, but the mere memory of the sounds Steve was making... Tony was hard as a rock and he would have gladly given anything at that moment to go back and continue clawing at Steve's door. *My omega... my poor omega...*

Pepper and Happy looked up at each other, still pinning Tony. Happy bit his lip, trying not to laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation.

"JARVIS, get Charlie on the intercom," demanded Pepper. Charlie was the pilot; Pepper needed to know how many more hours until they were off the plane. She was sure once Tony had a few breaths of fresh air he would calm down and go back to being himself.

JARVIS didn't respond and Pepper realized Tony's override was still in effect. JARVIS would only take orders from him until it was lifted.

The rest of the flight consisted of painfully long, stretched-out hours of holding Tony down and more of Steve pawing at the door and more thuds as he kept climbing across the cabin in desperate attempts to escape. When they were finally touching down Pepper and Happy had a plan. Pepper would get Tony back to his estate and Happy would get Steve back to his apartment and ensure everything was secure there. "Feels good to be a beta," said Happy glibly.

The moment Tony was off the plane and in fresh air, it was like a spell had been lifted. He breathed deeply, hoping they wouldn't have to talk about this. He stared out the window of the car, silently commanding Pepper not to bring it up.
"That was insane Tony," Pepper said quietly as she drove them away from the airport. "I've never seen you like that before. I've never seen anyone do that to you. That was just..." The desperation in Tony's eyes. It almost had felt real. "Do you have feelings for him?" Pepper blurted out. "Well? Do you Tony?"

"I... I don't know," said Tony, feeling confused. "I don't think so. I mean, he's my type, obviously. He's... he's blond and he's good-looking... and, you know, capable... muscular... attractive... very attractive..." Tony's mouth was starting to water again. He cut himself off. "I mean, he's... I don't know, yeah, I like him, that's why we hired him, but I don't... I didn't... I don't know what that was, okay? I don't spend a lot of time around omegas. I've never felt anything like that. It was like... like he was some sort of emotional crack."

"You lived with an omega for eighteen years! What do you mean, you don't spend a lot of time around--"

"Okay, yes, but that was different. Jarvis was never like... that. He was... you know... respectable. Steve was begging for it."

Pepper's jaw dropped. She stared at Tony incredulously. It wasn't uncommon that Alphas would attack omegas, take advantage of them, and then later, when charges were pressed, claim they couldn't help it, that they were feral, out of their minds, and that the omegas had been at fault in the first place. It was 2010 but omegas were often still treated with contempt. Pepper had always thought of herself and Tony as above that, assumed the "I lost control" argument was one of weak, impulsive Alphas who just wanted to have a good time. But there was no doubt in her mind that if she and Happy hadn't been there, Tony would have taken Steve without a moment's hesitation.

"...that's the most disgusting thing you've ever said," said Pepper softly.

"You don't understand, Pepper, you can't sense what I sense! You're a beta! The... the smell of him..." Tony gritted his teeth. Just the memory of it was arousing. Tony was pretty sure he was going to be jerking off to the memory of that smell for a long, long time. "...I don't think I have feelings... I mean... he's cute, he's fun, he's smart, he's qualified, he's proud, he's..." Tony blinked. "...okay, a small crush, maybe just... a very little, tiny, itty-bitty crush. That's all. Look, we'll fire him, we'll get a beta..."

"Are you kidding me? We can't fire him because you can't control yourself!"

"Can we fire him for taking unauthorized leave time?" asked Tony. "Because, seriously, I have a party in a few days and I can't have my assistant just ditching me. I can barely tie my shoes on my own. I need Stan around and he's gonna be home for... however long heats last, I don't know, rolling around naked and probably making an ass of himself."

"I don't think he's the one who made an ass of himself back there," said Pepper coldly.

"...Pepper, please, just lay off, will you? I nearly got killed twenty-four hours ago, I deserve a break. It just... it caught me off-guard. I swear, it won't happen again. Now that I know how bad it is, I'll be prepared, I won't... you know... react like that."

"You owe him an apology."

"I owe him an apology? He's the one who went into heat! I'm not apologizing to an omeg--" began Tony. Pepper shot him a withering glare and Tony dropped it. He felt defensive; who the
hell was she to lecture him? She had no idea how it felt, what it was like. But as much as Tony wanted to argue, he couldn't. Because he cared about Pepper. Possibly loved her. And she'd just seen him at an all-time low. He was going to have to tread lightly, at least for a couple of days, until she stopped being annoyed at him.

Tony breathed a sigh of relief when they got home and slipped off to his shop. He needed a new core on the arc reactor, and he also needed to beat off and to nap.

While Pepper had offered to take Tony, Happy was left to wrangle Steve. With some awkward coaxing, he helped Steve get dressed. He'd drunk almost all the water in his cabin over the space of the journey; Happy grabbed the last few water bottles before helping Steve to the car. Steve was panting and sweating like he'd just eaten a hot pepper.

Happy drove Steve right to his apartment block and walked him up the steps to his door. Steve was shivering all over still and flushed but the water had helped cool him down. That, and the lack of Tony. God. This had been embarrassing, hadn't it? Steve swallowed as they stepped into his apartment. It had taken him three attempts to just open the goddamn door.

"Are you sure you'll be alright in here by yourself?" Happy asked with a faint frown on his features but Steve waved off his concern.

"Yes. Really...please. Just leave me to it."

Happy shrugged as Steve slammed the door in his face, and went back to his car to return to his proper employer, Tony.

When he arrived at Tony's mansion, however, Tony himself was nowhere to be found, and according to JARVIS, he was in his shop and did not want to be bothered, not even if the house was on fire.

Tony's need for privacy was a legitimate one. With shaking hands, he eased out the arc reactor. The core was a repulsive mess of corroded metal and foul-smelling, inorganic discharge. It was almost enough to make him sick. The bruising on his veins was prominent and painful. He checked his blood toxicity: 67%. He no longer felt like masturbating. He told JARVIS to throw on some music and flopped onto one of the couches in the basement, falling asleep almost immediately to disjointed, arousing, dark dreams of Steve.

"Are you sure you don't want me to send someone round?" Natasha asked for the millionth time. Steve was in a lull, the heat would start up again soon but right now he could think normally. Or at least, normally enough to have a conversation over the phone.

"Yes Nat," Steve sighed from where he was draped over his sofa, lazily flicking through to channels. "Only one more day now. I've got this."

It had been hell though. A burning kind of hell. Nothing would satisfy him because nothing he could do or simulate was a real Alpha-- was Tony. "You gonna try and talk to Stark about your feelings, hm? 'Cus there's obviously something there."

Steve rolled his eyes. "He doesn't even know who I am Nat. I'm not playing with him like that. You know he doesn't even think I exist, right? Thinks Cap was engineered by a load of guys running around in the same suit and shield."
Natasha sighed on the other end of the line. "Oh--" Her train of thought switched tracks. "Clint offered his condolences. Says he knows how shitty this can be."

"Well...tell him thank you, then," Steve said quietly. Then he felt a wave shudder through him and he groaned. "Fuck. Nat. Gotta go."

"Don't forget to finish your report!"

His report. Ha. As if Tony would even want to see him again. As if he could just waltz back into Stark's life after that fiasco and act like everything between them was normal.

Well. No one ever said being undercover was easy. Steve hung up on Natasha to clutch his cramping middle and roll around groaning, and at least for a while, his mind wasn't on Stark's upcoming party or Stark's recent near-death experience or Stark's awful fucking attitude, but on his smell, the color of his eyes, and the allure of him as an Alpha.
Tony spent the next few days puttering around the shop and floating after Pepper, listening with dread as she gave statements to nearly every news outlet he'd ever heard of, reassuring and arguing and explaining and mitigating. Steve's absence was overbearingy noticeable; Tony realized he'd gotten used to the blond trailing him. Occasionally, he turned to make a demand only to remember Steve wasn't there.

Tony tried to be on his best behavior for Pepper. Neither of them mentioned the reason why Steve was absent, but Tony thought about it constantly. It was like a song that was stuck in his head, playing over and over. He found himself wondering what Steve was doing with alarming frequency. Was he naked? Hard? Wet? Was he thinking of Tony, or did he not care? Steve wasn't pair-bonded. He could seek relief from any Alpha at all. But Tony had an inkling that Steve wasn't that kind of guy. He was willing to bet that Steve would suffer proudly through his heat without any Alpha intervention at all. The idea of him writhing around in his bed somewhere, palming himself, seeking relief that he couldn't get, was strangely arousing to Tony.

Five days after Monaco, Steve appeared at the Los Angeles headquarters of Stark Industries. He was on time. He was dressed impeccably, not a hair out of place. He was carrying two coffees, one double espresso for Tony and one cinnamon skinny latte for Pepper.

His heat had lasted only four days and left him feeling wrung out. He was not one to shirk work; he came in despite still being in post-heat and feeling as weak as a kitten.

Pepper was on the phone as he passed her office but gave him a warm smile as she took the coffee off of him.

Steve paused outside of Tony's office. Okay. Let the awkwardness commence. He let out a long breath and opened the door. Steve set the coffee down on Tony's desk, and then his tablet. Just like he always did.

"98% of your guests have RSVP'd, 90% are coming. Music is sorted. Food is sorted. You have an appointment with the tailor tonight for a new suit-" Steve paused a moment to catch his breath. "And I booked Justin Hammer in for the 14th of June. 2089."

Tony had not expected Steve to come back; thankfully, he was busy when Steve appeared. He heard him first, and could smell the faint after-smell of his heat, but his eyes and hands and mind were focused on the circuit board in front of him. He was wearing torn jeans and a wifebeater; he'd woken to a terrible, burning throb in his chest and retired to his shop as quickly as possible to check his blood toxicity. Vanko's words floated up again: ...painful way to die.

He was still hiding it from Pepper. She was not thrilled with his appearance in the office but Tony had to work on the RT node; besides, he pointed out to her several times, no one on conference calls could see what he was wearing.
Steve didn't mention what had happened; Tony took his cue and did the same. "Thanks, Sparky," he said, eyes still fixed on his circuit board, trying to move a chip aside with a pair of tweezers. "Is DJ AM still on board to mix? Did you get the tigers? I wanted two, but if you can only get one, that's fine, too." He paused, sticking his tongue out as he delicately connected a resistor. "..oh, and cancel the Expo for the year 2089."

...ah. This was better. They were joking around; everything was normal; what happened on the plane was staying on the plane. Tony felt a surge of gratitude toward Steve. "Uh, Rogers? Thanks," he said again, reaching for his coffee. He wasn't really thanking him for the coffee, but that was fine.

It struck Tony suddenly that Pepper might be onto something. Maybe he did have feelings for Steve. But that was impossible. Steve was an omega. Tony didn't really run with omegas. He felt it was sort of pathetic and old-fashioned, Alphas and omegas, pair-bonding. He'd once told Pepper that and she'd laughed.

"It's not marriage, Tony. You can't call instincts old-fashioned. Pair-bonding just... happens."

"It's so stupid," said Tony.

"Wasn't your father pair-bonded?"

Tony had felt acutely offended by the mere suggestion. "...no. I mean, I don't know, I don't think so. I mean-- I doubt it. My old man wasn't like that."

"Can't you smell if someone is bonded?"

"I just never noticed."

"What about Jarvis?"

Tony's hackles had risen. ".. my dad was married."

"Married to a beta. He could have been pair-bonded to Jarvis. You know how close they were."

"Jarvis was married, too."

"...to another omega. I doubt either of them would have considered it weird, especially for that generation," said Pepper casually.

"Jarvis never had kids."

"Just because he didn't have kids doesn't mean he and your father didn't bond."

Tony had dropped it. The idea of Jarvis and his father being pair-bonded disgusted him. As far as he was concerned, Jarvis was just the help, a loyal butler who occasionally had to take a few personal days to cope with his heats. He didn't like thinking of him as an omega or considering that his fidelity had anything to do with some other relationship with Howard.

But, as Pepper had pointed out, that was ancient history, a generation ago. Nowadays, omegas didn't have to bond, didn't have to mate. They could, like Steve, lock themselves up and try to preserve their dignity. And Tony had every intention of letting Steve keep his because the last thing in the world he wanted to do right now was examine his feelings about Steve, which were all muddled up with his feelings about Pepper and his feelings about his mortality.
"Cancel the tailor," added Tony. The last thing he needed was someone prodding at his torso. His chest and neck felt sore, stiff, tender. The poison is his blood was leaving dark streaks across his skin. Tony felt it was better to keep that under wraps; a tailor would definitely notice and although Tony liked and trusted his tailor, you couldn't be too careful. His little problem was, so far, a secret, and Tony wanted to keep it that way. He was coping through intense denial and that was working out pretty well so far.

"Got it," Steve said softly and perhaps lingered in the doorway a moment longer than he needed to. He swallowed and then tried for a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. "It's no problem, Tony."

Steve was basically working nonstop until the party after that. He and Tony avoided each other, not so subtly, but no one brought it up either. Steve threw himself into his work and Tony holed himself up in either his office or, at home, in his shop. Steve managed to finish up his Avengers report and sent it to Fury the very evening of the party. His time with Stark industries was coming to an end, and he had to admit that he would be sad to go after everything. He would miss Pepper and Happy.

He'd miss Tony too.

The night of the party, Pepper wouldn't be attending. And Steve wasn't expected to either, technically. But Pepper had asked him to keep an eye on Tony, though she assured him that one of Tony's old friends, Rhodey, would be there to ensure things didn't get too wild. She informed Steve he could leave after Rhodey arrived and that he wouldn't want to be there after midnight anyway. Stark parties got legendarily out of control and Tony would be insufferably demanding. Besides, he'd be too drunk to even remember if his PA was there or not.

Steve dressed plainly in black dress pants and a crisp white shirt, not wanting to look too formal in a party atmosphere. He knew Tony was already drinking too much but was also mostly powerless to stop him. It was the guy’s birthday, after all.

There was no "start" time. People simply began filtering into Tony's home and, by the time the sun had set, it was a full house.

"Tony," Steve sighed as he appeared before the other, surrounded by women and various other famous and beautiful people Steve should recognise but didn't. "Remember what Pepper said."

Tony slung an arm around Steve's shoulders. It was the first time they'd touched since Monaco; Tony was tipsy and when he was buzzed, he always got a little more touchy-feely.

"Stan, Stan, Stan," he said, shaking his head. "Haven't you ever heard the phrase: *Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die?* I think that's the phrase, anyway. Go have a drink, be merry, schmooze a little, it's a *party*, Stan!" He suppressed a hiccup and then suddenly blurted, "You didn't hook up with anyone, did you? ...on your, uh... personal time? Because if you get knocked up, we're gonna have a problem, Stan. This house is definitely not child-proofed."

Across the room, someone dropped a glass. There was a shattering sound followed by laughter.

"See?" said Tony, gesturing with a grin. "No, wait! I think the phrase is... *eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we dine in hell.* Is that it? That sounds right. ...no, but seriously, you didn't hook up with anyone, right, because I kind of, you know, won you... from Justin... not that I'm saying anyone owns you, because, you know, omega rights and blah blah blah..."

A slender woman in a backless red dress passed by them holding a martini. Tony plucked it from her hand, grinned devilishly, and slid a hand down her spine. She giggled and pressed a kiss on his
cheek, leaving a smudge of red lipstick. "Happy birthday, Mr. Stark."

"Thank you very much... uhh... I wanna say... Samantha?" he guessed.

"Morgan," she said.

"Right, right, Morgan! Morgan, this is Stan, he's my new PA... I know, not as cute as Pepper, but damn, look at these guns, huh?" he said, giving Steve's arm a squeeze. "He's gonna put Stark Industries out of business, am I right? Here's your drink back, babe--" He handed her the empty martini glass. "--make sure you say hi to Rima for me, she's here too... Rima won the title this year--" he informed Steve. His words were slurring just the slightest bit; he didn't specify which title. "--not that I'm saying I won you, obviously, you can't win a person, that's not what I'm saying--" Tony's mind was a three-ring circus, capable of thinking multiple things at once; he had bounced back to the previous topic but a moment later he was rubbing shoulders with another woman in impossibly high heels and impossibly blonde hair.

"Julie! Hey, so good to see you, you look great! This is Stan, my personal omega--assistant, I mean, personal assistant, Stan, this is Julie, she's an ex--" He plucked the drink from her hand. "How's life treating you, sweetheart, do you miss me yet?"

"Every day, Tony," she teased, kissing his cheek, leaving another mark on his skin. "Are you going to suit up later? Jenny and I were hoping Iron Man would put in an appearance..."

"Who am I to deny the people what they want?" said Tony happily. "Didja see me take down that asshole in Monaco, Jules? Iron Man is like the Highlander, there can be only one. ...that's the Highlander, right? That there's only one of? Jules, this is Stan--"

"You just introduced us. He's your personal... assistant," said Julie, eyes flickering to Steve.

"Oh, great, then we're all pals!" exclaimed Tony with delight. "That was easy, great, I love it when things are easy. Here's your drink back." Tony handed her an empty glass. "If you'll excuse me, I think I see Chloe over there... hey, Stan, I'm starving, grab me a drink?"

Tony had a trail of beautiful women in his life. Steve didn't know why he'd kindled that flicker of hope that maybe--maybe--that moment in his heat was more than biology. Tony was possessive, he was an Alpha. He liked showing off pretty things. But that was about where it ended. At least, for him and Steve evidently. Steve didn't want to be upset by it. It was ridiculous. But having a drunk Tony going through a load of gorgeous women who all looked at him like competition, or something. It didn't put Steve in a good mood.

Natasha always said he was oversensitive. Warned him he needed to get a grip on controlling his feelings. Ha.

But Tony talking about winning him? Yeah. That pissed Steve off.

Steve ducked out of Tony's hold, suddenly wanting to be anywhere but this goddamn party. "I can't have children, Tony, so you have absolutely nothing to worry about," he assured him and then turned on his heel and left. Tony could get his own drink. God knows he'd had enough already. He just searched for a balcony. He wanted some fresh air.

Steve slithered off through the crowd, leaving Tony alone in the middle of pounding music and colored lights and warm bodies. Tony was surprised at how utterly alone he felt. He was in his own home, surrounded by the most beautiful, rich, intelligent, powerful, and influential people in the world... and yet, he felt nothing.
Maybe because none of them were really his friends. Tony could count his friends on one hand, and he hadn't seen any of them, unless you counted Steve.

Did he count Steve?

He shouldered through the crowd; someone handed him a scotch and he accepted it gratefully. He found Steve outside on the pool deck. The pool was backlit with blue lights and the water made the glow shift. It reminded Tony of his arc reactor. Right on cue, he felt a pang in his chest, and he hissed, waiting for it to pass.

He walked up behind Steve, the music thumping behind him. Steve looked annoyed. Tony wasn't sure why. He sipped his scotch to stall for time.

What did Steve mean, I can't have children? Did that mean he had let some other Alpha take him, and he was reassuring Tony that he had nothing to worry about?


"...you know, it's weird that we celebrate birthdays. Every year we're just... closer to... you know. You ever... ever think about that?" asked Tony, looking up at the sky. The light pollution in Malibu made most of the constellations invisible, but over the ocean, some stars were out. In the distance, freighters moved slowly, small specks of light in the dark water. It was impossible to tell where the line between sea and sky was in the dark. Far below them, waves crashed against the cliffs, their sound almost drowned out by the loud electronic music floating in from the mansion.

"...like... Stan... if it were, you know, your very last year alive, hypothetically, and you knew that... would you do anything different? Everyone says they would. But I wouldn't. I like to think I would but I wouldn't, I'd do the same shallow bullshit..."

Tony looked over his shoulder at the party. Somehow, it was going on without him. It was his birthday, his party. But he wasn't there and everyone was still laughing, drinking, dancing, joking. He wasn't the center of the universe. He wasn't anything. Cosmically, he was... insignificant. Did that make his impending death better, or worse? Tony couldn't tell. His heart was pounding. His mouth was dry.

He reached up to rub his neck but it ached and he knew without looking that the bruising of his veins had crawled up his neck, might even be peeking out from his collar.

"Yeah, I wouldn't do anything different. I love my life," he insisted. "...no regrets..." He stared at Steve. Steve was staring out over the ocean, his face stony. Tony caught a hint of Steve's afterheat and his knees felt weak suddenly. Steve smelled delicious. And Tony would never get to have him because he was dying. His neck was so stiff he couldn't see straight. His chest was on fire. The alcohol helped numb it but what was the use in numbing it? His blood toxicity was up to the eighties... this was his very last birthday alive and he'd somehow managed to piss off one of the only people in the world he gave a shit about... and, realistically, Steve probably didn't care about him...

"I think it's better to regret doing something than not," Steve offered quietly. He wasn't really sure why Tony had come out here to talk to him. He hadn't thought the man would spare him a second thought at his own party. Tony was supposed to be having fun. And even Steve could admit he wasn't the funnest person around. Especially in this century.

Tony wasn't listening to Steve's answer. His mind was elsewhere. Palladium in the chest.

Painful way to die.
Tony promptly leaned over the railing and vomited. "...oh, shit! That was... unexpected. Wow. Okay," gasped Tony, heaving. "Sorry, I... I had a few drinks... actually, I feel a lot better now... I'm ready for Round 2..." He shook himself out, a cold sweat breaking out over his skin. "...wouldn't be a party if I wasn't getting palladium poisoning! I mean alcohol poisoning. Sorry, alcohol poisoning. ...are you mad at me, Stan? Come on, don't be mad, you can make it my birthday present."

**Palladium poisoning...?**

Steve sighed and was about to say something more when Tony was throwing up and saying shit that didn't make sense. Steve frowned. "I'm not mad at you." A lie. "Okay, maybe I am, but it's fine," Steve said and promptly moved to pick Tony up bridal style before the man could protest like he weighed of nothing more than a feather.

Tony let out a noise of surprise when Steve picked him up. Holy hell, the guy was strong. There was something hilarious about Steve, an omega, carrying Tony, an Alpha, and Tony found himself giggling hysterically as Steve marched him up the stairs, clinging to Steve's shirt and laughing into his chest, huffing his scent happily.

Steve made to take the stairs around the back entrance up to his bedroom. "You're done, Tony. You're going to make yourself sick. For real."

Steve set Tony down on his bed and then quickly went to fetch the man a glass of water. As he did he sent a text to Fury: **Palladium poisoning?** He returned to a very drunk Tony sprawled out in bed. After setting the glass down he moved to sit Tony up in bed, a pillow cushioning his back and then Steve pressed the glass back into his hand. "Drink."

Tony looked up at Steve; the room wobbled and swayed, and Tony was aware that he was very, very drunk. He accepted the glass from Steve and drank deeply, then handed it back, grinning broadly. "Gross. What was that, water? I thought it was vodka," he joked. "Okay, take me back downstairs... I feel fine, Rogers, come on. I'm missing my own party..." He put his arms out. "Come on, carry me! ...Stan, I'm serious, I feel fine now. I wanna keep partying; it's my birthday. My fortieth one, Stan, that's a big one." He rubbed his chest, breathing out deeply. It was still burning but the alcohol helped. Tony could feel the music pulsing up from the floor below them. "You said yourself, Stan, it's better to regret doing something than not, right?"

Steve's phone chimed and Tony watched him with undisguised curiosity. Who the hell was texting Steve? Everyone important was at Tony's party, downstairs.

Unless...

"Stan? Did you... I gotta know... did you shack up with anyone? While you were in heat?" asked Tony. "...is that an Alpha? ...you just went home, right? You're one of those strong, progressive omegas who doesn't have an Alpha, right? ...right? ...Stan, who is that?"

"You're going to be sick if I take you back down there," Steve said seriously. Drunk Tony was surprisingly passive. Way more needy, and annoying. But less of the bullshit. "And you don't want all your guests to see you like this. You'll do something stupid, Tony, and then Pepper will kill me." He was only half joking. The surprise heat didn't put Steve in anyone's favour right now, really.

Fury's reply was short when Steve glanced at it.

> Will get back to you.
So helpful, as always.

"No," Steve sighed, hating himself a little for answering and caring that Tony cared. "I suffered alone. Is that what you wanna hear? Jesus, Tony. It's really none of your goddamn business." And it wasn't, but Steve was telling him anyway. "I don't have anyone. I won't be getting 'knocked up'. Don't you worry."

Tony relaxed. Even though Steve sounded pissed off, the words he said washed over Tony like a breath of fresh air.

No other Alphas. No competition. He'd "suffered alone," as he put it.

Tony had never seen an omega in heat, not directly, and he wondered how bad it was.

"I thought you said it was better to have regrets than not," challenged Tony, grinning triumphantly at Steve. "Oh, c'mon, please, Stan, I gotta go back now, I haven't even said hi to Rhodey yet... they want Iron Man, c'mon, I won't drink anymore, I promise, it's my birthday, Stan... I won't do anything stupid, come on, my IQ is over two hundred, I don't even know the word 'stupid.' Stan, c'mon, it's my party! Can I lick your neck?"

"We both know if you go back down there you're going to get shit-faced," Steve said bluntly and raised a brow at him. And then he blinked as he processed Tony's last words. "No licking," he told him flatly. "You're my boss." With that he went to fetch him another glass of water. "Drink," he said again as he handed it back again. "If you sober up more you can back downstairs," Steve told him. "But like this...with you asking to lick me, you're not going anywhere. And you'll thank me for it tomorrow."

Tony downed the glass of water and passed it to Steve. "Okay, okay, I'm sober now, can I go?" he demanded, rolling out of bed without waiting for Steve's response. He stumbled, nearly fell, then caught himself.

He spread his arms with a look of smug triumph. "Ta-da! Sober as a judge! Would you let me lick you if I wasn't your boss? If I fired you, right now, would you feel more comfortable?"

"There is nothing comfortable about you Tony," Steve said, although his tone wasn't critical...but Stark had this way of surprising him. Keeping him on his feet. He didn't know quite how to describe it. But Steve honestly quite liked being dragged out of his comfort zone now and then.

Tony swaggered toward the door, rubbing his neck stiffly. He was becoming obsessed with checking his blood toxicity. He wanted to check it again before putting on the suit. But it wasn't like he was going to do any heavy lifting. He just wanted to strut around for a bit. People loved the suit; they loved Iron Man.

And Tony, who had spent the first several decades of his life struggling to get the approval of Alphas more powerful than him-- first his father, then Stane-- soaked up the positive attention like a sponge. Being Iron Man was worth dying for because people finally loved him, approved of him. It filled a hole in his heart. Tony found himself laughing at the irony. Now he had an actual hole in there; his sternum had been obliterated; the skin around the arc reactor was melted into raised, pink, waxy swirls; he was a mess, a beautiful mess, a tragic masterpiece. He wanted to go out with a bang. He wanted everyone to remember him as he was tonight, happy, powerful, magnificent. No one knew it except him, but this wasn't a birthday. It was an Irish wake. The last party of his life.

"Stan, come on, come dance with me!" shouted Tony, bolting for the stairs gleefully. The main
staircase was an elegant curl; everyone cheered when they saw him descending and he flung his arms out. *Look at me. I'm Tony goddamn Stark,* he thought, beaming at them. His friends. So many friends he couldn't name them, didn't even know them all.

Pepper wasn't here. Happy wasn't, either. But hey, who needed them when he had all of these friends? "How are you liking world peace so far?" he hollered, and the crowd roared with delight. Tony was sucked into a crowd of bodies, people shaking his hand and handing him drinks (Tony hated people touching his hands, hated being handed things), people touching him, congratulating him, wishing him happy birthday and many more (ha ha, the irony!), women kissing his cheeks and lips and cooing over him. Tony basked in the attention, practically high from it.

Yes. This was it... the perfect conclusion to his life story. The perfect, final chapter.

He made his way toward the stairs to the basement, toward his shop. People wanted Iron Man and Tony was more than happy to oblige.

Steve had thought he'd be able to keep Tony from running off, but he was sorely mistaken. Shit. He'd made his way toward the stairs and before Steve could stop him, he'd already announced himself to the crowd, who had roared in approval, and then been sucked into it and disappeared.

Steve couldn't let him put the suit on. But how could he stop him? Then he spotted Rhodey stepping in through one of the entrance doors and he sucked in a breath. Yes.

Steve rushed over to Rhodey's side, pushing past the throes of drunk people. "Rhodey!" He called out the get the man's attention. An Alpha in the army. He was disciplined and respectful. Steve had worked with many like him, back, in the day. He found Rhodey's presence oddly calming, though he never got to see him much.

"Tony's going to put on one of his suits," Steve said as he finally stopped before the man. "But he's drunk out of his mind. Please. You have to stop him before he hurts himself." Or someone else, but that was left unsaid.

"Stan," said Rhodey with surprise. For a split second, his eyes darted over Steve's body; the aftereffects of Steve's heat were noticeable. But he wrestled his instincts under control almost instantly and put out a hand to shake Steve's, listening intently to what Steve was saying and nodding, his expression grim.

"Are you sure?" he asked, not wanting to overreact just yet. But his question was answered a split second later to a cheer from the crowd across the room, a cheer that could only mean one thing.

Rhodey's jaw tightened. "Okay. Listen." He stepped to the side, leaning in to speak to Steve. "Go get a mike from the DJ, thank everyone for coming, and shut it down. He won't come out of the suit while all these idiots are cheering him on."

The DJ had just started playing an electronic mix of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man." A beautiful, very clearly inebriated blond fell onto Steve and grabbed his shoulders for support. She giggled maniacally. "Hi, sorry!"

"Jesus, it's always blonds," muttered Rhodey under his breath. He caught Steve's eye. "...sorry," he added with a shrug. "Go, go shut it down, hurry..."

"Hey there, Stephanie. Just take a seat for me..." Steve remembered her name. Another ex. She was very drunk, bless her. He carefully lead her down into one of the sofas to take a seat and looked over at Rhodey and offered him a nod as the other disappeared after Tony.
Steve left Stephanie giggling on the sofa and turned to make his way toward the DJ. He'd simply announce that the party was over and then let Rhodey handle Tony's ire at cutting the party short.

"He'll fuck you and chuck you, you know."

Steve blinked in surprise as Morgan appeared beside him and curled a hand over his forearm.

"You haven't slept with him yet." Morgan smiled at him goofily. She was drunk. But she looked sad, too. "But you will," she laughed. It was an empty sound. "You'll think you're different..." Then Morgan leant in a fraction, breath hot against Steve's cheek. "But you're not."

She pulled away suddenly.

Steve almost flinched at her words and watched her saunter out of the door with wide eyes. He really didn't know what to say to that. But he had more important things to handle. Like terminating the party before it turned dangerous.

He pushed his way through the crowd toward the DJ and politely asked for the mic. "Hi everyone-..." he began. He didn't get any further. Tony appeared at his side in a full suit of armor and cheerfully took the microphone without a hint of discomfort.

Pepper had once said that handing Tony a microphone was like handing a bag of candy and a puppy to a child. She was not entirely mistaken.

Tony leaned over the DJ table in his suit, face plate down, addressing the crowd with a sort of casual smugness that was only validated by how entranced they all were by him.

"...forty years, wow... how time flies when you're having fun, am I right? ...let's hear it for DJ AM... thanks, Goldstein, you're a doll... I just want to tell all of you that I love you, you're all amazing, look at you... I look out and I see a crowd of beautiful people... and also Rhodey... ha, ha, no, I'm kidding, he's gorgeous too... isn't he gorgeous, everyone? ...you know, I like to think that this is exactly what my dad would have wanted, right here... men, women, whites, blacks, Alphas, omegas, all mingling together, all enjoying themselves... are we enjoying ourselves? Are we having fun, guys?" Everyone cheered affirmatively. Someone handed Tony a drink; he took it with surprising delicacy in his metal gauntlet and sipped it, the mic still in his other hand.

"HOW DO YOU PEE IN THE SUIT?" yelled someone suddenly. The crowd burst into laughter.

Tony laughed with them and pointed to the crowd.

"Excellent question... who asked that... ahh, Kevin, I should've known! ...you know, you're not the first person to ask that. And the question is quite simple." He paused. Everyone stared at him, waiting for the answer. "...ta-da," said Tony finally.

The crowd erupted in laughter. Suddenly, there was Steve, grabbing for the microphone. Tony slung an arm around him. The metal was icy on Steve's skin, and impossibly heavy.

"Hey, hey, hey, look, everyone, look, this is Stan... Stan's my PA, isn't he something, look at him... he looks just like Captain America, right! 'Cept, y'know, omega. He won't let me lick him, though--"

"I'LL LET YOU LICK ME!" yelled someone.

Tony pointed into the crowd. "Thank you, thank you! ...who said that? Oh, she's cute, hi there... thanks for coming, someone get her digits for me... okay, calm down, Stan, everyone, here's Stan, round of applause for Stan!"
Everyone cheered, until Steve took the microphone, thanked them for coming, and asked them to leave. The crowd grumbled and booed unhappily; Steve apologized as the DJ began packing up; Tony took the microphone back from Steve.

"Aww... sorry everyone, sorry... Stan's right, the party's over... all good things must come to an end..." said Tony in the mic, as the crowd protested. "No, I'm sorry, he's right, this party's over... I've been over it for like, an hour..." He flashed a grin. "...but the after-party is just beginning!"

The crowd erupted into delighted screams.

"Yes, that's right, we're gonna keep it going! All... night... long!" shouted Tony, tossing his empty drink in the air and shooting it. The crowd went nuts. It was like the Expo, but smaller, more exclusive, and Tony was giddy with happiness.

Suddenly the crowd went quiet and it took Tony a moment to realize why. Then he spotted him. In a full suit, Rhodey was standing there, back straight, jaw set, fists clenched.

"Everyone out," said Rhodey in a low voice.

There was a frantic but surprisingly quiet stampede for the door.

Tony stared at Rhodey, still processing what he was seeing.

"Tony. Take the suit off," growled Rhodey.

"Or what? You're gonna make me?" demanded Tony, his face breaking into a grin. "No, that's cute, really, Rhodey... but you shouldn't try on other people's clothes without asking, it's rude... careful with that reactor, by the way, that thing'll burn you... it looks good on you, I gotta admit... is it weird that I think you're kinda cute in the suit?"

"Tony. I'm serious. The party is over. Shut it down."

"Make me!" said Tony, suppressing a giggle.

Rhodey reached up and pulled the face plate down. Tony couldn't believe it. Was Rhodey threatening him? In one of his own suits?

"...Goldstein," said Tony, trying not to laugh. He failed, sniggering. "Can you... can you throw on a sick beat for me, something I can kick my buddy's ass to?"

The DJ had ducked under the table, but he blurted a "Yes, Mr. Stark," and one of his hands snaked up to find an appropriate song.

"...thanks, buddy, you're the best," said Tony. "You're my second-favorite omega here. Seriously, I love you."

Rhodey walked over, his steps heavy, arms out.

Tony took a swing the moment that Rhodey was within range. He was too drunk and had grossly over-estimated the punch; he actually staggered past Rhodey. Rhodey took the opportunity to throw an arm around Tony's shoulders from behind. "I said, shut. It. Down!" he growled, holding the other.

Tony paused, then threw his palms out and hit the jets, throwing both of them backwards and through a wall, nearly annihilating the DJ, who scrambled out of the way just in time. His
computer went skittering across the floor, still playing Queen.

The party-goers, who had been intent on leaving, didn't make it farther than the driveway. Seeing Iron Man blast himself and another armored mech suit through a wall was too exciting. They stood around sipping drinks, staring with unabashed fascination at the fight that was starting.

Oh lord. Pepper was going to kill him. And then bring him back to life. And then kill him again. Steve's throat went dry. This was a disaster. This was the worst it could have possibly gone. His phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Fury.

> Serious. Potentially fatal. Solution on its way .

What did that text even mean? Did that mean Tony was...dying?

And then suddenly it all made sense. It all clicked. The attitudes. The recklessness. The goddamn smoothies. It all made perfect sense.

Before Steve knew what he was doing he was standing between two Iron Man suits, with dozens, if not hundreds, of party guests gaping at them through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the front of the house. Steve held up his hands. "Tony. Tony, don't do that again," he said slowly, carefully. Every word measured and precise. "Please. Just get out of the suit. Please, I'm begging you."

Rhodey took a step forward. "Else I'll-" Steve held up a hand to him.

"Don't fight. Not here." And there he was. An omega bossing two Alphas around. The essence of the Avengers Initiative right there. Jeez. Tony would never follow his orders...would he?

"Tony-" Steve turned back to face him. "Come on. They've seen enough. Don't upset Pepper. You're better than this."

Steve was almost surprised to find he truly meant those words.

Tony stared at Steve, then glanced up at Rhodey.

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Logic was telling him to step down gracefully, to listen to Steve, who was making sense. Who had an excellent point about not upsetting Pepper. Who had a good head on his shoulders and who was one of the only people in the room who wasn't drunk or high or some combination of the two.

Logic was telling him that he would only ruin his own home and make an ass of himself in front of everyone if he insisted on fighting Rhodes.

But instinct was telling him that Steve was his. And that Rhodey was a threat. And that maybe, just maybe, this was why Steve didn't want him. Maybe he hadn't proven himself yet. Or maybe Rhodes was encroaching on what was rightfully his. Rhodey was, after all, a much more dominant Alpha than he. And Rhodey was, like Tony, unbonded. Competition.

And Steve's last words, that Tony was a good person ... Tony felt a lump in his throat, felt a rush of affection for the man. And with it, an intense desire to protect him, guard him, take him, possess him.

Rhodey looked at Steve, then at Tony. His stomach turned. He knew that look of aggression. In an instant, he took several steps back and held his hands up. "I don't want him, Tony. He's yours."
Tony put up his hands, too. He didn't hear Rhodey's words, just saw the hands go up, a small, glowing RT node in each palm. Two repulsors. Each with the power of a small jet engine.

"You gonna shoot?" he demanded, throwing his own hands up and charging them.

"What? No! No, put your hands down."

"These suits are mine. You don't have what it takes. That's my suit. My omega. Back off."

"I'm not goddamn anyone's!" Steve cried out but neither of them had been listening. Neither of them cared. Typical. Fucking unbonded Alphas, in an Alpha pissing contest.

"Tony, stop it," implored Rhodey. "You're drunk. You don't have to do this, man, come on."

"Come on. Try me. Try me. Take your shot!" challenged Tony, bristling.

"Put it down!"

"Come on, Tony, drop it!"

"Shoot me! Take it!

Steve couldn't say which sense was tripped next. There was heat, there was sound, there was light. For a split second the room was lit up in a halo of light, the only sound was the roar of two repulsors going off at once, the hair-singing heat of the explosion. Steve, Tony, and Rhodey were all thrown back. Rhodey smashed into a glass case; Tony slammed into a wall; Steve's shoulder caught a sofa and he was flung against a window that broke on impact.

The world paused for a moment as dust filled the room. The party's guests all stood stock-still, some covered in dust, looking like statues except for their wide, white eyes.

Across the room, there was the sound of rocks tumbling, a flash of silver, and Rhodey rose unsteadily to his feet, coughing.

Another shift of rubble and a bright, metallic-red suit climbed up, Tony coughing as well.

The two of them stared at each other. The crowd stared at them. Tony took one small, stumbling step back and caught himself.

Rhodey raised a palm. "...shut it down, Tony."

"JARVIS?" came Tony's voice from within the suit. "Shut it down."

"...weapons system deactivated," JARVIS replied.

"...you happy?"

"No," said Rhodey. "Are you?"

"No."

Rhodey stood over him for a pregnant moment. "When you get your head screwed on straight, call me." With that, Rhodes turned and with a few heavy, clunking steps, stumbled out of a shattered window into the night. The crowd in the driveway parted for him. There was the loud roar of an engine and then a streak of light across the sky. The jets on the suit moved north-east, a shooting star in the velvet-dark sky.
Tony stood there for a moment, staring after him. Without any further commentary, Tony turned, marched out of the back of the room toward the nearest balcony, and dropped off of it. The gasp from the crowd was swallowed by the roar of his jets, and the suit shot into the sky, turned sharply, and headed due east.

As the sound of the suits' jets faded into the night, a thick silence settled over the remains of the demolished central room. The party guests, huddled in the driveway and on the edges of the devastation, didn't dare move.

Suddenly, in the quiet aftermath of the drama, there was a shifting of rubble and a single voice spoke up. It was the DJ, shoving a coffee table off of his head. He gave Steve a look of alarm, and said, with horror, "...I think they broke my computer."

"We'll replace your goddamn computer. Send us the bill," Steve huffed and moved towards the center of the room. Where the hell had they gone? Fuck.

Steve turned. The party guests were still gawking. "...go home!" barked Steve. "Party's over!"

Finally, the guests began to move. Steve sagged against a sofa for a brief second of relief and shuddered. "Fuck..." Steve just had a few bruises and the odd cut from broken glass, but it would heal rapidly. It always did. Steve's vision swam a little and he blinked, rubbing at his temple till it began to settle down.

Steve didn't know what to do. The ringing of his phone startled him back into reality. Steve frowned and answered it. "General Fury, now really isn't a good time..."

"No, I kind of assumed that. I just got a call from the Department of Defense that there's been an explosion in Malibu. I'm guessing that was you," said Fury, sounding irritated. "You need to go track him down. We just had our med staff run some numbers. We can alleviate his symptoms, temporarily, but in the long run, if he doesn't fix that thing in his chest..." He let the words linger. "You need to go find him. I've got Agents Romanoff, Barton, and Coulson with me; we're on our way now. With treatment, he's got maybe two weeks. Maybe less, if he's using the suits. Text me his location once you find him and we'll be there to secure the perimeter."

Fury hung up.

A drunk girl in a short pink dress flopped onto the ruined couch next to Steve, hiccuping, her mascara smeared under her eyes. "This is just like last year," she said with a sob. "Only, last year, instead of a fight, me and Tony and Regan and Mercedes went upstairs... but then he left to get donuts at Winchell's the next morning... he doesn't care after he fucks you. His assistant escorted us out and everything. It was so embarrassing." A few tears slid down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I'm drunk and emotional... I just... I wish he'd fight over me like that... you're so lucky... it's because you're an omega. It's not fair. I'm, like, his biggest fan."

A second woman dropped onto the couch next to her. "Oh my God, Annie, you are trashed," she slurred. "...there's a big, um, rock on our car."

"Oh, nooo...." said Annie. "This is just like last year... except instead of ruining the car, remember, you and me and Mercedes--"

"Oh my God! And he went and got breakfast without us and just left a note? That was sooo awkward!"

The two of them collapsed against each other, weeping.
"Send us a bill for the... rock," Steve finished awkwardly and stood. "And I'm sorry- Tony can be a jerk." The girl actually laughed a little through her tears at that, throwing her head back as she did so. For some strange reason that made Steve feel a whole lot better.

Winchell's? Steve knew where that was, sort of. Google could do the rest. There was no way he could track down a flying suit properly but maybe he would luck out. He texted Fury the address and then hit JARVIS up on his phone. The AI said Rhodey seemed to actually be heading to his own home, where as Tony's flight pattern was making about zero sense. Steve sighed, moving to go get his bike from the garage. His one luxury purchase in the twenty-first century.

Steve's head was swimming though. Two weeks? Two weeks and Tony could be dead. The thought was chilling and, again, completely explained his irrational behavior. It was already well into the morning of the next day. Jesus, how long had Rhodes and Tony even been fighting for? Steve swallowed and ran a hand over his face before firing up his bike.

"I'm not a walk-up! What do you mean, you don't take walk-ups?" demanded Tony, putting his forearms on the drive-through window and glaring.

"I'd have to ask my manager, sir."

"Do you know who I am?"

"You're Iron Man," said the woman in the window.

"Come on! I just want a cup of coffee and like, six donuts. Give me a break! This suit flies. I'm not a walk-up. I'm a vehicle. You would serve an airplane if it pulled up, right?"

"I don't know. I'd have to ask my manager."

Tony let out a frustrated yell. "I will literally give you two thousand dollars for a pair of sunglasses, six donuts, and a cup of black coffee. That's all I have on me. Please. I'm begging you. I have a hangover that's melting my brain."

A few moments later, Tony was hugging a box of donuts and was perched in the donut of the Winchell's sign, watching the sun peek up over the horizon. He basked in its light, his eyes searing despite the pair of purple Chanel knock-offs he'd gotten after proper managerial approval from the drive-thru. He was hungover beyond all reason, but he didn't care. The pain in his head was helping distract him from the terrible soreness in his chest, his shoulders, his arms, his neck. Every throb of his heart sent fingers of fire through his veins. The suit probably wasn't helping, but he didn't care. His blood toxicity was in the nineties. He was a goner. Time to wake up and smell the coffee.

Rhodey had the suit; the world would be okay without him. Pepper had the company; Stark Industries would live on without him. And hey, he'd had a good party. Gone out with a bang. He'd made it to forty, which wasn't so bad. And here he was, watching the sun come up, warm liquid yellow, the palm trees swaying.

He couldn't say he had too many regrets. He wished he could tell Pepper he loved her. Wished he could hold Steve, just hold him, cuddle him. But other than that, he was satisfied with his life. The big stuff, like the company and the suit, he'd passed on. It would be okay.

He wondered when he should shoot himself. It was getting bad. Not unbearable, yet. But he didn't think he had much time left.
He bit into a cinnamon donut and tossed a few crumbs to a pigeon standing on the W below him. Several more birds flocked over. "...it just keeps getting better and better, kids," he said to them, throwing more donut pieces down. One of his personal heroes, Tesla, had died like this, mad and talking to pigeons. Tony chuckled to himself sadly. He had to laugh, had to maintain a sense of humor, or he'd have a total breakdown. He didn't want to die. But he no longer really had a choice. There was no substitute for palladium, and he couldn't live without the reactor, not even for a minute, not anymore. The electromagnetism had scrambled his pacemaker cells permanently. It wasn't just keeping the shrapnel out, but keeping his heartbeats regular. Without it, he would go into cardiac arrest within minutes.

He sipped his coffee, sprinkling his breakfast onto the ground, watching the birds peck at it, lounging casually inside the donut. The curve was comfortable enough that he could probably sleep up here. It was a more appealing idea than going home to his ruined house, where Steve was probably spitting mad at him. Tony's stomach flipped over and Tony pretended it was because of the hangover and not because of Steve. Steve wasn't even in heat anymore, and Tony still felt an insane urge to impress and protect him.

He sighed out, sipping his coffee again, refocusing on the sunrise.

About twenty minutes into Tony feeding an ever increasing fanclub of pigeons, there was a low rumble of an engine. Steve appeared in front of the donut store on his bike, a leather jacket thrown over his dusty white shirt from the party. His hair was a bit of a mess and even with the serum Steve looked a little tired. But he looked calmer than he had in awhile. He parked his bike outside and leaned his arms on the handles and his head on them, watching Tony feed pigeons without a care in the world until the billionaire finally looked down and noticed him.

It was an oddly intimate moment, when Tony finally looked down at him. Even with those ridiculous sunglasses on. Steve sighed and looked over Tony, over the suit. Did he still have two weeks after spending a night in that thing? Probably not. Steve's phone chimed in his pocket - a text from Natasha, most likely. Or maybe Pepper. But he had a feeling the CEO had lost faith in him somewhat, and with good reason. Considering his CV was mostly lies Steve really had done alright at the whole PA job thing, or so he thought.

Steve waited for Tony to get down off the roof, repulsors hissing softly before he landed on the ground. Steve sighed softly as he got off his bike. "JARVIS helped me get here," he said, figuring mentioning the drunk and crying one night stand wasn't in good taste right now. He walked up to Tony, the man almost taller than him in his suit rather than smaller. Steve placed his hands on his hips and tilted his head at Tony, exhaling slowly.

"Why didn't you say you were dying?" He asked, voice so gentle the morning breeze almost stole the words.

Tony peered at Steve over the top of his sunglasses.

"...why would I?" he asked softly. "...it would only bum everyone out. First I thought... maybe I could... fix it myself. Then I realized I couldn't. But I didn't want anyone to be sad, acting weird around me." He shrugged slightly. "It's okay now," he added. "It's nearly over. Sorry, Stan. Don't worry, I left you a generous severance package. Everything is taken care of." He shifted his weight, the suit moving with him, the motors whirring softly. He wondered if Rhodes had gotten the suit somewhere safe yet. He had about ten suits. All but one had been calibrated for Rhodey. That ought to keep the world safe for a long, long time.

"Maybe it isn't over yet," Steve said quietly, a hint of a smile on his lips like he knew a secret. Which, of course, he did. Would Tony hate him for it? Maybe. But they could move past it, Steve
was sure. He was still more concerned about Tony following his orders out on the field...maybe Fury was being a little too hopeful there? He shrugged and moved to steal the half a donut out of Tony's hand. Man he was starving.

Tony smiled sadly at Steve in his leather jacket and his wind-swept hair. Steve had to be the most bad-ass omega he'd never met. He was going to miss him. "...you, uh, you really think I'm..."
Tony made quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "...better than this? You actually think I'm a good person? Most people find me to be an insufferable ass. Charming, of course, devastatingly charming. But also an ass."

Steve's blue eyes shot up at the question. "You are an ass. A massive one," he agreed bluntly. "But there's a lot more to you than that. I've met a lot of utter assholes in my time." Now that much was true. "And even if they paid me ten times as much as you do, I still wouldn't work for them. This is probably one of the most rewarding but most stressful jobs I've ever done." Also true. "I wouldn't have done it without good reason. I like believing in things. I like believing in people." He could almost hear Nat telling him to 'tone down the Captain America' in his head. "If you weren't a good person, I wouldn't be here," Steve said simply. "Though, for the record, if you ever say I'm yours again, I will hit you." Even though it was sort of a threat, there was a hint of a smile on his face.

Tony laughed, crossing his arms and letting Steve take his donut. "I know, I know, I... I just... every time another Alpha looks at you, I want to tear their head off. You're a good-looking guy, Rogers. I like your smell. I don't know. I know you're rocking the whole strong, independent omega thing. I respect that. You just get me all hot and bothered." He gave Steve a grin. "Welp. Now that you've figured out I'm dying, you can, you know, buzz off. I probably won't need you pretty soon. But it was good meeting you. You're... a damned strong omega. Power to you."

Steve didn't really know what to say to all that. Tony didn't really know him. Well...

He knew his personality, actually. He knew how stubborn and uptight Steve could be. How proud. How 'uppity'. But he didn't know who he was. And suddenly Steve felt guilty for that. He never expected Tony to develop feelings for him...he never expected them to be mutual. Shit. When SHIELD arrived behind them Steve was almost grateful he was saved from having to know what to say.

And gosh, Tony's words had been...surprisingly sweet. Steve was almost caught off guard.

Tony gave Steve a friendly little salute with two fingers and turned to leave, but stopped short as a black SUV pulled up and four people climbed out. Steve knew two of them already. "Blinky. Phil Collins. Hi," he said. The other two were unknown to him. A steely-eyed man and a red-head, both in tactical gear. Tony didn't let himself react.

"You gonna try to recruit me again, Pop-Eye? Because I'm booked for basically eternity, actually, I was just telling my assistant here to clear my schedule for the foreseeable future. Sorry, but you'll have to get a different bad boy for your little boy band. Good luck."

"I'm going to go order us a round of coffee," Phil said with a tight but polite smile and walked past all of them into the donut shop, giving Steve a small nod in solidarity as he did so.

Natasha looked between Tony and Steve with an amused glint in her eyes. She sauntered forward, hands on her hips, ever bit the confident Alpha and nothing less. She turned to Steve.
"Симпатичный жакет."
Steve smiled. "спасибо. Рад видеть тебя."

Natasha smiled in turn and cocked her head. "Ваш акцент улучшилось. Вы практиковали."

Clint remained silent beside Fury, looking stoic as ever. Natasha stepped right up to Tony and gestured to the diner door. She put on her sweetest smile, but something deadly shimmered under the surface of her toothy grin. "After you, Mr. Stark," she said, a command hidden under the guise of a polite gesture.

Tony's eyes narrowed and he rounded on Steve. "...you know her? Who the hell is she?" he demanded. He ignored Phil and the other man. They weren't Alphas. She was. What's more, Tony could tell, in an instant, that she was the most powerful Alpha in the immediate vicinity. He didn't like the way she was eyeballing Steve, the way they were chatting like old pals. He could already tell she was powerful; she oozed a deadly, confident power. But Tony was just stupid and hungover enough to challenge her if he had to. Why not? He was going to be dead soon, anyway.

Then again, what was the point? Steve didn't want him. And Steve seemed to like her.

Normally he would never trust these people... but fortune favored the bold and he had nothing to lose, so he walked into the diner, making sure to give her a small knock with his shoulder. He was more upset by Steve knowing her than her being here. Tony didn't mind hanging around more powerful Alphas, but he hated watching her and Steve smiling conspiratorially at each other.

Whoever she was, she was a rival.

Tony hated that he found her attractive.

He slid into a booth and turned to see if he could order another coffee, but the staff had disappeared. Tony wondered if he was about to be offed. If so, they were doing him a favor. He reached up and rubbed at the rash creeping up his neck. He wondered if he should just let them shoot him or give a big show of fighting back. There was no point, really. He was on death row anyway and Steve had betrayed him. He guessed he'd just let them shoot him and get it over with.

"So... Fury, right? I love that name, it's a very cool name... sorry, do I look at the eye or...? If you could, uh, turn your head so that I didn't have to look at the patch... I'm honestly going cross-eyed... I'm really hungover, I had a birthday party last night... you weren't invited, is that what this is about? ...are you going to introduce me to Dark Angel and this guy... he looks like he's DEA or something, is this because I smoked some pot in college? 'Cause I'm not gonna apologize for that." Tony glared at all of them.

"You spent an entire night in that suit, only making the poisoning worse. We really don't have time for chitchat, Mr. Stark," Phil said, polite smile curled onto his lips as always. The guy seemed so sweet but Steve had sparred with him once or twice-- not so sweet.

"My name is Natasha Romanoff," Natasha introduced herself as they sat down, the glint in her eyes wicked. "And this Clint Barton." Under the table she put a hand on the man's knee but on the surface there was no hint of possessiveness. Natasha gave nothing away. She was good like that. "We're here for a multitude of reasons, but the most pressing matter is naturally the ticking time bomb in your chest."

Fury dropped a suitcase onto the table a little loudly. He opened it to reveal a dozen needles inside. "These won't cure you," he stated and pushed them over for Tony to inspect. "But they will buy you time. As for a permanent solution, we believe you can find it in your father's work."
"A new element," Natasha continued. "Something that won't, you know, burn up your insides."

And there was that smile again, pretty but deadly.

She glanced over to Steve. "Вы должны сказать ему."

"Stop speaking Russian," snapped Tony, glaring at Natasha.

Something occurred to him. Steve had lied to him, lied about who he was and who he was working for. Maybe he'd also lied about having an Alpha. Maybe she was his Alpha. There was no denying her dominance. She oozed it. Hell, Tony felt like an omega himself, being near her.

No wonder Steve had been spurning him. Who would want a guy on death's door with a chest that looked like hamburger meat when you could shack up with this stunning creature? He wasn't paired-bonded, but that didn't mean they might not be fucking.

Tony felt hurt, and angry. He had started to think of Steve as a friend, and Steve had been playing him the whole time. He'd been... what did they call it... he'd been honey-potted. Yeah, that was it. Steve was a honey pot.

He decided to ignore Steve. He didn't want to think about him, or look at him. He turned to Fury instead.

He barked out a mirthless laugh. "Okay, wait, let me get this straight. Let me just make sure I follow here. You want to inject me with... what is that, I don't even know what that it. That could be black-tar heroin for all I know. You could be trying to steal my kidneys. Joke's on you, by the way, decades of alcohol abuse has rendered them thoroughly unsuitable for transplant."

"It's lithium dioxide," said Fury.

"Oh, great, lithium. I've already kind of got enough battery byproducts in my body, though, thanks," said Tony, touching the arc reactor on his chest with a metallic tap. "So, you want to inject me with lithium and I'm supposed to trust you because you, what, you're connoisseurs of my father's work? Which explains this fucking Kombayah-singing dream team of Alphas and omegas, all working together in harmony, doesn't it? Listen, none of you knew my father, but--"

"I did know your father," said Fury, lacing his fingers together pleasantly. "He was a founding member of SHIELD."

"Oh, great! Just great! So I'm supposed to create a new fucking element before I die, that should be easy, no problem, Dad was always very, you know, encouraging and everything, he really believed in me, I'm sure that--" Tony was aware that a note of hysteria was rising his his tone. "--sure that there's a fucking recipe in his notes somewhere for a new element that I can just put in my body, no problem, probably right between his lemon cake recipe and a note telling me how proud of me he was. Great. Good talk, Eyeball, thanks." He paused to catch his breath.

Natasha took the opportunity to jab a needle into his neck.

Tony cringed. "Motherfucker, are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? ...I'm not doing it! You can't make me! I'd literally rather die than go through my father's notes, trying to create some new element. I've already tried every element, every ion, everything! There's no replacement for palladium! It can't be done!"

"Your father said you could do it," said Fury.

"Oh! Oh, did he tell you that, since you were so buddy-buddy, huh? He completely forgot to mention it to me! We didn't talk much, he was apparently too busy with his little underground..."
what are you guys, again, a fight club? Maybe that's why he didn't mention you, you know, first rule of fight club... why me, huh, why not Vanko? Did you know him, too, huh? Did you know Anton Vanko? My dad's secret Russian pal?" He jabbed a finger at Natasha. "I bet you did, huh?"

"Howard wanted to solve the energy crisis. Anton wanted to get rich," said Fury patiently. "They collaborated on the arc reactor, but Anton was deported before the project was ever finished."

"And now it's up to me to finish it, right?" asked Tony viciously. "Maybe I don't want to pick up my dad's project, maybe I don't want to follow in his footsteps and run around handing out candy to omegas and building bombs and slapping together fusion reactors that create toxic byproducts."

"You have some real issues with your father, don't you?" asked Natasha with the same sort of pleasant tone one might use to comment on the weather.

"Oh, thank you, Freud, thanks for noticing that!" said Tony, his voice rising to almost a shout. "Hey, newsflash for all the omegas at the table, you think my dad was a real hero, huh? Well, he wasn't, he was a cold, calculating drunk and all the smiles he put on for the cameras were faked. Oh, and while we're at it, Santa Claus isn't real, either. Welcome to reality, jackasses." Tony stood, then reached for the suitcase full of syringes.

Fury pulled it away. "You gonna let yourself die because of spite for your father?" he asked. "...you seriously gonna let yourself die a slow, painful death out of contempt for a man who's been dead for more than two decades?"

"That's the Stark promise, baby. Go hard or go home," sneered Tony. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going home. Oh, and in case it wasn't already clear, you're fired, Rogers." He turned to leave. There was a sharp, fiery pang in his chest and he reached up to grab the arc reactor. He needed to swap out the core again; Fury was right about one thing. Wearing the suit all night had probably cashed out the palladium core, and he was sure the thing was sizzling inside of him, dripping toxic discharge into his chest cavity with alarming speed. He wondered if he ought to risk flying back or if he should just hail a cab. Decisions, decisions…

Before Tony could leave the diner a hand on the upper arm of his suit stopped him. One moment he was strolling out, and then he was being yanked back. Panic rose in his gut; he pulled, harder. But when Tony pulled against Steve's grip his hold remained sure. He knew this was going to be hard. He knew Tony didn't trust him. But he wasn't going to let the stubborn asshole die for the sake of his pride. That wasn't happening on Steve's watch. He pulled on the arm of the suit and forced Tony to twist back around to face him. No normal human being was that strong. The suit, even without power, weighed two hundred pounds, and Tony was being pulled back like he was a child.

He tried not to look alarmed.

"From what I remember your father was egotistical. Clever, stupidly brave-- like you. But that was where it ended. We weren't close; I didn't know him as well as I know you now, Tony. And, for the record, I was severely freaked out when I found out he spent years searching for me," Steve said, words careful and measured. He hadn't let go of Tony just yet. That was probably the only reason Tony hadn't bolted. Steve was talking about his father, and Tony's mind went into top gear, trying to figure out what the hell he was talking about. Four conversations? Steve didn't even look like he was in his thirties yet; Tony couldn't fathom how Steve could claim to know his father, when his father had been dead for decades and Steve was clearly younger than him.

"I'm sorry I played a part in your shitty childhood Tony, even though I wasn't around." His tone was sincere. He meant it. "I woke up about four months ago. All of my friends were dead or dying,
I didn't know or understand anything. They trained me up best they could and then they offered me this. Howard's son? I thought it might make things easier, being around something linked to my past. But it didn't because you're not really anything like him." Steve paused for a moment. "They asked me to send diagrams of your designs. I didn't. I just wrote my report. I know I betrayed your trust and I violated your privacy but I never hurt Stark industries, or sold out your suit designs, or compromised the people around you. And you can read the report I wrote yourself; I actually emailed it to you. But you never check your emails, so..."

Steve almost looked sheepish. Almost looked shy. A side of him Tony had never seen because that wall of professionalism had been up around him 24/7. "And if you can't work out who I am then maybe you aren't quite as clever as you think you are. Because I barely even changed my goddamn name. I mean, come on... Stan Rogers? And no-- I wasn't four different guys running around with a shield. It was just little ol' me and I've been frozen in the sea for the past 70 years. I came back and I was assigned to follow you, to access your suitability for the Avengers Initiative--"

"Suitability," said Tony with a small snort. Steve ignored him and kept talking.

"There's plenty of good causes to die for," Steve breathed and finally pulled his hand away, expression imploring. "But not this. You might be willing to give up on yourself, but I'm not. And you're going to find that new element if I have to drag you through every old file and report of your father's. Because I won't sit down and take this. And the Tony Stark I thought I knew wouldn't, either." Steve let out a shuddering breath. "You're better than this."

Tony's brain slowly went through all he had just heard. An apology for a lousy childhood. A reassurance that Tony wasn't like his father. Things Tony never got to hear and desperately wanted to. He stared at Steve, still slightly lost. Up until Steve said he wasn't four people with a shield.

Tony's thoughts came to a grinding halt.

Captain America's real name was Steve Rogers. But that was a common name, wasn't it?

"But you're on omega," he blurted.

Both Phil and Clint made small scoffing noises at Tony's ignorance.

Tony glared at them, then looked back at Steve.

He'd never noticed it. He'd only seen an omega, an assistant. But, dear Lord... the guy was a dead ringer for Captain America, all right. His height, muscles, posture... the truth was, if Tony had seen Steve without smelling him, he probably would have seen it in an instant.

Tony took a step back, staring. No. Impossible.

"You're better than this."

Steve's words hit him like a truck.

Tony's eyes darted from Steve back to the others. He gave himself a small, mental pat on the back for not collapsing right then and there. Steve was Captain America. He'd been bossing around Captain America, calling him "Sparky," for over two weeks. He'd nearly fucked Captain America. Captain America, his dad's old buddy. Howard had talked about him constantly and suddenly Howard's views on omega rights clicked into place perfectly. And now here he was, Captain America, telling him he was actually a good person. Captain America, who was supposed to be dead, who had returned from the grave to say nice things to him.
Oh, Maxwell, Tesla, and Euler, Tony was not emotionally equipped to handle this.

Tony wanted to lie down and cry, but he literally couldn't remember how. He never cried. Never broke his carefully maintained mask of control. And so instead of having a meltdown, instead of screaming, demanding to know how Steve could do this to him, lie to him, Tony did what Tony did best.

He cracked a joke.

"Well, I'll be damned. The *Enquirer* was right," said Tony calmly. "Captain Omega. Boy, that's one hell of a revelation. ...Happy is gonna be delighted. He's been standing up for the journalistic integrity of that rag of a mag for years." He cleared his throat.

Fury stood and handed Natasha the suitcase of syringes. "My team will escort you back to your home."

"Team? I already told you, I don't wanna join your damn scout troop!"

Fury ignored him and a moment later, Tony was being escorted toward the black SUV and piled in with Natasha, Barton, Phil, and Steve. He sat wedged in a backseat between Steve and Barton, feeling like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. All of them were too crowded despite the size of the SUV; Tony's armor was enormous and the car's suspension creaked under its weight.

Tony looked over at Barton, close-up. "You got any weird secrets you wanna disclose?" he asked.

"Would you believe me if I told you that, as a child, I ran away to the circus?" asked Barton.

"What's your deal?" demanded Tony, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"I'm a good shot."

"...that's it? ...you're a good shot? That's your secret, special talent?"

"Clint's codename is Hawkeye," said Phil from the front seat, helpfully.

"You guys have codenames? What are you, ten years old?"


"What's *your* codename, the Nut Cracker? Jesus, give a dying man a break," huffed Tony, hunching up in his seat, loathing all of them.

"Consider this a very important life lesson 'bout omegas," Steve murmured in Tony's ear bemusedly before he piled into the car seat behind Phil. Phil pulled his seat up to make room for Steve.

Natasha flashed Tony a deadly look over her shoulder before she started up the car. "Black Widow, actually. But I like Nut Cracker. Coulson, is it too late to change my codename?" she hummed, tone overbearingly innocent as she took them out of the diner’s driveway. "I read your report," she said casually, to Steve.

Tony sat as close to Clint as he could on purpose, noting with some small, mean sense of satisfaction that both Steve and Natasha tensed marginally. It might not have been conscious, but it was there. Tony made a personal vow to get as chummy with Clint as possible. So they all thought Alphas and omegas could all be friends? He'd show them. And by them, of course, he
meant Steve.

"I think it's time for injection number two," Phil said lightly and moved to open the suitcase.

Steve and Natasha both smirked a little; Tony flinched as Phil jammed a syringe into his neck.

"So.  We need to get my dad's notes from HQ," said Tony, trying to distract himself from the needle.

Natasha gave no indication that she had heard him; she was driving over the speed limit but her eyes kept looking at Steve's in the rearview mirror.  "Ты уверен, что не спала с ним?" she asked with a smirk, catching Steve's gaze. Steve rolled his eyes in answer and Natasha laughed. It was an almost unnerving sound and she took the next turn a little sharper than she had to. She was enjoying herself, that much was evident.

Natasha pulled into the car park of Stark Industries' HQ like she lived there. "Right. Let's make ourselves at home, shall we?" She said before getting out of the car. The rest of them filed out, Coulson straightening out his suit as they stood.

Natasha slipped a hand onto Clint's shoulder briefly. Maybe to reassure Clint, or maybe just to assure Tony she wasn't after Steve. She could be sweet when she wanted to be.

They moved into the lift and it was suitably awkward. Steve broke the quiet after a minute. "Shall I arrange for some rooms to be set up?" He asked. Technically, he was fired but he was still more than capable of doing PA work.

Natasha's comment about "making themselves at home" bothered Tony.  This was his territory.  Who the hell did she think she was, anyway?  She was practically flirting with Steve. Tony saw her hand touch Clint lightly and he wondered what the hell that was supposed to mean.

Was she doing it to demonstrate her dominance? She needn't have bothered. She radiated power already. Was she trying to rub it in Tony's face, that this was her omega? That she was going to do the same to Steve? Tony had already subconsciously sussed out everyone's standing. Steve was the most powerful omega there. He was naturally desirable.

But, Tony reminded himself, he was also a liar and a backstabber and a former friend of his father's. Let her have him, thought Tony bitterly.

When Steve spoke to him, it interrupted Tony's thoughts. "Didn't you hear me, Rogers? You're fired. You don't have to do a goddamn thing anymore. Frankly, you've done more than enough," snarled Tony. "Do we have to do this here? Can't we go back to my place? ...I think I only tore apart one room. ...I'm not working without alcohol and maybe a pizza. Barton, order me a pizza."

There was a split second of tension. "I'll order it," said Natasha generously.

Tony admired her. That was some incredible diplomacy, right there. Simultaneously giving in to Tony while also refusing to let him boss around what was hers. Tony was impressed.

"Fine. I want pineapple and pepperoni. I also need a bottle of Jack. This is my process."

Coulson's nose wrinkled at the mention of pineapple on pizza. "He's one of those people," he muttered to Steve.

"Least you guys have pineapple," Steve pointed out quietly with a sigh. America wasn't hit especially hard by war rationing, but they weren't exactly throwing exotic fruits around for
everyone to enjoy in the forties. The elevator thankfully stopped and they stepped out. Natasha was already on the phone, ordering pizzas in fluent Italian from some, no doubt, local joint.

"I get that you're pissed at me. But if I hadn't told Director Fury you had palladium poisoning you would probably be dead already," Steve pointed out. "And after the way you--" He waited for Phil to walk past. "After the way you treated me. At your party. You slapping my ass. You making goddamn comments all the time. I say we call it even. You're a good person Tony, and I meant it when I wrote it in that report. But it still doesn't stop you from being a shitty Alpha."

"....Jack," said Tony, snapping his fingers at Steve.

"I'll get your goddamn bottle of Jack," he muttered and with that Steve pulled away. If Tony wanted to die drinking then that was his choice to make, wasn't it?

"Oh, and Steve?"

Tony grabbed Steve's arm. Steve's comment, about him being a "shitty Alpha," cut deep. But when Steve turned to look at him, Tony couldn't bring himself to admit that.

"...I'm not your Alpha," he said instead. It hurt to say, but Tony relished the pain. He got a vicious sort of pride from it. Steve wasn't his. Steve had lied to him and Tony had been almost stupid enough to fall for it. He was thankful he hadn't slept with Steve when he was in heat; he made a mental note to thank Happy later for stopping him

Tony let go of Steve's arm. "I need to get out of this suit," he said. "There's a gantry on sub-level three. You guys go grab my dad's stuff without me."

"You're not getting away that easily," said Coulson. Tony sulked the whole elevator ride down, his arms awkwardly crossed over his chest, armor gleaming. He tried to look dignified as he opened the door to sub-level three and let his bots peel away the suit's interlocking plates while everyone stared. He would have preferred to leave the armor on, but he could practically feel the palladium core of the reactor disintegrating inside him and he needed to preserve it at all costs.

It took several minutes for the armor to be removed; when Tony finally stepped out of the armor, he almost immediately stumbled, his heart throbbing. He caught himself and growled out a defensive "I'm fine!" when Coulson moved to grab him.

"I need to swap the core. Let's grab my dad's shit and let's go. I have extras in the shop," he ground out.

"Was your long-term plan to just keep replacing it?" asked Natasha. "Keep playing a game of catch-up?"

Tony scowled at her.

They left Coulson to play babysitter with the suit and then headed downstairs. Steve pressed the button to take them down to the basement. It was almost awkward again. He resisted the urge to fill be quiet with Russian, that seemed to only piss Tony off more.

Had Tony been worried they were a thing? The thought was pretty funny. Natasha would have probably eaten Steve alive; Steve found her dominance to be too intense for his liking. They were close, but not like that. Their relationship had a lot of give and take, but statuses never came into it. Natasha kept giving him that look though. And Steve knew what it meant.

You sure you don't like him, Rogers? Come on.
In all honesty, Steve wasn't. He'd gotten a lot of confusing feelings around his heat that hadn't really gone away. But Captain America couldn't have an Alpha. It wasn't possible. Steve was supposed to represent something, and he couldn't lose that.

Tony sulked in the elevator, for once silent. Natasha kept looking at Steve. Tony hated both of them. He reminded himself, over and over, that Steve was a liar, a traitor. He tried to squash his feelings, ignore Steve's scent, ignore his sharp blue eyes with the little flecks of green and the fluid, almost cat-like movements of his toned, sculpted body. Steve was still almost irresistible to Tony, but Tony kept up a constant, internal stream of beratement, wanting to shuck off his desire as soon as possible.

Steve has told him there was no other Alpha; Tony remembered it fuzzily from his party. But Steve had lied about everything else. Maybe he was with Natasha. Tony had been stupid to trust him. Stupid to care.

And stupid because he still cared, a lot more than he wanted to admit. Ever since his confrontation with Justin, Tony had been trying to deny how desperately he wanted the blond. Even now, deep down, Tony knew he'd still fight over Steve, still defend him if he felt threatened.

Even if he wasn't paired to anyone else, though, Steve didn't want Tony. Tony kept reminding himself of that and ignoring the pain it caused him. It was just fine that Steve rejected him, Tony lied to himself, because Tony didn't want an omega. Hadn't he always said that? Just because Steve's smell was mouthwatering to him, his every movement a work of art, his voice like music... That didn't mean Tony really wanted him, right?

"Question. Can I ask questions about this, uh, very idealistic, progressive little group?" Asked Tony, breaking the silence.

"Is it an insensitive, offensive question?" asked Clint.

Tony faked surprise. "They make another kind of question? ...no, ha, it's probably insensitive but, I gotta know, I'm dying of curiosity--"

"Curiosity killed the cat," warned Clint.

"But satisfaction brought him back," shot back Tony. "So, do you guys, do you all cycle together? Follow-up question, exactly how many accidental pregnancies have you had so far? Are casual Fridays super awkward when you guys are in heat, or do you just, like, leave bags of ice in the breakroom and pray to the powers that be that everyone's going to act rationally?"

"Steve was right. You're nothing like Howard," observed Clint. "He treated omegas like people."

"Oh, give me a break. Dad wasn't some civil rights messiah. You think he thought omegas were equals? Take a look at the board of Stark Industries. Alphas and betas... not a single goddamn omega. Not one. His business partner, Stane? Alpha. My mom? Beta. His military pals, drinking buddies? All Alphas, baby. Dad paid lip service to you and you lapped it up because, let's face it, the guy was a good looking son of a bitch. But he had like, one or two omegas in his life, tops. He cared as much about you as he did about me." Tony reached up to rub the scars around the reactor again. The injections had taken away some of the stiffness in his neck and the rash was noticeably better, but it still hurt.

"I'm sure he cared about you, Tony," said Natasha softly.

Tony scoffed. "Lemme guess. You secretly knew him too, right, Laura Croft? My God, no
wonder he didn't have time for me, he had this whole secret SHIELD family to nurture... Which brings me back to the question about how you guys deal with your cycles..."

"I'd never actually cycled in the 21st century until about a week ago," Steve filled coolly as they stepped out of the lift. It was strange, when the doctors had told him he wouldn't at all. It was suspicious. Maybe it was because he'd been spending 24/7 around an Alpha. But then Natasha should have triggered it way sooner than that even then. So if Tony thought about it, then he would have realised that Steve's body was reacting directly in response to him. To Tony. 'Shitty Alpha' or not Steve's body still recognised him and had wanted him. Maybe Steve had wanted to. But he wasn't allowed to, he reminded himself.

He held Natasha's gaze briefly and they shared a moment of understanding.

Natasha let the conversation, but gave Steve a look of sympathy. Tony's derision toward omegas was clearly based on jealousy. For all of Tony's posturing, it was obvious that he had been desperate for paternal attention, and that he'd failed to get it.

The elevator took them to the basement and Tony led them through a series of unmarked hallways, deep into the heart of the building. The floor was poured concrete and the bulbs were fluorescent. There were no decorations here. It was clear this space was not intended for much use.

Tony stopped in front of a heavy metal door and swiped a key card to get in. Inside, lights flickered on automatically as they entered. The room was filled with plain white boxes sitting on wire shelving. Tony made a beeline toward the back of the long, claustrophobic room and pointed.

"There it is. The unfinished scientific works of Howard A. Stark. Eat your heart out, Steve, Clint, I know this shit is like the Shroud of Turin for you people."

"You people?" repeated Clint. "...are you trying to piss us off?"

"Why, is it working?"

Clint looked to Natasha; she gave the slightest shake of her head. She could read people like books and it was obvious to her that Tony's overly cruel remarks were a result of hurt, not maliciousness. The way his eyes kept sliding over to Steve with an expression of longing and grief told her everything she needed to know. The guy was clearly smitten.

There were three boxes. Tony hadn't ever gone through them. It had been too hard, after his parents' death. For all he knew, the boxes were filled with nothing but sand.

Clint reached out for one and nearly dropped it as he slid it off the shelf. "...oh, hell, these are heavy."

"Yeah, at least one of 'em has the prototype for Cap's shield," said Tony, studying his nails, pretending not to care. "Plus you've got all his notebooks, newsreels, other shit. It's a good thing we're not operating under a deadline, huh, because it's going to take forever to go through all this." He grinned. "...deadline. Pun intended. ...oh, lighten up, guys, you're not the one who's about to drop dead. Come on, let's get this stuff back home... Grab a box..."

Steve picked up the box with the prototype in it no problem. Nat and Clint managed the others—just barely. As the boxes were moved, something else fell out from the shelf that had been propped up by a stack. It was a long piece of board, Steve didn't pay much attention to it. He just moved to set the heaviest box down in the lift.

"You wanna bring it?" Natasha asked when she noticed Tony peering at the thing in question. He
didn't answer right away so Steve took that as a yes and went to grab it, being careful as he set it down in the elevator along with everything else.

They put everything in the back of the car with Phil's help and just focused on fitting it all inside. (At least Tony was no longer wearing his armor.) Steve sighed as he straightened up and saw Tony peering at the board littered with small pieces of buildings and what not. "For the record," he breathed, "I didn't think Howard saw me as an equal. He just liked how much he could antagonize other Alphas via my existence." He shut the boot and went to get in the passenger seat of the car as Natasha was already starting it up.

They were on a short time scale, after all.

Tony played with the model distractedly. "This is the 1974 Expo," he informed them. "I was four. I didn't even see him that year at Christmas. The Expos, they really suck up your free time. If any of you guys get a chance-- I know you're real busy, you know, harassing dying men and all-- but if you get a chance, check out the one I'm putting on this year. It's dynamite."

He looked out the window, thinking. A week ago had been Monaco. Was Steve telling him that he'd been around Natasha for months without cycling but had gone into heat for Tony? Maybe he was lying again. Then again, you couldn't fake a heat. Tony remembered the desperate noises of want that Steve had made. Steve may have lied about who he was and why he was there, but there was no denying that that had been real. Even if Steve didn't like Tony on a personal level, his body clearly wanted him.

Tony wondered if he could get Steve to let him lick him now that Steve was no longer his PA. He wanted to believe what Steve had said, about how he was good person, if not a good Alpha. But he was well-aware that might have been some sort of manipulation tactic.

"So you guys are gonna hover over me while I go through Dad's stuff? What if I don't find what I'm looking for? Then will you leave me alone? I can't make any promises. Creating a new element is a damn big order, even for a genius like me. And it takes time. And frankly, I normally only work like two hours a day and that's with Pepper breathing down my--"

Fuck. Pepper. By now she had probably seen the mansion or read the news. Maybe it was better to from palladium poisoning than face her wrath. Ha, ha.

Right on cue, his chest flared suddenly with a searing, white-hot pain and Tony let out an involuntary gasp. He reached out for Steve's hand, seeking comfort automatically. He grabbed Clint's by mistake/

Natasha's eyes narrowed.

"Oh, give me a break, I don't want Hawkguy," snapped Tony, pulling away. "Coulson's driving is just scaring the hell out of me. ...what's your deal? You two paired?"

When Tony grabbed Clint's hand by accident and then let go Steve wasn't sure what to do. He let his fingertips graze over his forearm briefly. It could easily be passed off as accident brush of skin, but he hoped it was some small comfort to the man. He tried to catch Natasha's eye but she was clammed up thanks to Tony's question.

"He saved my life," she answered coolly.

"Avoiding the question. That's a yes, huh?"
"Clint recruited her," said Phil.

"Oh, like how I'm being recruited?" grumbled Tony. "Did he also lie to her for weeks? Is that normally how you guys do it?"

"I was sent to kill her, actually," said Clint.

"And, what, instead you went into heat and ended up boning?"

There was an uncomfortable, pregnant pause. Tony's eyes widened. "Nooo! ...really?! That's hilarious! Rogers, why didn't you employ the Barton technique? I would have totally joined up if I knew--"

"One more word and I will start breaking off fingers," hissed Natasha.

She seemed serious enough that Tony shut up and played quietly with the 1974 Expo model for the rest of the ride to his home.

"I think we'll have enough of a problem with you following orders already," Steve pointed out dryly. The Nat/Clint backstory was a complicated one, one he wasn't fully aware of yet. He knew it had been a messy time- a lot of fighting and a lot of- ahem. Natasha hinted to it a few times, but they didn't talk about their past much and neither of them pried much either. They were people of the present (or Steve, at least, tried to be). Nat didn't ask about the forties, Steve didn't ask about the KGB.

As Natasha parked the car efficiently, Steve glanced over at Tony and briefly down at his chest. "Do you want me to carry... I mean, do you want to lean on me?" he asked, tone completely genuine. If Tony was in pain he wanted to help.

Tony shook his head. "I'm not an infant, Rogers. I can walk all by myself, thanks," he growled out.

But he remembered, longingly, how Steve had swept him up and carried him to bed at his birthday. Had it only been yesterday? It seemed like an eternity ago.

If the others hadn't been there, Tony might have swallowed his pride and let Steve do it. It felt wonderful to be close to him, to inhale his intoxicating scent and to feel the warmth his body radiated. But Tony didn't want to look weak in front of the others. And he didn't want Steve to know he still wanted him, against all logic, against his own best interests. When Steve's hand had brushed his arm in the arm, Tony had broken out in goosebumps.

The house was a disaster. The entire front room was a mass of rubble and broken glass. Several partygoers were still there, passed out drunk in dusty, rumpled clothes that probably cost thousands of dollars.

"I'm going down to the shop," Tony informed them regally. It went without saying that he didn't want any of them to come with him. "Help yourself to..." He gestured expansively at the mess, and added ironically, "mi casa es su casa."

"It looks like a tornado hit this place," said Clint, picking across the rubble. "Is that girl dead?"

"Who, Sammy? No, she's just drunk. She did this last year, too. Stark parties are always open bar," said Tony, who seemed unconcerned with the number of unmoving bodies strewn around on the broken, dirty couches.

"What? No, sorry, I don't do sidekicks," said Tony. "My shop is my sanctuary. Only I'm allowed in there." He paused, cocking his head. "And my assistant, but I don't currently have one."

"Steve?" said Natasha.

"I fired him," said Tony.

"That's not up to you. He's your assistant on behalf of Fury," said Natasha.

Tony bristled. "I don't want him anymore."

"Too bad, Stark. Steve, go with him. I don't trust him not to go down there and dick around instead of working."

"Oh ye of little faith," said Tony with fake hurt. The truth was, he had absolutely been planning to drink himself into a coma and take a nap. He didn't want to dig through his father's things. Not now. Not ever. But clearly, he wasn't being given a choice. "Fine. Give Steve the boxes. Christ, he's strong, he's like a packmule. Steve. C'mon." Tony clicked his fingers at Steve to hurry him up. "Oh, and bring the model! That thing's cool, I might hang it up on the wall."

"Your ego is incredible. You've got, what, a week to live and you're thinking about wall art?" asked Clint in amazement.

"Let me know when my pizza gets here. You can just tell JARVIS; he'll call me up," said Tony, ignoring him. Seeing their confused looks, he added, "JARVIS is my AI program. He's sort of a virtual butler. Say hi, JARVIS."

"Hi, JARVIS," said JARVIS.

"Ha-ha, very funny, Jarv. Put all my calls on hold, I gotta go downstairs and whip up a new element or I'm doing to die," said Tony.

"Business as usual, sir?" asked JARVIS drily.

"You have a sarcastic AI program?" wondered Clint in fascination.

"He's modeled after the help, when I was a kid... his name is a backronym. Edwin Jarvis was the butler. JARVIS isn't a replacement for Jarvis, he's just a rather very intelligent system." He paused, waiting for them to get it.

"Just a Rather Very-- cute," said Coulson. "But you're stalling. Director Fury authorized us to use any means necessary to keep you on premises and focused on your task. So we can do this the hard way, or the easy way. Your choice. But my patience is wearing out." He crossed his arms authoritatively.

Tony stared at him. He couldn't quite believe he was being bossed around by an omega, or that Captain America had risen from the dead and was moonlighting as his PA.

...was it possible that palladium poisoning caused hallucinations? Perhaps none of this was ever real.

Coulson didn't budge. Finally, Tony shrugged. If Coulson was a hallucination, he was a damned stubborn one.

"Okay, fine. Let's do it. Let's rock n' roll."
Edwinium

No one-- not Steve, not Clint, not even Natasha-- seemed to think it was weird how Couslon, an unbonded omega, was bossing Tony around. Tony knew when he’d met his match. Coulson had all of Pepper's fierceness and attitude. He heaved a dramatic, world-weary sigh and loped toward the steps to his basement garage-cum-shop. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Steve was following.

Steve sighed and sent Natasha a look as he moved to follow Tony downstairs. Steve also wasn't impressed by Nat telling him what to do- probably due to Tony drawing out more Alpha vibes. But Steve was Captain. Once he was back in the field they'd fall into their usual routine, Steve was sure. Natasha was decisive but she didn't like leading. She was already moving towards Clint's side now she was out of Tony's view- privacy was less of a need in front of men like Phil who'd known them for years.

With a small thrill he realized he and Steve would be alone for the first time since Steve had revealed his identity. But he quickly suppressed his excitement. Steve was on a job and didn't want him, and besides, there was nothing sexy about the idea of looking through his father's old notebooks and newsreels. Tony punched the code into the shop and held open the thick, bulletproof glass door open for Steve, who was carrying the boxes, his muscles bulging attractively as he lifted the heavy materials. Tony eyed them when Steve wasn't looking. Just because Steve had betrayed him didn't mean he couldn't still at least check him out once in awhile.

It was weird, for Steve, to be going back into Tony's workshop after everything. Steve had only been down here a few times before to deliver a message or hand over a smoothie. Pepper went down far more frequently than he had. Maybe Steve had been a little jealous at times, she got to 'see the magic' as it was. The first time Steve had properly seen the suit in action was actually on the track in Monaco.

Steve set the boxes down, carefully lifting the model off the top and setting it down on a clear table space. With curiosity, seeing as he had the opportunity, he reached into the box to pull out the shield prototype. Steve immediately pulled a face as he held it in his hands. It felt all wrong. "This isn't anything like my shield," he said and set it back down.

Then Steve glanced up at Tony, as if he was now only realising that they were alone. He swallowed. Would this be awkward? He certainly hoped not.

Tony watched Steve pick up the shield, his emotions a confused, roiling mess.

Steve looked up and their eyes met. Tony tried to stare blankly. Not to look hurt, or scared, or angry, even though he was all of those things.

"Well... pick a notebook. Let's get started," he mumbled hoarsely, pulling the lid off of one of the boxes and peering inside.

Clippings  Blueprints.  Film reels.  Loose papers. Tony laughed without a trace of humor as he opened the first lab notebook; it was completely unreadable, its pages rippled with water damage, its ink smeared, running illegibly off the pages. "Oh, great... just great... this one's ruined. Well, we're off to a good start." He sniffed the lab notebook experimentally and threw it down in disgust. Whiskey.

He tossed aside a few newspaper articles and loose, unfinished blueprints.
"This is a fucking mess," he declared after a moment. "Rogers, get me some scotch, I can't... I can't do this. No one can do this, look at this, this is a disaster. This is a fuckin' Shakespearean tragedy."

He went to see if he could find a projector for the films, needing to get away from Steve, from the disorganized clutter. It was like looking into the future. Howard Stark had once been powerful and intelligent and articulate and commanding. But he'd worked himself down to the bone. The man Tony had known had always been either working or piss drunk, "keeping the edge off," as he put it. When he drank, he was belligerent. Toward Maria; toward Tony; once, (only once), even toward Jarvis.

Tony swore under his breath softly as he set up a projector. Bullshit. This was all bullshit. He wondered how well Fury had known the older Howard, the one that had called his son a sissy and a faggot and a disappointment. Tony knew he wasn't exactly the most commanding, powerful Alpha in the room, but so what? Betas couldn't tell, anyway, and Tony felt he more than made up for it with his smarts. But Tony's intelligence had been an inconvenience to Howard. Life in the Stark household had always existed in a sort of controlled chaos. The concept of "child-proof" didn't exist around Tony. By the time he went to college, the family was on its sixth microwave. He never believed in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy; to him, the concept of invisible energy was enough magic to satisfy his childhood curiosity. The idea of being able to manipulate it through circuits fascinated him. He was etching boards while most children were still learning how to tie their shoes. He took apart and put together nearly anything he could get his hands on. But being smart and precocious hadn't endeared him to Howard. Half of the staff's job was trying to wrangle Tony away from electronics before he destroyed them; around the house, anything that had wires was in dire straits and was always moments away from being torn apart by Tony. Howard's pride in having an intelligent son didn't extend to being patient when his intelligent son made life difficult. And Tony was nothing if not difficult. Every single tutor said the same thing: "He's not being challenged enough." But it was impossible to challenge him and most gave up eventually, letting Tony do whatever he wanted, which was sneaking into the garage to crawl into the car's engine and see what made it go.

By the time he was on the cusp of puberty, Tony had figured it out. What his father wanted was a cardboard cut-out of a kid he could drag to press conferences to complete his perfect image. He was a pilot and a patriot and an inventor and an entrepreneur and he didn't really have time for a kid in his life, but he needed one, so he could add family man to his list of accomplishments, and have someone to carry on his legacy.

By the time Tony was a teenager, any fondness he'd felt toward his father had evaporated in a furious rage at not being good enough. Tony was as purposefully difficult as possible, locking himself in his room to play Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" on an electric guitar that he'd amp up to the full volume. Howard suffered frequent "headaches" that Tony knew were hangovers, and the two of them spoke mostly through shouting over the music while Maria and Jarvis tried to calm them down.

When Tony got accepted to MIT, at the age of fourteen, his father had seemed unsurprised, not impressed, and Tony had gone off to school the next year seething that he still wasn't good enough.

And why?

Because he wasn't an especially dominant Alpha? He couldn't help it; his mother was a beta, it was his nature, he couldn't change how he'd been born. Or was it something else? His constant trouble-making? His imperfect tennis backhand? Tony had spent probably over a thousand hours in tennis lessons at the club, and the only thing he had learned was that he loathed tennis. He had
even looked up the inventor of tennis in the hopes that the bastard had died young and of tragic, painful causes. Unfortunately, he learned that Walter Wingfield had passed peacefully of natural causes at the age of 79.

Tony's mood was turning darker by the minute. He'd had a brief, unhappy childhood, isolated by money and intelligence and his father's reputation. It had ended with his parents' sudden deaths; at the age of 16, he was the CEO of a company worth more money than he could possibly imagine. His only family had been Stane and Jarvis, but Jarvis had passed two years later, eaten away by grief for his father. Tony hadn't cried at his parents' funeral, too shell-shocked, but had made up for it at Jarvis's.

"...and then he said... let there be light," murmured Tony, fitting a film reel into the projector and hitting the switch.

Howard Stark appeared, addressing the camera directly.

"Alright, take... what is this... thirty-two? Thirty-two already? Jesus. Okay. Let's wrap this up, it's already eleven-ten." He cleared his throat; the image skipped a few times and Tony held his breath, but the film continued to play. "Welcome, ladies and gentleman, to the Stark Expo--"

"Oh, cool, this is from 1974," said Tony. He pointed to the large model of the fair. "How 'bout that."

"--welcome to... the future."

"Sorry, old man, but you're in the past, now," Tony informed the film.

"Showcasing the latest innovations, we here at Stark Industries pride ourselves on looking forward, improving the world for a better tomorrow. I believe, that everything is achievable through technology. Better living, robust health, and, yes, even world peace."

Tony pretended to give an exaggerated yawn. "...talkative, isn't he?"

"Cut," said someone off screen. "Boom mic."

"...again? Jesus Christ, come on, how hard is it to keep out of the shot?" demanded Howard. "...speaking of shots, Patty, refresh my drink, will you...?"

Tony snorted and looked up at Rogers. "Told you he was drinker. This is only gonna get worse, you know. Speaking of drinks, Steve, I thought I asked you for a scotch?"

He flipped through a notebook, bored, while the film skipped again. Howard had walked off screen and two other, unknown people were trying to find a better angle for the model Howard had been standing behind, the same one that was now sitting on Tony's desk.

Steve didn't go fetch the drink but he didn't think Tony noticed either, too wrapped up in his own desperation. He didn't see how drinking would help anything right now. He knew Tony was stressed and scared. He could see it in his face. But the man needed to be at his best to tackle this, not tipsy. Tony was being uncharacteristically quiet...which was to be expected with everything Steve had done. And the fact that he was, you know, dying.

Something heavy tugged in Steve's gut. Something like lead. Tony. Dying. The two thoughts didn't compute in his mind. The man was so full of energy and life, his enthusiasm was infectious. But now he already looked drained, like he was giving up. Defeated. And Steve wouldn't stand for it. He just wouldn't. Tony wasn't going, not like this. Not before he wasn't mad at Steve anymore. Not
before they talked, not before they...Steve stopped that train of thought. Or rather, the video of an old Howard speaking to a camera did.

And he looked old. Yeah, Howard had aged well. But the Howard Steve had left behind had been smooth skinned and handsome. He hadn't had wrinkles and greying hair. His voice had even sounded nicer. Or maybe Steve was just romanticising the past again. He was still distinctively Howard, though. Steve was almost taken back to a time in the lab, when Howard was making a comment to him about Peggy, joking about that fondue incident on the plane.

Peggy. A fearless female Alpha in a sea of sexism and Alpha men. A woman who was worth ten of every man in there. Steve's chest ached to think of her. He'd been to visit a few times. She was old, now. It was hard- seeing her like that. But he was still forever grateful he'd gotten the chance to see her at all. Most of his other friends were dead.

"...I think a lot of people were drinkers after the war," Steve said quietly, eyes dragging down to the real life model on the desk before them. He stepped around, peering at it. "It has a remarkable amount of detail, don't you think? Lasted well too."

Like he had. Ha

"Shh," murmured Tony, transfixed. His attention was divided between the old film and the notebook in his hands; he was almost going cross-eyed from trying to focus on both at once.

Despite all his protests, now that he was seeing and hearing his father, he was utterly absorbed.

"Okay, okay, take thirty-three. Is that boom mic out of the shot? Great. We're still rolling? Great." Howard cleared his throat. "Everything is achievable through technology. Better living, robust health, and for the first time in human history, the possibility of world peace. So, from all of us here at Stark Industries, I would like to personally introduce you to the City of Tomorrow." A pause. "Fuck. Future. City of the... Tomorrow? Future. Cut."

"Just start from the introduction." said someone off-camera. The camera shifted a little. Howard took a sip of the drink his hand.

"...maybe Fury's lost it. This little walk down memory lane isn't helpful at all. I don't think I'm going to make any ground-breaking discoveries watching Dad try to--" began Tony, but he stopped short.

The color drained from his face; on screen, a child was peeking over the edge of the model.

"Tony, what are you doing back there? What is that? Put that back! Put it back! Why aren't you in bed? Where's your mother? Maria!"

Tony stared, remembering how he'd played with the model in the car. He didn't remember the incident on screen but took a vicious joy in knowing he'd gotten to play with the model as an adult. He considered moving some pieces around, just to spite his father.

He reached out and groped for Steve's hand. "I don't wanna do this anymore, Steve, c'mon... my childhood ended a long time ago. I don't wanna go back. This isn't helpful at all. Fury must've hit his head, there's no reason for this film to even be in my dad's files at all, it's not like there's anything useful in here, nothing scientific. This is just, you know, a promo for the Expo. Dad shot promos all the time."

The film began skipping. Tony sighed, moving to fix it, but suddenly, there was a new shot. It was steady; his father was sitting behind the model, looking grave, sober, hands laced together. It
seemed darker, emptier, later. "Tony."

Tony looked up, sharply. His heart jumped into his throat. For a split second, he wondered if he'd imagined it.

"You're too young to understand this right now, but someday you'll be old enough... so I thought I would put it on film for you. I built this for you."

Tony stared at the screen, lost. The Expo?

"And someday you'll realise that it represents a whole lot more than just people’s inventions. It represents my life’s work. This is the key to the future. I’m limited by the technology of my time, but one day you’ll figure this out. And when you do, you will change the world. You're brilliant, Tony, and I believe that your only limitation is your imagination.” A pause. Howard looked down at the model contemplatively, then up, at the camera. "I'm proud of you. You are, and always will be, my greatest creation."

Tony would have given anything in the world for Steve not to be there. He didn't dare more, worried that doing so would break the fragile dam that was holding back a deluge of emotions.

"...did you get it?"

"I got it."

"Was it good?"

"It was excellent, sir."

Tony was paralyzed. The camera was temporarily obscured by another man, his accent unmistakable.

"Are you sure? I don't... I don't know how to talk to him."

"No, it was perfect."

"We can cut it tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Tony... God, that boy.” Howard sighed, leaning back. Jarvis handed him a drink and he accepted it gratefully. "Ed, you know what it's like to have a kid who wants to know how to describe a non-linear Lorentz transformation and whether or not Minkowski space is applicable to non-Galilean transformations? He asked me what gravity was made of, and when I said gravitons, he wanted to know whether it was spin-1 or a spin-2 boson. ...they don't make pop-up books for kids like that."

"You're doing fine, Howie."

Howard dragged a hand across his face and said something, but the film was skipping again, and his words were indistinguishable.

"Howie, a kid that smart will turn out fine. You're doing your best,” said Jarvis. "Look at him; he's curious, he's thriving."

"I'm doing the best damn job I can, but a kid like that... no one in the world could raise him right. He's four, and he's building circuit boards, Ed. I'm in over my head here."
"I know, love."

More skipping on the reel obscured the first part of Howard's reply. "--right. Even if I mess up, he'll be able to figure it out. He'll be alright." Howard sighed and rose. "Okay. That's good enough for now, maybe we can shoot another one tomorrow? I just need him to understand that this is his." He gestured vaguely to the model in front of him.

"I'm sure he'll understand, sir."

Howard's next words were garbled again and the film jumped slightly. Howard reached out and his hand touched the small of Jarvis's back, gently guiding him. Jarvis glanced over his shoulder with a smile; Howard smiled back and leaned forward. They shared a brief, tender kiss.

Tony stared, mouth open slightly. God damn it, they had been pair bonded.

He didn't move as the film suddenly jumped a few times, the projector slapping the reels together loudly.

Then, suddenly, large, sick blotches began blooming on the image, plague tokens, spreading rapidly. Tony let out a yell and leaped to his feet; the ancient reel had gone up in flames.

"No! No, no, no, no!" Tony tore the film from the projector, oblivious to any burns he might get, trying to put out the flames, but by the time he finished patting out the fire, there was little left than a few smoke-singed cells.

Tony let out a shriek of frustration and shook the projector violently.

It had eaten his father's words of approval, the only Tony had ever heard. It had taken Jarvis, too: sweet, ever-encouraging Jarvis. And Tony still didn't know what it meant, what his father wanted, how the fuck the 1974 Expo was supposed to help Tony finish his father's work with the godforsaken arc reactor.

He turned around with a scream of uncontrollable rage, grabbed the nearest thing he could (a small building from the model expo), and threw it across the room.

It bounced off the wall, bounced off a desk, and then hit the model shield Steve had set on the floor, spinning around it, like a little planet in orbit.

Tony stared at the little building spinning on the floor with the shield in the center, panting, shaking, heart piercing his chest with every painful beat.

"Tony! Tony, Jesus Christ. Just breathe. Breathe for me. In and out, in and out...that's it." It was like second nature. Comforting Tony, putting his arms around him and leading him to sit down on a bench. He was malleable in that moment, so stunned and lost in his own mind that Steve wasn't sure Tony was even aware he was there. He felt like he shouldn't have seen that, some precious yet small moment between father and son. Too little, too late, but something. And that man, Jarvis, who Tony had spoken so fondly about. Hadn't Tony ad mused over his relationship with his father? Everything had been confirmed in the most soothing way, a balm on decades of uncertainty. And then the proof destroyed. Fate was being so cruel to Tony Stark as of late.

"Just breathe for me," Steve said again and knelt down in front of him, pushing Tony's hair back from his forehead without thinking, another hand squeezing his shoulder gently to ground him. "That's it." Tony's chest wasn't rising and falling at quite such an alarming speed now.

Steve found himself memorising the details. The stubble on his neck line, the neat facial hair, the
way his hair stuck up. It reminded him of a dossier he'd read on a mutant who went by the name of Wolverine. The dark hazel of his eyes. Steve swallowed. He wanted to remember, in case... in case... He'd drawn Tony quite a bit, of course he had. He'd drawn Pepper a few times too. It was often on long plane or car journeys. Steve would doodle, it was in his nature, in his blood. He was always the artist before the soldier and he guessed he liked to capture things that mattered to him. He used to draw Bucky hanging out of the window on a muggy summer's day in Brooklyn, smoking with his shirt undone.

"You can do this," Steve told him as Tony's gaze finally landed on his face, recognising the other person in the room. He drew his hand back from his shoulder, still on one knee in front of him, almost in an echo of old omega manners from the forties. But Steve didn't kneel for just anyone. "I didn't survive a plane crash and being frozen for 70 years to wake up to all my friends dead or dying to watch you die too, Tony Stark." His words wavered in the air. They were Captain's words, not to be messed with. They carried meaning. "The answer's in this room. And I know it hurts, in more ways than one. But you can ponder over the past another time," he breathed. "Right now I'm more concerned with your future, and making sure you have one."

Tony felt like he was having a heart attack and considered that this might, finally, be it. This might be the moment of his death.

He could hear Steve's voice, as if from far away, but couldn't make out the words. He felt a hand smoothing his hair, strong arms surrounding him. He matched Steve's breath, staring at him.

He realized that Steve was kneeling in front of him. He stared down at the super soldier, on one knee, looking up at him. Blue eyes through long lashes, every blond hair perfectly in place. Their eyes met. They were having a moment. This went beyond attraction. This was hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, instinct; an ancient, primal knowledge.

Tony wanted Steve. Steve was looking up to him, and Tony knew, right then, that he could take him if he wanted, as his omega... that they were made for each other... that all he had to do was lean forward, kiss him, taste him...

Over Steve's shoulder, the little model building was wobbling out of orbit around the shield prototype. Its movement in the otherwise still shop was distracting. It finally came to a rest.

Thank God, thought Tony. That was annoying. Stupid little building, orbiting--

"Wait a moment," said Tony.

He rose, a hand on Steve's shoulder, fingers clutching his shirt.

"Wait a moment," he repeated, staring at the building beside the shield. "...look." He reached down and picked up the little building, examining it.

He walked back over to the model and put it back where it had come from, closed one eye, then opened it. Then closed it. He brought up his hand, made a circle, and looked through it.

"...JARVIS?" His voice cracked when he said the familiar name.

"Yes, sir?" asked the AI system.

"...JARVIS... scan this model. Scan it, I need... I need a digital render. ...Steve. Steve, look at it. He made it for me. Look. Not the Expo. The model." Tony pointed to the model. "Look!" Excitement was creeping into his voice. "Look, look at the sculpture in the middle... look, see, it's an atom, see how the little electrons... see... it's your shield, Steve, look. The building. I threw the
building, and it went into orbit. It was spinning. Look. The buildings! The buildings orbit-- no. No way. No way!"

"Render complete, sir," said JARVIS.

"Project it! I need to manipulate... I need to see..." Tony's voice was growing louder, more excited. "Lose the concession stands, lose the landscaping... the pavilions... oh my God... they're all radiating out... he drew the..." Tony was talking to himself now. "...he structured the protons and the neutrons using the pavilions as a framework... the... and that's the nucleus... this is...!"

Tony stepped back and pointed.

The projection of the Expo's layout no longer resembled the Expo at all.

"It was in the design all along." Tony began laughing, giddily. "I discovered-- no-- I rediscovered -- he knew! The bastard knew! He hid it in the model! That's why he didn't want me to touch-- oh, my God, Steve, look!"

"The proposed element should serve as a viable replacement for palladium," announced JARVIS.

Tony laughed harder. "He's been dead twenty years and he's still outsmarting me! Oh, Dad! Steve... Steve, he's schooling me from beyond the grave... this is it, this is what he wanted me to do! This is what the arc reactor was supposed to run on! This thing!"

"It's impossible to synthesize," said JARVIS.

Tony was still laughing. "...the only limit I have is my imagination, weren't you listening, Jarv? We can make it... we can synthesize it right here, we need... this is easy, we just need to build a particle accelerator... Steve! Steve, I found it! ... we found it!"

He grabbed the back of Steve's neck without thinking, his fingers carding through his soft blond hair, and he turned, kissing Steve deeply, shoving his tongue into Steve's mouth, finally, finally tasting him. His body went limp and if he hadn't been grabbing Steve's neck his knees would have buckled. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced, this kiss. It was rich and raw and perfect; their mouths were like puzzle pieces, made specially for each other; Tony had never kissed an omega but suddenly he was lost in his desire for Steve, mind unusually and blissfully blank; he was a creature of pure instinct and emotion, and his emotion was one of joy, fulfillment, love. His tongue ran over Steve's lips, his jaw worked against Steve for a brief, perfect moment.

Then Tony yanked away with a moan, stumbling back. "Holy shit. Holy shit, I-- shit, I'm sorry, I-- I got-- caught up--" Tony was panting, shaking, but it wasn't the same sort of fearful shivering he'd experienced earlier. This was something else. This was something wonderful. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" he repeated, holding up his hands. He'd crossed a line, he knew that. Seeing the structure of the new element... seeing Steve kneeling... it had all been too much and he'd lost control. Steve's mouth had been warm and sweet and inviting and soft and Tony wanted to pounce on him and bite him and breed him, but consciously, he was aware that was over-emotional and that he couldn't do that. Not to Captain America. Not in this century. Alphas didn't just get to get swept up in their emotions and take omegas anymore. Steve had made it very, very clear that he didn't belong to Tony, and Tony felt embarrassment at his outburst. Though not enough to stop being excited. He'd done it. He'd done it in, what... less than two hours? Oh, the look on Fury's face would be priceless when they told him how quickly Tony had solved the riddle...

"I apologize," repeated Tony, quietly, more calmly, more sincerely. He cleared his throat and reached up to rub his arc reactor awkwardly. "That was out of line. My bad. Let's... er, let's go upstairs and tell them we cracked it."
Only Tony Stark would laugh and smile in the face of the word 'impossible'.

Steve was very much caught off guard by Tony kissing him, however. His back had met with the edge of a desk and before he'd known what he was doing- fuck. He'd kissed Tony back. Something seized in his chest. Something like hope and relief all at once. Because Tony wasn't going to die. He was going to save himself and then- then what? Would he go back to hating Steve for lying? Hm...didn't matter so much when he was licking into Steve's mouth though. Whether he liked it or not it made the blonde shiver involuntarily. The kiss was intense, more so than anything else Steve had ever experienced. He'd never been aware of being so wanted before in his life, that he could remember.

It was enough to make him blush. Captain America blushing, ha. Natasha would hit him if she could see him now.

As soon as the kiss began it ended and Tony was gone, leaving Steve very much stunned and pink cheeked. He blinked, watching the Alpha still. He was just speechless, utterly speechless. He just watched Tony for a little while, to the point where an awkward silence had essentially settled between them. Steve swallowed thickly. Oh god. Say something, he thought. Goddamn say something.

"You don't have to...apologise," Steve said, finally. His words were measured. Careful and unsure. "I wouldn't bother. There's no time to waste. You can synthesise it now, tell them later." Maybe a selfish part of Steve still wanted Tony to himself, didn't want this moment to end. And he didn't want Tony's good mood to end either and he certainly wasn't enamoured with the SHIELD family upstairs. "Fury wanted blueprints from you he had no right to. You may as well let him sweat a little."

"Yeah. Okay! Okay. Let's... let's get to work," said Tony, avoiding Steve's eyes.

He clapped his hand together and rubbed them together, and looked down at the charred remains of the film reel. He stared at it for a moment. "JARVIS? ...were you... did you happen to record...?"

"I recorded audio, sir," said JARVIS.

Tony nodded, once; better than nothing. "Okay. Okay, good. Where's my jack hammer? I gotta build a super collider. Start up a new project file, index it under Particle Accelerator, use my private server. Can you get into CERN and yank their blueprints? I need that, but it's gotta fit in the house. But we can knock down some walls, we're in remodel mode--"

"That explains the destruction of the living room yesterday, sir," said JARVIS.

"Yeah, that was good, huh?"

"You have a jack hammer stored with the scrap in bank 2 of garage level 1."

"Perfect, great, yes. Lemme just swap this bad boy out and we can get started," said Tony happily, digging around the sinkhole that was his desk. Pepper often criticized Tony's seeming lack of organization, but Tony knew where things were; he had the precise methodology of all mad scientists and refused to move anything. The result was piles of papers and circuit boards and wires and old coffee cups. He knocked over a tangle of wires and a stack of journals before finding what he was looking for; a new palladium core.

With a deep breath to steady himself, he winced and pulled out the arc reactor with a loud snap of metal on metal. Holding it delicately in one hand, careful not to tug on the wires, he dug two
fingers into his chest and swiped out a blob of yellow-brown goo with a hiss. He flicked it to the floor, nose wrinkling; the smell was something between rancid meat and singed metal. "That never gets any less gross," he muttered, mostly to himself, rooting around in his chest. He popped out the old core; it was a mess of corroded metal, glistening with discharge. He popped the new one in and, without thinking, automatically, grabbed the blood analyzer on the desk and pricked a finger.

95%.

"Phew, okay... let's get this show on the road," said Tony, throwing it aside and walking into the garage. "Steve, go get me... let's see... I need... okay, I think i have some old fiber cables I can repurpose somewhere around here... I'm gonna need a sledge hammer, that wall over there will need to come out... we'll need all the jennies up and running to do this, so I'll put a hole here, and here..." Tony's mind had already begun building; he gestured madly around the garage, his inner eye seeing the finished project, unconcerned with the amount of destruction he was going to need to do to his house. You had to crack eggs to make omelettes. Tony liked cracking eggs.

"The wall needs to be gone, huh?" Steve moved to grab the shield prototype and felt his hands along the wall. "I'm on it." He hesitated a moment and cocked his head, eyes narrowing. "Hm." Then Steve drew his hand with the shield back and promptly shoved the thing straight through the wall. It groaned and hissed in protest but Steve soon knocked another significant hole through the wall as he slammed the shield through it again. And then again and again and again. Plaster and flecks of paint soon littered the floor as Steve systematically tore down the wall piece by piece like it was no more inconvenient than a layer of thick cardboard.

Steve turned around to see Tony fiddling with wires. He let out one short breath as he set the shield prototype down on the desk. That was all the exertion it had taken. To take down a goddamn wall. He could see the focus on Tony's eyes, he recognised it. He could do this. Hope seized in Steve's chest.

Steve kicked an especially big chunk of wall out of the way with a grimace. He almost didn't want to speak and break Tony's 'mojo' as it were but he had to ask. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Despite the spartan, minimalist design of most of the house, when it came to his shop, Tony was and always had been an absolute pack rat.

It was paying off now, though, because Tony was discovering most of the materials he needed lying around the shop. He gutted one of his bots for parts and tore apart his desk searching for components, slowly building a pile in the center of the room. The collision point would go here; the coolant pipes would have to be run through a wall, which Steve tore through like it was a wet paper bag as soon as Tony asked.

Tony paused in his frantic, squirrel-like collection to observe Steve. He was an omega, yes, unmistakably an omega. For Alphas and omegas, they could identify their orientations as easily as if it were their gender or age range. But Steve was a uniquely powerful, commanding omega, and Tony liked that. He liked that a lot. He couldn't imagine how shitty it must have been for Steve in the forties, during an era when omegas were expected to bow and kneel and not make eye contact, to serve Alphas indiscriminately and unquestioningly and be grateful to do so.

Tony could understand why his father would have been eager to put Steve on the Avengers team. Yes, Steve was noble and stubborn and strong and well-trained... but also, Tony was certain that Steve was right, that Howard had done it to make others uncomfortable. As a sort of prank, just to be difficult and subversive. Worse, back then, no one had known how to suppress heats chemically; it was only halfway through World War 2 that that particular technology had become
available. Before that, an omega who went into heat was pretty much forced to suffer through it, and was a target for Alphas to prey on.

Poor Steve.

Tony shook himself out of his musings and went back to work, trying not to watch Steve's muscles rippling under his shirt as he slammed the shield prototype through plaster.

He was trying to untangle a pile of copper wires when Steve came up behind him. Tony sensed him before Steve said anything, but still let Steve speak, not wanting Steve to know how much attention Tony was paying to him.

"Yeah, actually, if you could put on these safety goggles..." began Tony, offering a pair to Steve. "I need to do some jack hammering and I'd hate a shard of gravel to hit one of those pretty blue eyes. I have a, uh, thing about shrapnel for some reason." He tried to pretend he was joking.

Happily, a lot of the remodeling was loud, so Tony had a built-in excuse not to talk to Steve. The more time they spent not talking, the more temporal distance they put between themselves and that kiss, the better.

Tony tore a hole through the floor with a jack hammer and another through the ceiling with a sledge hammer. It all would have gone faster if he could use the suit, but his blood toxicity was so high and his condition so unstable, he didn't dare risk it. Instead, he did things the old-fashioned way, wearing not a mech suit but a pair of ratty old jeans and a wife beater.

The dust settled as he opened up a hole in the ceiling, and Clint, Natasha, and Phil peered down at him curiously.

"What are you doing?" asked Natasha.

"Installing a sunroof. I figured if I was gonna be stuck here for a while I might as well work on my tan," said Tony. "Move aside, I'm gonna hand this hammer over to Steve, I need this wider, Steve... like... maybe a half-meter wider, okay? Nat, I'm gonna throw some cables up, can you catch them and run them across the floor, toward the south end of the house? Thanks."

Tony's mania was increasing; he was the same jittery, overly-excitable creature he'd been in Monaco just before the race, and he didn't wait for anyone to agree to anything; he tossed Natasha the cables, shoved a sledge hammer into Steve's hands, and then spent the next twenty minutes on the floor of the shop bending pieces of metal yanked off one of his cars into a series of small clips and rings, murmuring excited notes to JARVIS, who was keeping a projected lab notebook up in the shop that was utterly incomprehensible to anyone but Tony.

"I think he might have just actually lost it. Dying makes people go crazy, right?" Clint said, watching Tony flit about through the hole in the floor with a strange expression on his face.

"He was already crazy," Steve breathed as he appeared beside them to make the hole in the floor bigger. "Would you mind...?" Together they took away more of the ceiling, cracking it and lifting it up and then bending the mesh back that supported it. It was a slow process but it ensured none of the concrete would land on Tony's head. Steve belatedly thought about how Pepper would react when she saw this, how she react to him being nearly 93 years old. It would certainly be interesting.

"He found it?" Natasha confirmed quietly. Steve dropping the hammer down and lifting the goggles to run a hand over his face. He nodded. The Alpha smiled subtly. "Good. I'll text Fury."
Steve watched her pull out her phone. "He's not doing this for Fury's benefit," he said quietly and Natasha looked up at him. Her gaze lingered a second too long, like she was trying to make a point.

"No," she agreed softly. "He's not." Then Natasha patted his arm, a weird gesture for her in itself. "You better get back down there. He might need your help."

Steve took the steps back down to the workshop two at a time. "Tony...?" He stepped into the mess a little hesitantly. "How's it going?"

"Great!" said Tony with delight. He was walking a motorcycle across the floor; he threw out the kickstand and began stacking books on it. "Lift that pipe up here, all of these pipes have fittings, uh, metal clamps, those need screwed on, there's grommets that fit between them, but don't tug any wires, there's two smaller pipelines--" Tony was talking rapidly, wrenching a bolt onto a L-pipe. The notes JARVIS was maintaining for him had grown as messy as the desk; projections of diagrams floating around the room like fish swimming lazily. It was a bit like being inside Tony's head.

"DUMM-E, get over here, this part needs support.... bolt a cable to the ceiling here....hurry up, hurry up, I need to connect the positron line... Steve, grab the heat sink... Steve, the heat sink!"

Tony looked up in exasperation at Steve's blank expression. "It's the blank box over there with a lines it in that looks like a drying rack. And grab my level while you're over there, too. I need this pipe to be level, I'm nearly-- CLINT! I NEED AN ESPRESSO!"

"The last thing in the world that guy needs is an espresso," muttered Clint to Natasha; they had been watching Tony through the hole in the ceiling for the last couple of hours. Tony had most of the materials laying around; he'd been putting them together with an energy that belied his sickness. His shop was unrecognizable.

"Sir? Mr. Hammer is on line one," announced JARVIS.

Tony was on his back on a wheeled board, tightening another bolt on the underside of a pipeline. He kicked himself across the room to grab a differently-sized wrench.

"Tell him I'm sorta busy working on my Nobel Prize."

"It's with regards to the Expo."

"Forget the Expo, JARVIS, I'm making something big here! Well... something small, actually, something very small... an atom, actually... how the hell did he get access to my personal line, anyway? That guy shouldn't be able to call me--you know how annoying I think he is."

Tony kicked himself out from under the pipe and rose. For a split second, Steve saw Tony's knees buckle slightly. He put a hand out to steady himself on the pipe; he was used to hiding weakness. He grinned easily and set the level on top. "...damn it... okay... that's a few degrees off..." He crouched, examining a junction between two pipes. "I need... I need something here... maybe some... yeah, that might work... CLINT! ARE THERE A FEW COPIES OF WIRED ON MY COFFEE TABLE?"

"They make a magazine for people like him?" asked Clint.

"I think Wired is about electronics, not for people suffering mania," replied Phil. He peered down the hole, pushing a cable aside. "No, there's no magazines up here. Can we come down?"

Tony paced around the equipment, frowning. "Kicker looks good... junctions are tight... radio-frequency source is live... I need an argon tank here... Steve, get me... there's a teal tank over that
way, roll it over, I gotta hook that up... if I can just get my drift tubes straight we can turn this bad boy on..." He adjusted the level and his frown deepened. "I need something under here, just a few inches of lift... hmm... CLINT, WHERE IS MY ESPRESSO?"

Steve was essentially bossed around for the next ten or fifteen minutes. But he was fine with following Tony's weird requests, lifting and bending what was too heavy and stiff for him. The man's hyperactivity was infectious and Steve moved around quickly at Tony's word, biting back a fond chuckle when the man was so frustrated with Steve not knowing what a heat sink was. He had learned a lot at his time at Stark industries but none of it really had any bearing on engineering.

He peered at the few inch gap when Tony pointed it out and blinked. Steve moved over to one of tables, searching through the messes of materials.

"You can have coffee after you've saved your life, Mr Stark," Coulson said from where he was watching next to Clint and Nat, his hands clasped neatly before himself. "But considering you did not sleep last night, caffeine will only serve to exhaust you further." Phil, the king of passive aggressive. Steve sometimes thought it would just be politer if he just said 'no' once in a while.

"How about this?" Steve asked and lifted the prototype of his shield up from under a sea of wiring. "This big enough?"

He pulled the shield away from Steve and crammed it under the pipeline to check the level again. It was perfect.

Steve watched Tony's legs shake again and before he knew it he reached forward, curling a hand around his bicep to steady him. "Tony?" Steve said, voice a touch softer now. "You okay to stand?"

Tony's teeth clenched. Steve's hand on his arm sent an electrical jolt up his nerves; he yanked back. "I'm fine," he snapped. He didn't want Steve, of all people, to see him as weak. Ironically, Steve's stabilizing hand had made his knees even weaker. The effects Steve was having on Tony were disturbing. Deeply disturbing.

Tony had enjoyed being carried back when he felt like Steve was just doing him a favor, but now, Steve's concern was underlining Tony's sickness, and he hated it. Tony was an Alpha. Maybe not an Alpha like his father had been, maybe not an Alpha like Natasha... but, damn it, he still wanted, needed, Steve to see him as powerful and strong, and instead, Steve was making him feel inadequate and disappointing.

It was funny how even now, when he could drop dead at any moment, he desperately wanted to impress Steve.

It was funny how Steve was such a paradox. So stubborn and strong, physically intimidating; taller and more muscular than Tony, his voice commanding, full of leadership. And yet, occasionally, Tony had glimpsed hints of Steve's past. Steve's generation had expected different behavior from omegas; Tony noticed how Steve had practically gone limp when Tony kissed him. He could have shoved Tony off, easily. Could have kicked his ass. But he'd let himself be shoved against the desk and let Tony lead, and responded automatically, almost submissively.

It made Tony almost... hungry.

Maybe it was just a side effect of dying. Tony reminded himself, consciously, that he didn't want an omega. Tony hated feeling out of control and he knew all too well how stupid Alphas got around omegas. He didn't want the commitment, didn't want the responsibility. Having watched
that brief encounter between his father and Jarvis on the film reel, he remembered now how Jarvis had acted after his father's death.

He'd pined and grieved and slowly wasted away to nothing. He was as sharp as ever but the cloud of depression that hit him never quite lifted. He moved slower, and every task he did became less thorough; the only thing he never faltered on was cleaning the glass face of the photographs. Howard Stark's image never got dusty in the years following his death; Jarvis could polish the photos around the house for hours on end and refused to let Tony take any down or move them. At the funeral, Tony hadn't cried; he'd stood gravely around with Stane's hand on his shoulders, thanking people for coming, agreeing that his parents had been lovely people taken too soon and yes, it was terribly shocking, but he was so lucky to have everyone's support, et cetera, et cetera. Jarvis had wept, completely silently, the entire time, barely speaking. Tony had found it more upsetting than if Jarvis had been keening or wailing or acting dramatically. He'd just stood around, crying stoically while old army buddies tried to get through to him unsuccessfully. According to family legend, his father and Jarvis had worked together in the war. Jarvis had been in the RAF. His father was a pilot; the two of them had apparently had all sorts of wild adventures in their youth. Howard never talked to Tony about them, and Jarvis spun Tony stories that may or may not have been true at all, so Tony was never sure what, exactly, they'd been through together. He only knew that the depth of their relationship bordered on unfathomable and it was a miserable two years of watching Jarvis suffer after his father passed. Jarvis had only found peace in death; Ana, his wife, had followed him a few days later; the funeral for them had been so much smaller than his parents because they were nobodies, really. Omegas, hired help. Tony had cried himself senseless for them and never hired new staff on despite all of Stane's urging.

Realizing Jarvis's grief had probably been due to a pair-bond made Tony never, ever want an omega. Sure, Steve was desirable. But the idea of being responsible for him terrified Tony. Hell, he couldn't even keep a girlfriend for more than a few months; how could he possibly keep an omega?

Why was he even thinking about it?

If Steve had been a beta, Tony would have praised him for his idea, using the shield. But he didn't because he didn't want Steve to get the wrong idea about them. The kiss had meant nothing; it had been impulsive; besides, Steve had been playing Tony, spying on him, for weeks. Their friendship, brand-new and fragile and just starting to bud, was over, as far as Tony was concerned.

He decided to take a leaf from Phil's book and act as passive-aggressively as possible. Phil was really starting to annoy him. He wondered if Phil had any sort of weird power he didn't know about; if he hit Phil or tried to boss him around, would Phil suddenly reveal some crazy talent? Shoot lasers out of his eyes?

Damned Avengers. Tony was looking forward to kicking them all out once he got his new element synthesized.

"Okay. I'm gonna put a prism in here to direct the positrons," explained Tony, gesturing to a small box. "In theory, if my math is right-- ha ha, if, no, it's right, it's always right-- then we'll get our newest, latest, greatest element in here, right out of the kicker, into this stripping chamber, and then we can just shoot it right over there to that sink, right, it's based on the arc reactor's old design, right, we still got the ten acceleration modules and particle bottle ring but there's no longer a reaction chamber since this element, in theory, anyway, has a ridiculously long carbon life. Good news for me because, being honest here, this little tabletop science fair experiment probably isn't safe. I mean, the stripping chamber is a little closer to the carbon ring transfer line and the voltage terminal than is probably safe so everyone's gonna need shades. When the particle beam is gonna
hit that ring over there--yes, I know it's a triangle, asshole, ring is just what we call it-- the thing about synthesizing transuranic elements with particle accelerators is that a lot of the atoms are unstable-- hopefully the ring will stabilize them, or else I'll die, which really makes you wonder... where the fuck ass hell is my espresso, it's my last wish, you clowns, go get me some java!"

"I didn't follow any of that," said Clint.

"I'm turning on a machine. It'll go zap and then create a material that will help me not die," said Tony. "Much like how a coffee machine would."

"You're almost as smart as you are entitled," said Clint.

"I'm hearing talking, but not tasting coffee... what is wrong with this scenario?" mused Tony.

"Are you afraid?" asked Phil suddenly, with his usual calm.

"...what?"

"If the device is complete, then why are you stalling? Are you afraid it won't work? Turn it on, Mr. Stark."

Tony realized that Phil had hit the nail on the head. Tony was scared. So many things could go wrong. Tony's math was solid, sure, and his engineering skills unparalleled. But all that was theoretical. In practice, unexpected things happened. The collider could fail to work or blow up in his face. The element might not be synthesized, or if it was, it might be too unstable to be held in the newest arc reactor, in which case Tony was a goner.

He swallowed and looked over. Steve was standing there. Steve, the omega Tony desperately, desperately wanted to be good enough for.

"I'm not scared. Of course it will work. I was waiting for everyone to get shades on. I told you, it's gonna be bright." Tony grabbed a pair of welding goggles off his desk and slipped them on, rubbing his hands together. "JARVIS, power this fucker up, please."

"Yes, sir."

The lights flickered as JARVIS rerouted the all of the house's generator power to the collider, and Tony remembered, suddenly, long ago, his father talking about creating Captain America. They'd been in his study. Tony wasn't allowed there, technically. But sometimes, if Howard had had a few drinks and was in a good mood, he'd let Tony sit there and talk happily about the past. Before the age of eight or so, Tony had sought out these rare meetings, eager to bond with his father. He would listen, enraptured, remaining silent and nodding gravely, excited for the special privilege of being in Howard's study, an honor that only a few other men had, like Stane and Jarvis.

"We knocked out a couple of city blocks blasting that guy with Vita-rays," he'd said, laughing. "It was the brightest light I ever saw, Anthony, brighter than the sun... and they told me to stop, but I kept turning that wheel. Let that be a lesson for you, kiddo. Don't you ever let anyone tell you that you can't go harder. There's always room to push a little bit more, and that's what we do. We're Starks; we work hard and we play hard. We're made of iron. Men who give up, men who don't put in that extra push... those are men that never end up accomplishing a goddamn thing."

Time to accomplish something.

The device was on and it was loud, louder than a jet engine, rattling ominously. Tony stood by the stripping chamber, holding a large prism in his hand, waiting for the right moment. He had one
shot.

...no pressure.

Steve put his hands up to his face and peeked through his fingers. He could stand brighter lights than some people could in shades. They'd done a lot of experiments on him in the past, around the war. They'd wanted to be able to recreate the serum some day and the only way they could do that is if they understood it in the first place. Or anyways, that's what they told him when they kept shining a pen light into his eyes.

He glanced up through the hole in the wall and saw Natasha watching Tony with a curious expression on her face. Steve glanced over to catch the alpha looking at him who then quickly looked away. Steve almost felt his cheeks heat up and then he was thinking about the kiss- how hot and wet Tony's tongue felt in his mouth. Fuck. He'd liked that. It had been totally out of line but...maybe Steve had liked that a little too.

Jesus Christ, if Natasha could read his internal thoughts right now...

But Tony looked nervous. Phil was right. He was afraid and rightly so. Steve swallowed and resisted the urge to reach out to him again. He wasn't his alpha, he didn't have a right...

"I know you can do this Tony," Steve whispered, giving him an encouraging look, blue eyes genuine. "Really, don't look so stressed. You've got this," he said simply, voice soft and gentle. "Just...go save your life and then you can go back to being mad at me," Steve joked weakly with a half smile before stepping back as Tony got the contraption ready to create his new molecule. Atom? Whatever. One of the unfortunate effects of being frozen for sixty-five years is that Steve had the equivalent of a third-grade education and was desperately struggling to catch up on all the science, literature, and history he'd missed.

So, Steve didn't really understand what was happening or what he was seeing. All he knew was that there was a loud hissing sound and a bright light and he felt the floor shivering underneath him at the power of it all. Steve sucked in a breath as the light got brighter, so bright he could barely see. It made him think of what he imagined heaven might be like (when he'd still believed in God) and they'd put him in that machine which made him the soldier he was today. In that moment Steve had been sure he was dying- and then, in an instant he'd suddenly never felt more alive.

Tony shifted a coil with his knee and then shoved the prism into the stripping chamber.

"Initialising prismatic accelerator," said JARVIS. The prism was already lighting up; a steady beam of light was zipping through the chamber. Even if the element wasn't constructed, thought Tony, at least he could take some pride in knowing his collider had worked. A small triumph, in and of itself. "Approaching maximum power."

"Keep going!" hollered Tony. He gave a yank to the valve wheel on top of the chamber.

The prism shifted and all at once, a beam of light was cutting across the room.

Unfortunately it was nowhere near the arc reactor, which is where it was supposed to be pointing.

Tony grabbed the nearest wrench and began pulling the valve wheels, trying to shift the prism. "Whoops... oh, no... oh, boy, not good..." he hollered with good-natured, destructive delight. Despite all his best calculation, the angle was a lot wider than he'd expected and currently he was frying a hole through the wall. "Whoops... okay... easy... easy..."

Tony cringed; he couldn't turn off the accelerator now, not without losing all the momentum he'd
built up, and who knew if the generators would have enough energy to power it up again? So he carried on, watching as the particle beam, white-hot and painfully bright, slowly moved across the room as he turned the prism in its base plate, cutting a line across the concrete wall, through a support beam, rebar and all, through a metal filing cabinet, three Fender guitars, the jukebox, a shelf full of priceless retrotech, and an original Barnett Newman painting that he'd set on the floor and sworn to Pepper he wouldn't let anything happen to. (It burst into flames.)

No time to cry over spilled milk. Tony continued to yank on the wrench, every muscle straining; the beam hit the support plate for the arc reactor and for a moment Tony worried it would cut through that, too, but it only etched the surface of the stand. (Tony had been using an adamantium alloy. Thank Tesla. Most metals would have warped hopelessly under the heat.)

Finally, the beam hit the particle bottle ring, the thin wire triangle that should stabilize it. The room lit up, white-hot; Tony was sweating, and he could smell Steve, and above him, Coulson and Barton, all of them alluring in their own way, their sweet little omega scents mixing with the other comforting, familiar smells of Tony's lab: oil and grease and gasoline and hot metal. The particle bottle ring was glowing blue. There was a loud boom from below them. **There go the generators,** thought Tony lazily.

He reached over and slapped the kill switch.

The beam flickered off. The particle ring slowly, slowly dimmed. But didn't go out. It remained glowing a steady blue.

*It worked.*

**Thanks, Dad.**

"...that was easy," said Tony with fake bravado. He crossed the the room towards the ring and picked it up with a pair of pliers.

Fortune favored the bold. Tony ripped out his arc reactor and popped out the palladium core, then shoved the new ring into place and crammed the whole mess into his chest, giving it a few sharp whacks to make sure it was plugged in.

"JARVIS?" he hollered. "I need diagnostics; am I dying, or...?"

"Your vital signs are stable, sir."

"...my pulse...?"

"Stable."

Tony pulled out the blood toxicity meter from his pocket and jabbed his finger. ...96%.

"I put a new core in. It's a new element I kind of just made up just now, no biggie. Is it working?"

"It appears the reactor has accepted the modified core, yes. All functions are nominal; energy output is steady. Congratulations, sir."

Tony jabbed his finger again. 96%.

He switched hands, jabbing it into his finger and wincing.

95%. 


Tony laughed incredulously. Was it going down, or was that natural variation? Was he going to be okay, then? He'd wait a bit and then check it again. He poked at his neck; it was stiff, still, the rash still present. But he didn't feel worse.

...if he didn't drop dead within the hour, then it was probably smooth sailing ahead.

Tony reached up, dragged a hand over his face, aware for the first time that he was shaking. "...okay..." he whispered to himself, closing his eyes. "...okay."

"...hey, you still want that coffee?" yelled down Clint suddenly, breaking the silence.

"I want a drink," Natasha said dryly and pulled back towards the kitchen area. Phil followed on as the Alpha female moved to raid through a drinks cabinet with a worrying level of comfortableness as she popped open a bottle of dark coloured rum and found some glasses.

Steve was breathless. Everything had happened so quickly and he wasn't quite ready for the sight of Tony wrenching the arc reactor out of his chest when he was swapping the old core out for the new.

When JARVIS said it was working, the words didn't quite sink in. Steve blinked dumbly, a strange yet warm sensation clouding his chest. He swallowed thickly. Tony was going to be okay. He was okay. He wasn't dying. He was....

He was okay.

Steve blinked and he was stepping forward towards him, getting too close before he stopped himself. He felt overwhelmed with emotion. With relief. He could hardly breathe.

Steve swallowed. "You did it...you really...are you going to be alright now?" he asked, surprised at the sound of concern in his own tone, blue eyes bright with sincerity.

Tony let out a small, shaky snort that was supposed to be a laugh.

"I'm Tony goddamn Stark. I'll be fine. I'm always fine," he said, staring into Steve's eyes.

Steve glanced away for a second, then back.

An old habit, one he'd learned in the forties.

He was too close. The collider had heated up the room and Tony could smell him. Adrenaline was coursing through his body. He was shaking slightly.

Steve's eyes were blue, yes, blue with little flecks of green and hazel. Steve was holding his gaze now. Ever the stubborn omega. But this wasn't a challenging stare. It held relief and something else that Tony wasn't sure of.

The eyes flicked away again. Submitting.

Steve was accidentally, unconsciously submitting.

Tony's mouth watered.

"Kneel." He barely even whispered it. It was so quiet that it was gone as soon as he'd murmured it, a beat of moth's wings toward a flame. Maybe he hadn't said it at all. Maybe he'd only thought it. Maybe he'd only remembered how Steve had looked when he was down on one knee earlier. The word, tiny and fragile, had already evaporated, all evidence of it wiped from existence.
Steve's breath hitched. But he didn't think- he couldn't think. He just moved. Before Steve knew what he was doing he was kneeling, back soldier straight and posture perfect. He ducked his head down slightly, gaze on the floor as he clasped his hands behind his back neatly. He was Captain America. But here he was, kneeling for Tony Stark because he'd asked him to. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. His actions spoke louder than words ever could.

Steve dropped like an invisible hand had pushed him down and in a second he was on his knees, head lowered respectfully, hands clasped behind his back.

Tony was shocked. He wasn't even sure he'd said it, but...

There were no words that could express Tony's emotion. He didn't think a word existed for it. He took a step toward Steve, reached out, and put his hand on Steve's head, feeling the softness of his head. He gave Steve a gentle pull forward, pressing Steve's head against his thigh. For a moment neither moved; Tony stood there over Steve's kneeling body, hand on Steve's head, the heavy warmth of Steve's head resting against his leg.

He'd seen old pictures in the twenties and thirties and forties of Alpha and omega pairs standing like this, the omega's cheek pressed into the other's leg, eyes closed, face a picture of contentment. Or gazing up adoringly at their Alphas, sometimes with the Alpha gazing down protectively at them.

Tony had always thought those expressions were fake, those postures posed.

But it felt like the most natural thing in the world, the way they were standing. Tony never wanted to move again. This was how pair-bonded Alpha-omega teams stood and it was incredibly familiar. Tony's hand was stroking Steve's hair lightly, slowly, as soft as possible, not wanting to break the spell.

A line of tension sagged from Steve's shoulders as his cheek was pressed against Tony's thigh. He let his eyes slip shut slowly, a serene feeling swelling in his chest and sinking down into his very chore. He'd not felt this relaxed since waking up in the 21st century. Steve sighed softly, contently and didn't think he'd want to move anytime soon.

Tony's fingers were rough and warm in his hair. It made him shiver as he tugged against his hair lightly. Steve still didn't speak. He just savoured the feeling of Tony's fingers in his hair, stroking gently. He didn't have words for this moment- he just knew Tony was going to be okay. That was all that mattered.

Upstairs, Coulson's phone rang. "Clint. They need us in New Mexico," he said with sudden seriousness.

"What's in New Mexico?" asked Clint.

"Something big."

"Bigger than this? Did you see what he did down there?" demanded Clint.

"It's okay," Natasha waved off. "I'll clear this up. Let Fury know what's happened. You boys go have fun," she said with a glint in her eyes as she straightened up, glass in hand. "Though I have a feeling things will go smoother than we expect anyway..."

Phil pulled a face of disbelief.

"Oh come on," Natasha shrugged. "Tony looks at him like a lost puppy..."
"How big is big?" Clint asked Phil as they strode across the room upstairs.

"Big," said Phil mysteriously.

Natasha knelt by the hole in the floor to look down. "Steve, Tony, we just got a call that--"

She stopped in the middle of her sentence, staring down.

Tony was standing in the middle of his demolished shop, gazing down lovingly at Steve; Steve was kneeling in front of his, one cheek against Tony's leg, hands behind his back while Tony carded his hair with his fingers.

"Guys."

Phil and Clint knelt by the hole and glanced in.

A grin split across Clint's face and he ducked his head, nuzzling Natasha's arm briefly, knowingly.

"He's supposed to be undercover! That is not undercover!" hissed Phil.

"Oh, cover was blown hours ago, and he already submitted the report," said Clint.

"Look at them, they look like they've bonded," said Natasha sweetly, her hand coming out to touch Clint's cheek automatically.

"Give me your drink, they can't--"

Phil took the tumbler from Natasha and tossed the cold liquid over the pair.

Tony let out a shriek and jumped away, shaking himself off. "What the fuck was that, Coulson? Why did you--" shouted Tony, wringing out his clothes, furious. He looked up at the three faces peering down at him. Natasha had a small little mysterious smile on her face, and Tony didn't like it at all. "Okay! That's it! Show's over! I did it, I synthesized a new element, now get out! All of you! I told you, I don't wanna be an Avenger, it's stupid, Iron Man is a solo act and always will be! Scram!"

Clint ducked as Steve threw the shield prototype right back at the other's head. The omega captain was on his feet again, jaw a little set in frustration that the moment had been ruined. Maybe it was a little embarrassing getting caught doing that but Steve was still their captain and he gave the orders in the end. He could cling onto that.

"The Avengers aren't stupid," Steve said, the rest of them showing no signs of leaving anytime soon. "I recommended you join strongly, actually. In my report."

The spell broken, Tony was marching up the stairs to the main floor, Steve on his heels.

"And the job comes with a lot of perks," Natasha said, biting on her bottom lip slowly, eyes bright with mischief.

Steve let out a frustrated huff. "Tony, slow down, where are you--"

"The health insurance is good," Phil filled in conversationally. "Though we really should be leaving..." He said and glanced to Clint.

Steve swallowed and glanced back over at Tony. "Are you kicking me out too?" He asked quietly.
Tony felt a lump form in his throat.

"You lied to me."

The moment had been broken and the magic was gone now. Steve's eyes were pleading with him, but it could be another trick.

"I'm not your Alpha," said Tony after a moment. The words were so hard to grind out, but he did that with surprising steadiness. "You're just fucking with me, aren't you? Is that how your team does it? Sends cute omegas out to recruit? Tries to manipulate people into joining the dream team by pair bonding them to omegas?" It was a vicious accusation. Even Tony knew that while he was saying it. Maybe that's why he said it. He couldn't afford to have Steve hang around, ruin the safe life he'd created for himself. "Well, it didn't work. I don't even want your omega. You can take him back, Romanoff. In case any of you got the wrong idea, we never mated; he doesn't want me, and I don't want him. I'm happy being single and I don't know what his deal is, and I really don't care. I care about Iron Man. End of list. And now that the reactor problem's been solved, I'm back to business as usual. Which means I don't have time for your stupid little diversity project, and I sure as hell wouldn't want to join knowing the uppity little omegas that you guys use to get shit done. I'll pass on joining the team. You can tell Fury to go fuck himself."

Tony crossed his arms, glaring, as he walked over to the front door. He pointed. "Out."

It was, surprisingly, Phil who reacted first; he actually took two steps toward Tony, fists balled, before Natasha threw out an arm to stop him.

"I hope your pride in your loneliness is enough to keep you warm at night," she said softly, coldly, before lowering her arm and jerking her head "Captain? Agents Barton, Coulson...?"

She turned and began striding out. Clint followed her. Phil looked to Steve.

"You heard her. Shoo. Get out of my house," snarled Tony to Steve.

All that relief and serenity Steve had been feeling dissipated in an instant and a heavy weight tugged in his gut. Was he going to be sick? He felt like maybe he was. Natasha was giving him one of her looks- a sympathetic look, like she was right all along but she was sorry she was. Steve didn't move right away, a lump lodging in his throat.

Right. Tony was mad at him. He didn't like him. He didn't want him. Steve had betrayed his trust. All that screwed up stuff.

He almost flinched when Tony snarled at him.

"Just read the report." Steve said quietly, all emotion devoid of his voice and then he walked out, feeling Natasha's hand on the small of his back briefly in comfort.

He didn't even look back. Tony didn't want him. He didn't. Steve felt numb all over, like someone has stolen the air out of his lungs. Like he was drowning in ice cold water all over again. Steve realised he was being lead up to a car.

"Steve? Goddammit, Steve, say something. Are you okay?" Natasha asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Я думаю, что я мог бы его любила," Steve whispered. Nat squeezed his shoulder as she guided him into the car; they got in and left Tony standing, alone, in the rubble of his mansion.
Tony glared at them as they left. First agents Barton and Romanoff, the two of them looking deadly in their tactical gear. Then agent Coulson, looking crisp and professional in his well-cut suit. And finally, the odd man out, Steve, his leather biking jacket thrown over his once white button-up shirt. Steve paused at the door and turned, as if expecting Tony to change his mind. Tony kept his arms folded and his glare fixed, and then Steve turned and left.

Tony made sure he heard the car starting before he dropped his mask.

"...JARVIS?" he asked.

"Yes, sir?" said the AI.

Tony remembered the smile on his father's face when he spoke to the real Jarvis. How the two of them had gazed adoringly at each other on the film that was now burned to ashes in his basement. How, for just a brief moment in time, he'd felt that from Steve.

He realized he was tearing up.

*I'm forty years old. My house is ruined. Pepper is furious at me. And I just let my omega go.*

Tony staggered toward the bar and grabbed a bottle to try to force down the lump forming in his throat. It was almost worth being honey-potted by some shady government agency to feel what he had felt around Steve. Maybe he should run after him. Admit that he didn't care if Steve was faking. Beg Steve to let him be his Alpha. Beg to have him, even if their whole relationship was just a clever ruse by SHIELD, because Tony had slept with hundreds-- *thousands* -- of women and never felt anything remotely close to what he felt when Steve had knelt for him.

But, irony of ironies... Alphas didn't beg.

Not strong ones, anyway.

And even if they did, Tony could never run after Steve, not with Phil and Natasha and Barton watching.

"He should've just let me die," said Tony dramatically. (Tony believed in having a melodramatic breakdown at least a couple times a year.)

"Perhaps his refusal to let you die was evidence that he cared for you," said JARVIS.

Tony sank onto the nearest sofa, still covered in dust from his disastrous birthday party; it creaked and then broke, depositing him onto the floor. He snorted at the situation. He decided to handle it the way he always did. By drinking. He'd have a nice little breakdown and maybe, with time, he'd go back to feeling his usual numbness. His usual shallow sense of superiority. And maybe, with time, maybe he'd get lucky and forget Steve entirely.

"Steve! Steve, where do you think you're--"

"I'm taking the week, Nat," Steve snapped as he slammed the car door shut. Phil and Clint had taken another ride to New Mexico. Natasha had offered to drive Steve to his place; he had sat sulkily in the passenger's seat, scowling out the window, clearly not willing to talk.
She'd stopped just outside of his apartment-- which was his, his own space, even though it had been paid for by SHIELD. In the heart of Westwood, a small, posh neighborhood in Los Angeles, it was the same apartment he'd used to be undercover in Stark Industries. But it was still the closest he'd come to having his own home in this century.

"Steve. We need to talk about you said--"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"Steve!" Natasha slipped out of the driver's seat, hurried around the other side of the car and grabbed his wrist. He stopped, even though it would have been perfectly easy to wrench away from her.

"What, Natasha?" Steve demanded. "What do you want me to say? That I fucked up? That I got compromised? I'm a ninety-five year old virgin who’s still coming to terms with the fact that he isn't fucking dead and that I've fallen for Tony fucking Stark- who hates me- because fate has a grim sense of humor?"

"Oh, please, you're not even ninety-three yet," she scoffed.

"I don't want to talk. I want to go to bed, for days. I want to sulk and have long baths and eat shitty food and I don't want to see anyone. I don't want sympathy. I want to be alone. So, please, Nat. Just leave it. Because I'm done-- I'm just...I have nothing left to give right now."

Natasha's grip remained on his wrist, but Steve made no motion to pull away; he really didn't have anything left to give.

Tony lying on the floor of his ruined shop and finishing his second bottle of Jack Daniel's (he'd started on Captain Morgan, but the "Captain" on the label had prompted a new bout of dramatic wallowing) and playing with a Rubik's cube he'd found in the rubble of the his basement when he felt a drop of rain.

"JARVIS. Tell me it's not raining. This is southern California. It doesn't rain."

"Yes, sir. A drizzle," said JARVIS.

"How poetic," slurred Tony, solving the cube. He began mixing it up again for another round. He could generally solve them in a couple of minutes; he just liked having his hands busy. "I lost Steve and now I'm being rained on. In the house. Because there's a hole in my roof. Because I beat up my best friend. On my birthday. JARVIS, I think I might be a mess."

"It's possible," conceded JARVIS.

"Is there anyone out there who isn't mad at me right now?"

"I'm not mad at you, sir."

"Thanks, Jarv, but you're not human. You're just a program. A damned good one, but still... not really a connoisseur of human emotion. Math isn't great at predicting people's motivations." He took a swig from the bottle. "Maybe I oughta call Pepper."

"You've already called her, sir."

"...I did?"
"Yes, sir, fourteen times. Her voicemail is full. You've left messages. Most of them incomprehensible."

"Oh, shit. I should call someone else, then." Tony hiccuped. "...maybe I oughta call Stan. I mean, Steve. I mean, Captain America." He felt his stomach drop a little.

"You told me not to allow you to call Steve. You've requested a drunken call to him thrice already, sir."

"I did? Maxwell's equations, how drunk am I?" Tony dropped the Rubik's cube and fumbled to pick it up. He knew he was too drunk to pass a field sobriety test. He was taking up to five minutes to solve the cube.

"Your blood alcohol content is likely above a point two, sir. Perhaps closer even to a point three." JARVIS sounded about as impatient and concerned as an artificial program was capable of.

"You meant point zero three?"

"No, sir. Point three."

"How bad's that?"

"If you weren't an alcoholic, it would likely kill you."

"I'm not an alcoholic!" protested Tony. "...alcoholics go to meetings. ...can you call Steve from a blocked line? Run the number through a proxy? I won't talk. I just..." Tony felt a tear run down his face and tried to pretend it was just the rain. "...I just wanna hear his voice. Please, JARVIS. ...if you call him, I'll drink a glass of water, try to get that point three down..."

"Dialing Steve Rogers from a secured line," said JARVIS, sounding defeated.

Outside of Steve's Westwood apartment, Steve had just turned when his phone went off.

Natasha saw an opportunity and took it. Steve was in no condition to be by himself and she didn't want to let him go without a fight. Lightning-fast, she plucked his cell phone from his back pocket and took a step back. "...it's from a blocked number," she reported, holding the phone hostage. "I'll give you the phone, but please, Steve. Please don't lock yourself away. Or at least let me lock myself in there with you. I'm worried about you." The phone continued to ring in her hand.

Steve was having none of it, however. Natasha was quicker, but he was stronger. He backed up her against the car like she weighed of nothing with his forearm pressed against her chest. He forced the phone out of her hand. Steve wasn't afraid of getting in close and he was in no mood for games right now. He glanced down at it. It really was a blocked number. Huh. Steve blinked and then he looked back up to see Natasha's forlorn expression and she sighed.

She rarely expressed emotion as sincerely as this; concern was written all over her face. "I'll call you tomorrow," Steve promised. "But I've literally had two weeks of playing at being someone I'm not. I need some time to myself right now, Nat; I'm sorry." He took the call, holding the phone to his ear. "Hello?" He frowned for a moment when he heard nothing. Steve couldn't even hear breathing. "Wonderful, now someone's butt-dialed me..." He sighed and rolled his eyes. Natasha smiled a little at his use of the term "butt-dialed;" the first time he had heard it, he'd blushed crimson. "I'll speak to you tomorrow Nat," he told her firmly and then turned, heading into the lobby of his building.
Tony closed his eyes and sighed with contentment as he heard Steve's voice.

"He sounds okay, right?" he asked JARVIS. "He doesn't sound like I hurt him too bad or anything... I didn't wanna be so hard on him but... but he... he was just lying to me, JARVIS... the whole time. He didn't care about me. I needed to make sure he wouldn't come back. He said... he said I was a shitty Alpha..."

"There, there, sir," said JARVIS drily.

"Thanks, Jarv. Call him again."

"I advise against it."

"...I'll drink another glass of water."

JARVIS wasn't programmed to sigh but he didn't need to be; he dialed the phone for Tony. Tony held his breath, listening intently to the other line ringing, desperate for more of Steve's voice. He knew he was torturing himself but maybe he didn't care. Maybe he even deserved it, letting himself fall so hard, like an idiot. Ever since he was around to experience Steve's heat, he'd been obsessed with him. Tony wondered what his father would have thought about Tony falling for the omega Howard had eagerly appointed to be the captain of the Avengers, the same omega he'd pumped full of serum, creating an unnaturally strong, agile, powerful omega. Would he think it was pathetic? Funny? Tragic? Ironic? Tony felt it was all of those things, and more.

The worst part was thinking, feeling, that Steve had maybe liked him.

"No one likes you," hissed Tony to himself while the phone rang.

In Westwood, Natasha watched Steve turn. "Steve. Please call me, if you need anything, okay? I've been undercover my whole life. I know what happens when you get in too deep, how it feels. We don't have to talk. If you just want to lay around in sweatpants eating ice cream--"

"I know," Steve said quietly. "I promise. I'll call."

Once in the lobby, Steve took the stairwell. He lived on the seventeenth floor, but the stairs never winded him and he found climbing them to be a good way to burn off some energy and have some quiet time to think. He took the steps two at a time and then he was home. Inside his safe and secure apartment. It was small, but stylish; after all, SHIELD had paid for it. But above all else it was homely. The kitchen was tucked away in a broken off corner from the living room, and all of the furniture was shaded in soft creams and a duck-egg blue. His sofa was large compared to the TV, which was small; the bookcase was swamped with literature he was starting to think he'd never quite catch up on. His bedroom had huge windows which left it full of light; the bed was piled high with blankets- more than he needed, really. But Steve had always hated the cold. Or even the idea of it.

His bedroom was also littered in art supplies; one of his first personal purchases was an easel which was propped up by the window. He'd drawn the cityscape view many a time and he didn't think it was possible to tire of it. Of course, there were drawings of Tony in there among the mix. Why not? Tony was of interest to him; Tony was also the subject he'd been spending the most time around over the last few weeks.

He sighed raggedly and held up the phone again as it began to ring. The number was still withheld.
Steve held the phone to his ear. "Seriously, who is this?" He asked. Still nothing. But Steve didn't hang up this time. He flicked the latch up and locked the door behind him. He slowly stepped into his living room.

There was a pregnant pause.

"...Tony?" Steve whispered, failing to conceal the hope in his voice. "Is this you?"

Tony's stomach jumped into his throat when Steve said his name. Tony lay there, staring up at the dark sky, letting himself get rained on.

Steve asked if it was him.

"...no," said Tony hoarsely. He realized, after saying it, what a bone-headed lie it was. Now Steve had heard his voice.

_I'm the world's dumbest genius_, thought Tony, closing his eyes, feeling the world rock him. He'd drunk enough enough that he was feeling better. Well... not better. But empty, which was better than the agony of losing Steve. He felt like a shell. A taco shell, specifically, the crunchy fragile kind that always split when you bit into it and spilled its contents everywhere. But Tony no longer had anything to spill. He was all dried up, a husk.

If he could just maintain this for the rest of his life, things might not be so bad.

Iron Man didn't need emotions to keep the world safe. Didn't need friends, either. Didn't need anything.

Tony tried to take a swig of the bottle but it was empty. He began crawling toward the bar. It was hard; the world was moving pretty significantly and his coordination was non-existent.

Another memory. Steve, carrying him to bed. A new pang bloomed in his stomach. A small, pathetic cry caught in Tony's throat. He froze. Had the line been open? Had Steve heard that? Was this normal, to hurt so much? Tony didn't know enough about Alpha-omega relationships to know. He'd never wanted to learn anything about pair-bonding, pretending that such old instincts were outdated and stupid and that he was above them, intellectually. That his logic trumped the deep, ancient desires of his genetics.

Pair-bonds rarely, if ever broke, with death being the only real condition that tended to separate partners once they'd bonded. Tony had heard of people wasting away after losing their partners--everyone had--but that was all anecdotal. Clinically, Takotsubo syndrome had been described fifteen years after Alpha-omega divorce had been legalized; whether or not the two were correlated was uncertain. But Takotsubo syndrome was generally reserved for pair-bonds that had been around forever, like Howard and Jarvis. And besides, he and Steve weren't paired. Tony had merely wanted to--

No! No, he hadn't. He didn't want an omega. Especially not one that had been _spying_ on him. Especially not a childhood hero that had been created by his father and was _supposed to be dead_. This was all way too complicated.

Tony made it to the bar, happily rose, lose his balance immediately, and swept six different bottles to the concrete floor, where they shattered. Tony paused, lying there, surrounded by broken glass. "...I'm a little bit drunk," he informed Steve helpfully. His words slurred into each other.

Tony noted, with interest, one bottle was intact. He wrestled with the top of it, not caring what kind of liquor it was, as long as it would keep him numb, keep his world rocking, keep his misery
at an arm's length.

Steve sighed loudly enough for Tony to hear. "Right. It's been like an hour, Tony. You nearly died once today, isn't that enough?" He almost sounded like PA Stan, because really there hadn't been much of a difference. Sure, Steve had been a little more professional and less confrontational. But he hadn't lied per se (aside from the whole Cap and SHIELD thing). Everything else was true— it was a deception on the surface, but not underneath.

"Why did you call me?" Steve's voice was soft, gentle, and without accusation. He frowned when he heard the smashing, the sounds of pain. Why was Tony doing this to himself? Steve kept the phone to his ear as he moved around his kitchen, setting the kettle on to boil.

Tony didn't say anything. Steve figured he'd fill the silence. "I know you're mad and you have every right to be. And I regret what I did, honestly—but I'm glad I wrote that report. Which you should still read," he added and then paused. "And I'm glad I got to know you," Steve murmured, tone sincere as ever as he moved to get a mug out of his cupboard. It had an American flag on it with the word "PATRIOT" on it in an overly swirly script. Natasha had gotten it for him. She thought it was funny; Steve was raised to be practical and not wasteful, so he used it even though it was sort of silly.

"Now, I don't want to talk about Howard, or SHIELD. They're the reasons why we met and why we're here, sure. But that's where it ends," Steve said, words careful as he dropped a tea bag into his mug. "I'm Captain America, but that's not... that's not all I am, you know?"

"You're an omega," said Tony, tone accusatory.

"Yeah."

"...everyone says Captain America is an Alpha."

"Well, I'm not."

"I mean, there was that sexy Captain America omega act with the USO, but--"

"Yeah. That was me."

"...you're supposed to be dead."

Steve swallowed, watching the steam billow up as he poured the boiling water into the mug and watched the amber color bloom into flavor. "I was frozen. I-- I remembered crashing a plane into the Atlantic, and then I woke up here. You know what it's like drowning in ice cold water? Not fun. It actually took me over four hours to fall unconscious...never told anyone that before. Guess I just let people assume I got knocked out straight away. I don't know why they thought I did."

Another sigh.

"And then you showed up... or I guess, I was the one that showed up. I mean, Nick assigned me to you--"

"Nick assigned an unbonded omega not on suppressants to an unbonded Alpha?" asked Tony incredulously.

"They told me I was probably infertile from the ice, too screwed up. That I wouldn't have heats, so I didn't need to worry- and suppressants wouldn't work on my metabolism anyway. Look, I didn't mean to have a heat, I thought-- and I'm not supposed to goddamn kneel for anyone! I'm Captain
America! Jesus Christ." Steve ran a hand over his face.

"But you did," said Tony.

"But I did," he echoed. "For you. I don't know. Maybe a part of me was mad at myself for doing it, but it felt as simple as breathing. And for the first time ever, since I woke up in this place, I felt like maybe... maybe I'd found home." Steve swallowed when Tony remained quiet. "Please," he said after a moment. "Just...say something."

Tony listened to Steve's words wash over him, a soothing balm, while he fought with the cap of the liquor bottle. It took him a moment to realize Steve wasn't talking anymore. Tony fought to go back, struggled to remember what Steve had said to respond to it. "I know what it's like," he said finally. A confused pause. Tony realized Steve might think he meant heats. "Drowning in icy water," he clarified. Tony had never told anyone about that. Not in detail. No one needed to know what those three months had been like. Ninety-six days to build the very first suit. Ninety-six days of hunger, sleep deprivation, rape, torture. By the time Tony had left the cave, he'd been fearless. Death had seemed like a preferable option to remaining there. That had been two years ago. Tony still sometimes had nightmares.

He tried to think of a joke to lighten the mood.

"Gotta admire that dedication, right? Using water to torture a guy in the middle of the desert? Those guys, man, it was an art form." He took a swig of the alcohol, coughing and choking a little on the burning liquor. Bottom-shelf gin. Ugh.

Wait. Where the fuck was his Rubik's cube? Tony scrambled around the floor for a bit, then gave up. "I... I lost my Rubik's cube. I'm pretty drunk. A little bit--" Tony bit back a sudden urge to vomit.

Did Steve even know what Takotsubo syndrome was? Could you get Takosubo syndrome if you weren't bonded? Would he have ever agreed to go undercover if he knew he'd end up killing Tony this way? Because Tony was sure he was dying. How ironic. He'd saved his life, he'd replaced the reactor... now he was alive... but he was dying, suffering... pining for Steve... and, conveniently, he'd already put all his affairs in order, expecting to die... he had given away the company and the suit and made provisions in his will for what remained of his art collection, his cars, his guitars... which had been destroyed today, anyway...

"You're right, Stan. I mean, Steve. I mean-- Captain?"

"Steve's fine," said Steve.

"You're right, Steve. I'm a shitty Alpha... I'm sorry I asked you to kneel. It just felt right."

"You aren't shitty," said Steve. "I was just angry when I said that because sometimes you made me feel embarrassed and objectified. And let's be honest, even in today's standards that's nothing new or unusual. I wouldn't have knelt if I hadn't wanted to. And I wouldn't have let you kiss me if I hadn't wanted you to, either," Steve pointed out quickly, nearly stumbling over his words. "Just...just read the report. Please. And don't do anything stupid, Tony. I didn't fight so hard for you to live for you to just hurt yourself."

Steve stared at his tea and his shoulders sagged. It had over-brewed, the tea bag left in for too long. He hated that.

"I know you don't want me there right now," he said carefully. It hurt to just say it. "But if you
need somewhere...or to just not to be alone. Then I'm here. You know where I am. My address is the same."

And then he sighed again.

"I know we made a mess of things-- we both did, in our own ways." Steve slumped against the countertop in his kitchen and slowly slid down till he was sitting on the floor. "But I wouldn't mind... trying to figure out things together. You made me feel a lot of things," he admitted quietly. "I always thought the idea of submitting to an Alpha was awful. But with you it’s... the opposite. It feels... I dunno..."

"It feels right," volunteered Tony. "...I'm worried we're scent-mates."

"Maybe," said Steve. "...if you want to talk about it, like I said, you can come over, I can explain everything."

Tony looked over at the garage. The peg board with the keys was lying broken on the floor. Half the cars were wrecked. "I'd come over," he slurred, "but I messed up my garage doing a thing earlier. I made a new element. I'm... I'm naming it after myself, Steve. I'm naming it... naming it badassium."

"You're kidding, right?" asked Steve.

"He was quite insistent on calling it that," piped up JARVIS.

"I don't know anything about omegas, Steve. I... I can't... you spied on me... and you... went into heat and I just lost it, I lost control. I can't... shouldn't... I'm a genius, I'm Tony goddamn Stark. I'm too... too evolved for that kind of behavior... and now, I am going to throw up." With this calm pronouncement, Tony leaned over and began retching, an entire stomach's worth of Jack Daniel's coming up with fairly impressive force. Tony had the presence of mind to feel disappointed by that. He needed that alcohol. He needed it to numb the pain, to give him courage. He never would be talking to Steve if it weren't for the alcohol.

"Literally... nothing..." he gasped, still leaning over, spitting occasionally. "Dunno how often they go into heat or how long or nothing... never been with one in heat, either... ever... never wanted to... don't wanna... don't wanna feel anything... can't... oh, my God, I think maybe I might be a little drunk." He spat again, stomach twisting and coiling inside him.

"Okay... okay, no, I feel better... oh, my God, I don't think I ever drank that much... I threw up way more than went in... okay... I'm good now... I'll read the report, Steve, okay, but... but if you can hurry up and text it to me... email it, I mean... just send it... I... I have a big night planned, I'm gonna donate it. My badassium. I wanna donate it to--"

Fuck. He hadn't thought that far ahead.

He tried to think of a good cause.

"What's that place where you cut off your hair and give it to kids with cancer? They can have it. Or... or maybe, uh, I don't know, uh, the... the World Wildlife Fund. JARVIS! JARVIS, I need you to update my will again."

"Sir, your alma mater would be the best choice for such a donation," said JARVIS.

"MIT? Yeah... yeah, okay, call them for me... but first I need you to read Steve's report, I'm too drunk... Steve... Steve, did you send that report? I'm only reading it 'cause it's so damned important
to you. I hate reports, I hate paperwork, you know that..." He hiccuped, but nothing more came up. He felt slightly better. He took another swig of his gin, forcing himself to keep it down.

"I already sent it over, remember? You just never check your emails." Steve's voice was quiet, growing distant. Maybe he was wrong- maybe he read it wrong. Maybe him kneeling for Tony didn't mean as much as he'd thought it had. Tony was so sloppy drunk that Steve doubted he'd remember much of this conversation, or his suggestion that they might be scent-mates.

"Shall I read it out loud?" JARVIS asked politely.

Steve could have kissed the stupid program. "Yeah! ...yeah. Read the report out loud to him. Tony, this is what I wrote after two weeks of observation--"

"You spied on me!"

"--yeah, and I said I was sorry, okay? SHIELD wants to recruit you but there were questions regarding your stabili--"

"I'm perfectly stable!" slurred Tony.

Steve sighed. "JARVIS, can you just read the conclusion, please?"

It was calming, hearing his own words read out by the AI. "Tony Stark is, without doubt, one of the most arrogant and self-absorbed men I have ever met. He is obnoxious, rude and at most times selfish. He was often inappropriate with me and did not know how to appropriately act around omegas-- but that is something that can be learned with experience and time. And I believe Tony Stark is more open minded than he's led the public to believe. Regardless, it must be acknowledged that Tony Stark is not a man without faults. But his faults are negligible when compared to his good qualities. Tony is an obviously ingenious man who has the potential to change the world forever and for good, and in some ways he already has. From what I have observed, Tony Stark is a remarkably service-oriented man who, despite all of his insistence to the contrary, believes in the greater good and is prepared to sacrifice everything and more for the people he cares about. He's ambitious, determined, and though lacking in self-discipline, he has a drive befitting a special ops agent, and an enthusiasm for his work than I honestly envy. He has an unrivaled level of compassion for life. I do not see how Tony Stark could not be an asset to the Avengers Initiative; he would be, in fact, a vital component in the team's success."

Tony listened to JARVIS reading and a slow grin spread across his face, his head bobbing appreciatively. Arrogant? Yes. Self-absorbed? Check. Obnoxious, rude, and selfish? Guilty as charged.

Tony had long since begun to wear his smugness and intellect as a suit of armor. He was proud of Steve's excellent description of it.

His smile faltered as JARVIS continued. A lump filled his throat. Change the world for good? Him?

"Steve." His voice cracked. Steve had him all wrong. Tony wasn't a good person. He'd spent years building weapons, and never for a second wondered where his missiles were landing. When he went to Afghanistan and saw what they were doing...

Part of being Iron Man was penance. Trying to make up for the sins of the son, and the sins of the father. He'd been talking about protecting the troops and creating peace for decades, stupidly and blissfully unaware that his work was indiscriminately destroying whole villages of innocent
people.
He was feeling sick again.

"Steve, I'm... I'm not a good person. I wanted to save the world. I wanted to save the world and I
couldn't even save Yinsen. I'm... I'm..." There wasn't any word for what he was. Tony's brilliance
had wrought more destruction than he'd ever be able to make up for. Ever. And everyone loved
Iron Man so much that they didn't see what he was doing for what it was. It was atonement and it
was too little, too late.

Tony didn't deserve an omega. He didn't deserve to be loved or to be happy. If he had, wouldn't
his father have loved him? If he had been a good person, if he hadn't been loathsome, then would
Stane, his business partner for decades, the man closer to him than his own father had ever been...
would Stane have betrayed him, tried to kill him?

Tony made a noise of frustration and pitched the gin bottle across the room. "I don't wanna be an
Avenger!" he said petulantly.

"Sir, Hammer on line two."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now, JARVIS?! God damn it, I fucking hate that guy! Put him
through!"

JARVIS put Steve on hold before Steve could protest.

"Tonyyyy!" sang Justin. "Hey, Tony Bologna, how's it hanging?"

"Justin, you cock-sucking son of a syphilitic cunt, I hope your dick falls off and a bird eats it."

Justin considered this. "Wow. Well, I can see I called at a bad time. Just wanted to say happy
birthday."

"That was yesterday."

"Well, I didn't know about it; my invitation must have gotten lost in the mail. I just saw the news.
Sounds like a party. Hey, so, did your assistant book me that spot at the Expo? I have something
I think you're really, really gonna be blown away by."

"Go blow yourself," growled Tony, rubbing his head.

"...cute assistant, by the way."

Tony's hackles rose.

"...an omega. Interesting choice. Thought you were only into betas for some reason. He was a
cute little blondie, wasn't he?"

Tony knew he was being baited, knew Hammer was trying to get him upset. It was working.
"Justin, shut the fuck up."

"Sorry. He's not yours, though, right? I didn't peg you as the kind of guy to get possessive. I
mean, I can see why ... he was really, really tasty-looking--"

"Justin, I will cut off your head and pee down your neck."

Justin laughed breezily. "You're such a kidder, Tony. Have you been drinking? We ought to drink
together sometime, it'd be fun. Well, enough chit-chat, I know you're busy, I'm busy too, you know, us two, movers, shakers, and producers, right? Get me that spot at the Expo. You're gonna be surprised, Tony, really, I promise that."

"Fine, show up early so I can kick your ass, you piece of crap."

"Haha. Oh! Check out Vanity Fair if you get a chance. Christine wrote a great story about me. ...did you happen to get acquainted with her, Tony? She was something."

"Stay away from my omega," said Tony, before he could stop himself.

"So he is your omega?"

"He's his own omega."

Justin burst into laughter and covered the phone briefly to call to someone behind him. "Jack! Jack, oh my God, Tony Stark just told me his assistant was his own omega..." He turned back to the phone. "You really are turning into your father, Tony. You getting soft? Getting into omega rights now? ...wow, that is something. ...that's cute. Okay, I'll see you soon, buddy, at the Expo, right? Put me in for a Saturday slot. Thanks, Tony. Ciao!"

He hung up. Tony clenched his teeth. "I hate that guy!" he growled. JARVIS put Steve back on. Tony was still worked up; the hair on the back of his neck was still standing up. "Steve," he murmured, as if checking that Steve was okay. The very idea of Justin even thinking about Steve drove him crazy.

Whilst Tony left him on hold, Steve had rescued his cup of tea with milk and sugar. He liked how available the stuff was; you could get it anywhere, anytime. The future was amazing like that. "I can't believe you put me on hold for that asshole," Steve said, his tone almost teasing. He sipped at his tea and toed off his shoes before he moved to sit down on his couch, knees tucked against his chest.

He briefly thought back to the racetrack and how possessive Tony had gotten. Something stirred low in Steve's belly-- yeah, he liked that. He swallowed and sipped at his tea, realising he was almost blushing alone in his very own living room.

"If you don't wanna be an Avenger, then obviously I can't make you," Steve said gently. "And you'd have to follow my lead, Tony, and I'm not sure how you'd feel about that exactly..." he stretched his legs along the length of his couch. "My job isn't to judge people on their past, Tony. It's about the present. Natasha and Clint have pretty dodgy histories, too...for the record. But they're focusing on what they can do for the world, not what they've already done for it...

"Sorry," Steve cleared his throat. "I didn't mean to go all Cap on you there. ...but for the record, I really do think you'd be a great addition to the team. ...but also for the record, we don't slap each others' asses. Just so you know."

Tony felt his body relax, his tension melt away, as Steve began talking again. His chest swelled with an emotion he couldn't name. It wasn't the words, but the tone. Steve's voice was like a magical spell that made him feel... something.

Talking to Justin made him feel emotional, too, but in much more obvious way. It made him feel protective. He wanted to protect Steve. Tony had a brief mental image of himself, standing over a kneeling Steve, teeth bared at Justin.

It was ludicrous, of course. Steve was the last guy in the world who needed to be protected; he
was huge. And Tony wasn't really that kind of Alpha. Not usually, anyway. He could easily imagine fighting Natasha (and undoubtedly losing) on Steve's behalf.

Part of the reason, Tony suspected, that Justin hovered around was because he, like Tony, was not an especially strong Alpha but he, like Tony, happened to be in a business that drew lots of intense Alphas, ones of high dominance. Their pheromones screamed aggression and assertiveness. But there was a difference between Tony and Justin. Tony would have been remarkable if he were a beta; Tony's claim to fame was his intelligence, not his social status. Justin clung desperately to his because it was all he had, and revolved madly around Tony, trying to validate his specialness by drawing a comparison between the two of them.

"You clearly have not seen me around my friends," slurred Tony, pushing Justin out of his mind. "If your friends were all supermodels and shit, you'd slap about ten asses a day. ...what's your deal with friends? Why are you being so nice to me? Have you been watching Care Bears or something?" Tony didn't add that his "friends" were really associates and people he invited to parties and women he slept with and then didn't take out to breakfast the next morning. The people Tony actually cared about were limited to Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey, and two of those people were furious with him and probably not talking to him. Tony didn't really understand "friends." He'd never had them. Rhodey had been the first friend he'd ever made, in college. Before that, Tony had been too isolated; he was never able to connect or relate to his peers. He was Howard Stark's son and, worse, he gained a reputation for being devastatingly, intimidatingly intelligent.

At the frat party he and Rhodey had met at, Tony had been doing mental math for shots. The Stark Wunderkind, they called him; he was something of a mascot, a seventeen-year-old who was balls-deep in two Masters programs and was known for hovering around the robotics lab helping out Ph.D candidates for fun.

"What's two hundred and eighty-seven divided by thirty-six point eight?" they would yell.

"Seven point eight!" Tony would yell back. Someone would plug it into a calculator to confirm he got it right, but he always did, and then they'd all cheer and hand him a shot. Rhodey had dragged him away after finding him vomiting outside.

"You know they're treating you like a performing monkey?" he asked coldly, looking at the kid.

"No, they're my friends," Tony had replied. And in that moment he'd felt proud... proud to have friends, to be popular. It was one of the few things Tony struggled with, making friends. He hadn't solved that particular equation yet. People liked him because he was smart and powerful and funny, and Tony soaked up the attention like a sponge. But his relationships never evolved past that point. There was never any intimacy.

If you wanted to be Freudian about it, he suspected you could blame his parents, and especially his father, because the Stark household hadn't been an overly friendly one; they didn't hug, didn't tell each other they loved one another, didn't do family vacations or even really family activities. Howard was too busy working, and Maria was too busy with her charities, and Tony preferred to be left alone so that he could destroy various electronics.

"I don't know what Care Bears are," said Steve.

"...are we friends?" blurted Tony. "Did you ever really like me, Steve? If there weren't any Avengers, would me and you... would you care?"

The vulnerability in Tony's voice made something tug sharply in Steve's chest. The blonde swallowed, phone getting clammy against his ear from the heat of his face. He swallowed and
paused to think before answering.

"I think we're friends," Steve said quietly. "I've looked after when you're drunk, brought you smoothies, dealt with your one night stands...and I've seen you nearly kill yourself to protect your friends. I'd say we're friends," he murmured. "Or, I'd like to think we are. But I did lie to you. But there's nothing I can really do about that now," he murmured, almost to himself. "But I wasn't lying when I said I like you. Didn't I make that clear already? I goddamn knelt for you Tony. What more can I do to prove it to you?" Steve stared down at his milky tea in his lap. "Avengers or not--I mean it. I protected your designs from SHIELD; I like to think that counts for something," he breathed and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

Steve wasn't a natural liar. It had taken a month of intense training from Natasha for Fury to even consider him for the job in the first place. She'd taught him how to lie and deceive-- how to use his omega wiles if he had to. How to blend into crowds, how to read people... the soldier had turned into an agent. Steve wasn't sure how he felt about that transformation. But he couldn't really go back now, could he?

"My designs?" repeated Tony.

"Yeah. They wanted intel on the suits."

Tony snorted a little. "Weren't you born in the twenties? They sent a guy from the twenties to try to figure out how the suits work? Without an RT node in the middle, you can't power them anyway... no one knows how to make them except--" Except me, he'd been about to say. Except that wasn't true anymore. There was a scary-looking Russian guy who'd nearly killed him, who was currently rotting in a jail cell in Monaco. The thought chilled his blood.

Steve didn't seem to have noticed the abrupt quiet on the other line. "All this...I don't know." Steve sighed. "It makes me think maybe this was supposed to happen. Maybe I was supposed to be frozen, end up here..." With you. The words went unsaid but the meaning was clear. Steve pressed his lips together into a thin line. "My heat was strange. And that heat, it happened because of you and I'm not sure if I can just...ignore that. I didn't even know...I've never experienced something so intense in my life."

"Me neither," said Tony softly, hoarsely. Remembering how he'd had to be physically restrained was embarrassing, to say the least. If Happy and Pepper weren't there, he would have spent the whole flight trying to tear down the door to get to Steve. He'd never lost his cool like that, especially not while sober. "...but, like, us being scent-mates, that doesn't mean we have to--"

"No, no, of course not," agreed Steve quickly.

An hour ago, Steve had knelt.

He'd only ever knelt for one other Alpha in his entire life.

Tony swallowed. Would it be wrong of him to pursue this? He could be playing into Fury's plan. Who knew anymore? Nothing had been certain these last two years, ever since Afghanistan. Everything in his life was completely back-asswards. His assistant was now his CEO and his omega was an undercover agent and he'd been dying and now he wasn't, and Justin fucking Hammer was trying to get his foot into the door of the Expo--

Wait a moment.

Tony shook his head out. His omega? No. Steve wasn't his omega. Steve didn't want him. Not
like that. They were just friends, friends who had experienced something weird together. Steve wasn't in heat anymore. The kneeling had probably just been due to... who knew, maybe, emotions had been high, neither of them were thinking. Tony asking Steve to kneel in the first place was way out of line. But he'd apologized and Steve had forgiven him and now they could move on. Steve was a powerful omega and a captain in the armed services; of course he didn't need some weak little Alpha like Tony to feel validated.

And as they'd both agreed, logically, being scent-mates did not obligate them to like each other or be together or... anything. They could just be friends. And they didn't even have to be that.

If they were friends, would it be weird for Tony to come over? Talk to Steve without Natasha and Clint and Phil breathing down their necks? Being caught in an intimate pose, with Steve at Tony's feet, had been embarrassing. Tony was almost grateful that Coulson had dumped water on them.

Mixed signals. Steve had gone into heat for him. His body had practically been crying for Tony's; the vibes Tony had gotten were clear; Steve wanted him, Steve needed him, Steve was desperate to give himself to Tony. But then again, Steve had locked himself away for his heat; Steve had actively, consciously not wanted to mate with him; and he hadn't let Tony lick him, on his birthday ...

This would be easier if I weren't so drunk, thought Tony.

"If we're friends can I come over? I... I have a hole in my house. It's raining. And... and I think maybe the fridge is buried under some rubble," said Tony, weaving excuses. "I mean, I don't care, I can go out, actually, I can go through a drive-thru, but, uh... uh... listen, I don't really... what I said, earlier, I don't think you couldn't help going into heat... I just... I... I don't know if I wanna join up... Fury talked to me about it once but it's not my thing, you know, teamwork, cooperation... gross... actually you're probably too busy with the Avengers to hang out, that's fine, I just... I wanted to... come over... because of the hole in my roof." He trailed off, feeling pathetic. Talking to Steve like this, without having to look at him or smell him, without the other Avengers watching them, Clint and Natasha smirking knowingly, was easier. But still tricky, because Tony didn't want to seem desperate. But his earlier anger had cooled and now he just felt empty. He longed for Steve. Just to be in his presence, hover over him, feel close to him...

Tony spied a bright orange sticker and perked up. The Rubik's cube! He snatched it off the floor and want back to playing with it.

"You can come over," Steve murmured after a beat. "I don't have a spare room though; you can take the couch," he offered quietly and thought about them sharing. Thought about pressing the curve of his body up against Tony's under the sheets and blushed darkly. "Or... whatever."

Or whatever.

Tony doubted Steve had meant it like that but he let his imagination go wild.

Steve emptied his cup of his tea and went to drop the mug in the sink. "I'm not saying you have to sign a contract, Tony. I just want a chance to show you what we do-- what we could achieve together. If you'll let me. I really think the Avengers Initiative could be good for you--"

"Stop talking about the stupid Avengers thing."

"...okay. Okay, fine. I'll see you soon, Tony, yeah? Get your ass over here," Steve said, a fondness creeping into his tone.
Steve told him to come over, practically ordered him. Tony didn't need telling twice. He waited for Steve to hang up and then scrambled across the floor to try to find keys to one of the cars that wasn't wrecked, but managed to slice his hand open on a shard of glass in the rubble.

"Fuck!" he squawked at the crimson liquid blooming in his palm. He sucked on the cut, looking around for a pair of car keys.

But would a car even be fast enough? Fuck the car. He'd fly. Besides, he needed to make sure the new arc reactor could power the suits effectively.

"JARVIS! I need a suit up, I gotta go see Rogers. Can we get the Mark IV up on the gantry and slap a couple of thrusters onto it, just for a quick, short-term flight?"

"The Mark IV was never designed to be flight-capable, sir. I advise against--"

"Can it, Jarv. You can't get a DUI in a flying robot suit." I think. "How long can we keep the Mark IV in the air? I'll keep it under a hundred miles per hour."

"...eleven minutes," said JARVIS.

"...perfect. I won't need it for that long," said Tony eagerly.

Tony could barely stand straight on the gantry but once he was locked in, he felt steadier, more stable. The plates locked over his body, the gauntlets and greaves creeping over his body, enfolding him, and Tony felt the usual sense of comfort and strength. He reached up with a gloved hand to flip down the faceplate and waited for the augmented reality to load up. The digital readout came online in an second.

"JARV, set a route for Steve's apartment, I think he lives on Wilshire... somewhere in Westwood?"

"Yes, sir." JARVIS brought up an address from Steve's old personnel file; it still read "Stan."

Tony pointed the heels of his hands to the ground and hit the thrusts a hell of a lot harder than he meant to. He slammed into the ceiling, two feet away from the hole, and bounced back down to the ground.

"Fuck! Ow!" Iron Man climbed heavily to his feet, the gears whirring, and hit the thrusts again, this time making a perfect exit through the hole.

Once he was in the air, there was nothing to hit. Tony paused for a moment over the house, hovering. The front entrance was littered with broken glass. He remembered with some guilt how he'd tossed Rhodey around. Tony was good at pushing people around. Or away. Whatever. Same diff.

He hit the thrusters in the boots and shot himself left, realized he was going west, not east, over the Pacific, and cut the thrusters. The suit dropped, tumbled through the air for a moment, a dead weight; Tony hit the retro-thrust and aimed east.

"Sir, would you like to turn on the autopilot? Your current course so far has suggested that your inebriation has compromised your ability to fly."

"Are you kidding me? I'm doing great!" said Tony, shooting down his driveway and narrowly missing a palm tree. "...but if it would make you feel better, go for it."

"It would, sir. Setting autopilot for Wilshire Boulevard. Estimated time of arrival is four minutes."
Tony relaxed in the suit and jetted due east, admiring the beauty of the world below him, the streets lit up with the orange glow of streetlamps, their courses painted with the red of taillights and the white of headlights. Tony had always liked driving at night.

They swung down Wilshire, skyscrapers rising on either side of them. Steve was at the Wilshire, one of the older buildings, with wrought-iron railings on the balconies and copper adornments that had long since turned green with age.

He came in too fast and made an awkward, stumbling landing onto a balcony. He knocked on the door.

An unfamiliar person opened it, a woman in a bathrobe.

"Hi, I'm Iron Man," he said through the helmet. "Looking for a guy named Steve?"

"He's next door," said the woman, staring.

"Cool, thanks!" Tony turned, tripped over the wire railing, and fell off her balcony. She rushed over to see if he was okay; he'd already caught himself and was hovering outside a window. He rapped with his knuckles.

Steve had just stepped out of the shower and finished changing into clothes he hadn't spent twenty-four hours in. He looked up at the knocking from his balcony and blinked.

Steve opened the window and Tony was glad he was wearing the helmet, glad Steve couldn't see his face, because Tony felt like he might cry. He felt so much affection toward Steve. He could still smell his post-heat.

*It's the drink. Just the drink,* he reassured himself.

Steve's breath hitched a little. "Are you still drunk?" he asked, loud enough to be heard over the thrusters. He already felt better now Tony was here; he felt grounded. "I wasn't... I wasn't sure you'd come."

"Aren't you gonna invite me in?" demanded Tony, hovering. Steve was on the seventeenth floor. "I don't want the suit outside, last time I was in Westwood I got ticketed. They ticketed the suit, Steve. Beverly Hills Parking Authority is ruthless like that. Seriously, the Mark IV was never designed for flight, hurry up and open the window more, I'm coming in, move it..."

Steve laughed quietly and moved aside holding the window open for Tony. He stepped out of the way, expression bemused as the suit clunked into his bedroom. Tony shimmed awkwardly through the window, falling clumsily onto the floor. All the natural grace of it was gone and replaced with the awkward bulkiness of heavy, metal limbs. "You're bossier when you're drunk," he told him, but his tone was fond.

Tony realized he was in Steve's bedroom. His heart leaped into his throat and for a moment he just lay there in the suit, letting the heavy metal ground him.

Then he got up. The suit wasn't really designed for indoor use; it was far too bulky. Tony didn't want to leave it, but he couldn't stomp around Steve's tiny apartment in two hundred pounds of armor, so he steeled himself to face Steve. "JARVIS. Let me out of the suit."

Steve watched with both wonder and concern as the suit slowly, slowly began to unlock its plates and open up. "...how long's this gonna take?" he asked after a minute of mechanized whirring.
"Look, Steve, the Mark IV is an early prototype and it took a real beating in Morocco. The fact that it's non-gantry and flew here without killing me is a freakin' miracle. Anyway, you can't rush perfection."

The two of them lapsed into silence for another minute, waiting impatiently for the suit to open enough for Tony to remove himself from it. After several long minutes, Tony was finally able to step backwards out of it.

The suit did not collapse back into its briefcase but stood silently against the wall, an empty sentinel.

Tony stumbled a tiny bit as he stepped away from it, but caught himself.

He extended his arms out, in a *ta-da* gesture.

Steve didn't look impressed. He looked horrified.

"Do you want coff-- oh my gosh." Steve blinked. "Are you *bleeding* Tony?"

"Huh?" Tony looked at his hand. It was covered in blood. "Oh! Right! That! That's fine, don't worry about that... sorry..." Tony put his mouth on the cut. How the hell was his palm still bleeding? It was a clean cut, but deep. Lousy glass. "I'll just... wrap this... if you have bandages..." Tony hiccupped and swayed, but the sway turned into a practiced swagger and Tony let himself into Steve's living room, strutting around the room, examining Steve's inner life. He had never seen this place before. There was a stupid-looking, overly patriotic mug on the kitchen counter, some pictures on the fridge, an easel in the corner with a half-finished skyline in watercolor.

Tony didn't know Steve painted.

He squinted at the photos on the fridge. One of Steve and Natasha, Natasha looking deadly but a hint of a smile in her eyes. One of Steve giving a cheeky thumbs-up next to his own gravesite. One of Natasha and Clint giving each other bunny ears in front of the Washington Monument. Clearly, Steve and the other Avengers were more than just work friends.

One of the photos was older, dog-earred, faded. A candid shot of a man leaning out of a window, smoking and lost in thought, shirt unbuttoned, a pair of dog tags around his neck. "Who's that?" demanded Tony.

"An old friend," Steve said only as he went to fetch his first aid kit. Bucky was something private, something that was his. Steve wasn't usually selfish but Bucky was something he wasn't prepared to share with the world just yet- or rather, the memory of him. He was dead, long gone, but still precious.

For some reason, the picture struck Tony as intimate and he immediately felt threatened by the smoking man, the "old friend."

Tony had opened the fridge and begun digging around in it, leaving a bloody handprint on the white door.

The contents were telling. Tony learned that Steve was one of those people that put bread in the refrigerator and that he preferred whole milk. Tony closed it and wandered over to a bookshelf to start reading the titles. It was like a Museum of Steve and Tony's curiosity was piqued. He explored with the sort of unapologetic, naked interest of a child. The whole place smelled like Steve. Tony was happy here. Every little detail made him happy, with the possible exception of
the picture of the guy on the door of the fridge.

Steve let Tony observe for a bit but he really didn't want blood on his carpet-- maybe he was more than a little house proud. Steve had come from a meager background with shared tenements and cramped rooms with mold growing in every corner and a persistent chill in the air because they couldn't afford to ever heat it. So, yes, Steve was proud of his apartment. And he was quite happy to let Tony search around it for details of his life. No more lies. Steve wanted Tony to get to know him, in fact.

With a gentle hand on Tony's shoulder he lead the engineer to sit down on the couch. "Give me your hand," Steve said, tone fond as he sat next to him. He pulled out some antiseptic wipes. "This will hurt," he warned him and then he began to clean away the blood.

He winced a little when he felt Tony tense at the pain. "Sorry." Steve pulled out gauze tape next, fixing up the wound before carefully wrapping a strip of bandage around Tony's palm. It felt good to do this...to look after him. Maybe he wasn't Steve's Alpha, but he was still his friend.

He wrapped the bandage slower than he had to, admittedly enjoying the contact. "Natasha's been teaching me Russian," Steve said to fill the silence and explain. "That's why we were talking in it."

Tony was too distracted to listen to this explanation; he picked up a picture frame from the table beside the couch. Another old one, with a beautiful, smiling woman. Even though it wasn't in color, Tony could tell her lips were painted bright red; she was beaming, eyes squinted, wearing a military uniform, leaning against the side of a small plane. He flipped the frame over.

*Peggy Carter, 1942.*

Ah, yes. Aunt Peggy. Another one of Dad's old pals. Somehow, Tony had never pictured her as being drop-dead gorgeous.

It occurred to him that the guy on the fridge was probably dead. Maybe Aunt Peggy was, too. When was the last time he'd spoken to her, anyway? If she passed away, he would have heard about it, right? Someone would tell him, right? He hadn't talked to Aunt Peggy in about twenty years.

...Jesus, all of Steve's old friends were ancient.

Poor Steve.

Tony examined a baseball pennant on the wall. "Hey, Steve... you know the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, right?" he asked. "They haven't been the Brooklyn Dodgers in, like, sixty years..."

"I know," said Steve with a small smile as he tore off a piece of gauze. Tony's whole body shivered and tensed at his touch. It hurt, yes. But more importantly, Steve was touching him. They were holding hands. He closed his eyes as Steve slowly, slowly wound the end of the bandage around Tony's palm. "...did you hear what I said? About Natasha teaching me Russian? I'm sorry if you felt like we were talking behind your back."

He frowned at the mention of Natasha. "I don't speak Russian," he informed Steve with a hint of annoyance. "She giving you private lessons? ...is she aware that French is the language of love, not Russian? Russian's one of the least sexy languages."

Steve had finished bandaging his hand, but he was still holding it. Tony didn't move to pull it away. Steve's tender care had elicited something in Tony, a sense of comfort, of belonging. No one had ever done this for him, except Pepper. Tony mopped up most of his own wounds, and had
done so since childhood.

He looked at Steve. Their eyes met.

"I'm sorry," said Tony. "I'm sorry about what I said, earlier, about you being uppity. I was angry. It was... kind of a dick thing to say. I should have gone after you. I wanted to, but you were with... them. ..Natasha, and Phil, and Clint... and I couldn't. But I wanna stay friends. I like how..."

Tony cracked a smile suddenly. "I like how you're uppity."

He blinked slowly, expression blissful. "I'm sorry too," he whispered. "I didn't enjoy lying to you," Steve continued. "But I still did it. And I'm glad I did. The Tony Stark I was told about before I worked for you was worlds away from the reality," he murmured. "You surprised me Tony, pleasantly so. And after waking up having missed 70 odd years of history... not much surprises me. Anyway, I kind of pride myself in being uppity, if I know what that means. Which I think I do..."

"I do," agreed Tony. He reached out without thinking and cupped Steve's cheek with his bandaged hand, waiting to feel Steve lean into it submissively.

"So you think French is the language of love?" said Steve, smiling. He leaned into Tony's palm on instinct, letting his hands drop down into his lap comfortably.

"Oui, oui," said Tony glibly.

"Donc, si je vous parle français, vous me comprenez?" Steve asked with a playful smile hinting on his lips, his French accent far superior to his Russian one.

"Ouais," said Tony softly, stroking Steve's cheek with his thumb. He noted that Steve was using "vous," the more formal tense. Was that because they were being formal? Or was that because Tony was an Alpha and Steve was an omega? "J'aime les omégas impétueux ." he murmured. "...tu, notamment. ...my French is pretty rusty. Is that doing it for you?" Steve was smiling a little, his head tilted into Tony's hand. Tony didn't move, feeling the strength of Steve's jaw, the hint of peach fuzz. He looked over Steve longingly. His eyes were so sharp. So crystal blue.

Artist and engineer. Alpha and omega. They were like puzzle pieces, filling in for each other... fitting together perfectly...

You're drunk. That's all this is. You're drunk, Tony chanted inside his head. He refused to let himself get swept up in emotion. But he also didn't move his hands. He held Steve's cheek; Steve held his other hand; they were perfectly frozen in time. It was that moment in the basement, all over again. But this time, no Clint to break them apart. No Phil to get a phone call from New Mexico. No Natasha to smirk and tease and make Tony feel defensive.

It was just the two of them in the quiet stillness of Steve's apartment. Outside, rain was pattering softly. The apartment smelled like Steve, and it was warm and comforting, so much more homely than the neomodern, minimalist design of Tony's huge, impersonal mansion. Tony had made the right choice, coming here... getting to touch Steve's skin, sit on his couch, peer into his life.

The silence spooled out but Tony didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable with it. He felt like he and Steve understood each other perfectly as long as he was stroking Steve's face and Steve was pushing back against his hand.

"Your accent is nice," Steve told him. He probably would have said that even if it was shit though. Everything Tony did just endeared Steve to him further. His voice was velvet, a low rumble. Steve
could see how Tony ended up with so many bedmates throughout his life. Right now it felt like he would do anything the Alpha asked of him, as simple as ever.

Steve sighed softly, breath hot against Tony's fingertips. It would take seconds to just turn his head and press his lips to his fingers and suck one into his mouth and-- he blushed a little, surprised at his own thoughts.

"Donc, vous avez vraiment jamais eu un oméga avant?" Steve whispered, eyes curious.

Tony watched Steve blush and felt a surge of affection for him. He wanted to gather Steve into his arms and cuddle him, protect him, shelter him.

More ridiculous, nonsensical instincts. Steve was bigger, stronger, faster... Tony's desire to enfold him was bizarre... Steve didn't need that...

"Non,," whispered Tony. He was glad they were speaking French, because admitting these things was embarrassing. He hated talking about his sexual history. In fact, he hadn't bothered to do so in about a decade. He left it up to Pepper to screen his one-night stands to make sure they were legal and clean. She had initially refused to do so until Tony had caught the clap twice in one year, and then begrudgingly begun to do so, all which muttering that none of this had been in her job description. "Donc... pas en chaleur. Mais, uh, principalement, les bêtas, et les femmes seulement. Et tu?"

A very, very, very small lie. Tony had been with men in a few contexts but none of those seemed important. A blowjob was a blowjob and when you were high on MDMA in a club, you didn't really care who was doing what to you. And naturally, sure, he'd double-teamed a few ladies in his time, that happened occasionally; you didn't want to be the only billionaire at the coke party who was going to throw a fit because there was another guy balls-deep in the other end of your lingerie model. But he lacked the vocabulary to explain this distinction to Steve and he was pretty sure Steve could guess at that, since Steve had seen how he lived.

And of course, there was the small matter of what had happened in Afghanistan, but Tony planned to take that particular secret to his grave.

His fingers ghosted briefly, delicately over Steve's lips, but then he pulled back and returned to cupping Steve's jawline, stroking his cheek, looking into his eyes. Steve was looking up at him coyly, shy, his eyes darting down every few moments. Tony held his gaze steady. This was how Alphas stared; Steve's small, downward glances were how omegas showed respect and deference. Tony hadn't been raised with that sort of old-fashioned etiquette but it came to him naturally, instinctively. He was barely aware how intently he was staring into Steve's eyes.

"Jamais. Avec quelqu'un. J'étais trop malade, puis je me battais une guerre," Steve admitted with a small blush, his cheeks turning a tinge pink. It was the truth. He was done with lying to Tony. He just hoped his inexperience didn't put the other off. Steve had had opportunities, of course he had... and if it wasn't for Bucky he wouldn't be a virgin anymore and certainly not out of choice. Bucky had kept him safe from everything.

Even from himself.

He almost shuddered at the memory. It was a different time now, Steve reminded himself. He didn't need protection. Not now he could protect himself.

The way Tony was looking at him was overwhelming. Steve felt something seize in his chest and swallowed thickly. Before he knew it Tony's fingertips were tracing over the bow of his lips and he
felt something flutter in his chest. On instinct Steve nipped at his fingertips lightly, playfully, his own blue eyes darkening a fraction.

Shit, should Steve have done that? Was that okay? But the way Tony was looking at him...

...that was more than okay, actually.

Tony was smiling and felt a surge of excitement at Steve's nips, but Steve's words were still ringing in his ears.

Had he understood correctly? No one? Ever? At all? Tony's French wasn't perfect. He might have misunderstood.

Steve was nipping him and that was making it hard to translate the French in his mind. Tony's insides felt weak. He felt inexplicably proud of himself for remembering to brush his teeth before leaving.

Wait. Why? Was he planning on kissing Steve?

No. No, no, no! Don't you dare, Stark! Don't you dare! his mind was screaming at him.

"I want to lick you now," said Tony throatily. It was like another person was talking. He leaned forward, slowly, giving Steve the chance to move if he wanted to. His hand was still on Steve's jaw; he tilted Steve's face up, exposing his throat, his vulnerability. Slowly, gently, he nuzzled Steve's skin, then ran his tongue over the other man's neck.

Tony had been bumped ahead so many grades as a child that he'd never had sex ed. His sex ed was limited to Obadiah telling him to be safe in college and tucking a condom in his wallet. Therefore, he had no idea that what he was doing was courtship behavior. Besides, he'd always limited himself to betas. This behavior was new to him, and he was doing it not because he knew what he was doing, but because... well, it just felt right. It came automatically, naturally.

Steve let Tony tilt his head up pliantly, eyes slipping shut as he let the Alpha guide him into the position he wanted. Tony's fingers were hot and strong on his jaw, the touch so prominent it was almost burning. Steve relished in the sensation. In all of it.

He shuddered noticeably under Tony's touch at the wet drag of tongue and the rough graze of stubble. It would have made him weak at the knees if he'd been standing. Steve felt breathless and heady all at once. "T-Tony..." the rest of his words died on his tongue. Steve wasn't even sure he had any. He wasn't sure he could bring himself to quite say it...

"Je veux être bon pour vous," Steve said softly, headily, not even entirely sure what he meant by that in itself. But it was easier to say it like this.

Tony growled low in response, lapping at Steve's neck lightly. He untangled his hand from Steve's and set it on Steve's shoulder... the hand on Steve's jaw trailed down his other arm, finding his wrist... Tony was crawling forward, pushing Steve back, getting on top of him, pinning him. Steve wasn't resisting; he was bigger, he could easily shove Tony off, but he was limp under Tony, letting Tony press down on him, bite his neck softly...

Steve was in a trance. He'd even whimpered slightly when Tony sucked a mark into his skin, leaving his trace there. Claiming what was his. Steve felt himself shiver. He felt hot and cold all over all at once. He felt good. Good in a way he wasn't used to.

And the way Tony growled and sucked at his neck-- that was goddamn near enough to make Steve
wet. Jesus Christ. And him pinning Steve down- despite his size. He wasn't afraid of manhandling Steve despite the serum and that was attractive in itself.

The phone rang.

Tony froze. He felt like he was being pulled out the The Matrix.

*Has Steve seen the Matrix?*

...Steve!

Tony looked down. Steve was lying on the couch; Tony was grabbing one of his wrists, pinning down the opposite shoulder. A bruise was blooming on Steve's neck where Tony had been sucking at the skin. He didn't even remember pushing Steve back. He'd been so absorbed in Steve's neck, the warmth of his skin...

He rolled off of Steve so quickly he rolled off the couch and onto the floor with a thud.

"You... you should get the phone!" he panted. He was sweating, literally sweating. The room reeked like pheromones, the same subtle, musky flavor he'd tasted in Monaco, right before Steve went into heat.

*Where's Clint with a glass of cold liquid when you need him?* wondered Tony. So much for controlling himself. Okay. Okay, okay. He'd tasted Steve. Now he was done. He took a deep, calming breath, trying to quell his excitement, trying to gather himself up.

Just because they were scent-mates (that much seemed obvious at this point) did not mean that they had to give in to base instincts. They weren't animals; they were fucking human beings and they were perfectly capable of controlling themselves.

He rose and sat on the couch in the most dignified way he could, crossing his legs and trying to ignore his erection.

Steve blinked dumbly as he slowly processed Tony's words. "Right. The phone," he said with a thick swallow and fumbled around against the couch cushions. Steve sighed when he saw the caller ID.

"Nat, you better have a good reason for calling."

"Well, let's see... I'm your friend and I'm worried about you. How's that for a good reason?" asked Natasha. "Are you okay? ...do you need me to bring you anything?"

On the edge of the sofa, Tony was keeping himself busy and distracted. He'd found a string on the end of his wifebeater and was pulling it. It wasn't snapping, just unraveling. He spooled it around his hand with intense concentration. He didn't dare look at Steve. He avoided eye contact at all costs. He'd get lost in those crystal blue pools. God, he'd just wanted one little taste and he'd ended up planting a hickey the size of a half-dollar on his neck.

Did they make Hallmark cards for that? *Sorry I acted like you were mine last night / I'm not your Alpha, so we're cool now, right?* Tony felt so embarrassed. He hoped Steve hadn't noticed his erection. He'd been caught up in the moment. He hoped he hadn't crossed a line. Steve didn't want an Alpha and now he was marked and would stay marked for probably a week or two; he had every right to be furious at Tony over that.

Could omegas have back-to-back heats? Was that it, maybe? Could Tony blame his actions on
that? He didn't know enough about omegas to know. The room smelled like arousal but that meant nothing, considering the position they had been in moments earlier.

"I'm fine." Steve huffed and ran a hand over his face. "I'm fine Nat, really...you don't need to worry about me." He glanced over at Tony and frowned at how forlorn the Alpha looked.

The fresh mark on Steve's neck ached.

"I think I'm working things out," he told her quietly. "I'll call tomorrow, yeah?" Steve said, voice a tad softer and then he hung up.

He looked down at Tony's lap and then back up at his face again. Steve wanted-- he wanted so badly in ways he didn't even understand. "I want--" Steve stopped himself, cheeks turning a tinge pink. He swallowed and then sighed. "Tony, that felt really good," he whispered like it was a secret.

"I am... I am so sorry, Steve," whispered Tony back conspiratorially. "I didn't meant to mark you, I just got caught up... I'm not saying I'm one of those douchey Alphas that goes all feral and takes omegas, I'm just saying I-- I didn't mean to, I'm kinda drunk-- not that being drunk is an excuse, either--" He laughed nervously and ran his fingers through his hair. "Wow, okay, I... I sound like a moron, I sound like an asshat, I'm sorry. If Pepper were here she'd-- you know, she's very into omega rights, she doesn't know how hard it is... I'm sorry, are you... are you going into heat again? I shouldn't be here." He rose, took a wobbling step forward, and grabbed the couch to stabilize himself.

Right. Still drunk.

He spared a glance at Steve. Steve was sitting there, bright pink, blushing, eyes roaming over Tony's body.

"...stop undressing me with your eyes, Rogers. ...come on, put my mental clothes back on. We're friends. Look, let's... let's look at this logically, right? You're an independent, modern omega and you don't want an Alpha, and I'm a modern, independent Alpha who doesn't want an omega. We'd regret it if--" Tony stopped, mouth watering. If we mated. "--besides, I'm drunk, I just... I just came here to crash on your couch. Let's watch a movie or something?" Watch a movie and cuddle.

"Can you grab me some water? I have a sneaking suspicion I'm going to be wicked hungover tomorrow."

"I wouldn't let you do anything I didn't want," Steve pointed out calmly. He could have pushed Tony off easily at any point...but he hadn't. "Heat?" He echoed with a frown. "What...? No. I won't have one for months now, I just had one Tony...you know that." So why would Tony ask? Was he confused? Didn't he know how heats worked? "It kind of feels like we want each other despite all that," Steve said carefully and then stood, going to fetch Tony a glass of water. He pressed the chilly, wet glass into the other's hand when he returned, their fingers brushing briefly before he stepped away, giving the Alpha space. Steve wasn't usually so forward but he was sick of lying-- and he figured after everything he owed it to Tony to be honest.

"You chose a movie," he said quietly. "I don't know much 'bout movies."

"...right," said Tony. Steve was giving him a weird look. Like he should know how heats worked.

Tony made a mental note to Google how the fuck omegas worked when he got home. He didn't want to look like a moron in front of Steve. He was supposed to be the "experienced" one. Steve was a virgin and he'd been frozen in his late twenties. Tony was supposed to know this stuff. But
most of what he knew wasn't technical or psychological; it was mostly stuff he'd gathered from porn and Law and Order: SVU. He decided not to mention that to Steve.

Tony sipped the water, and closed his eyes briefly; the world wobbled uncomfortably, and he opened them.

So Steve was saying he wanted it. But he hadn't wanted Tony while he was in heat. But now that he wasn't, he did. It made no sense to Tony but he didn't dare ask; he was drunk, he'd look like an idiot. He wasn't even sure if Steve did want him. Maybe Steve was just a hopeless flirt. Tony didn't peg him as one, but then again, he hadn't realized he was Captain America, either. Clearly, his judgement regarding Steve was poor.

"Scarface," said Tony. "If you haven't seen Scarface yet, then we've gotta watch that. Do you have a computer? Give me five minutes with a computer and I can probably jack your neighbors' Wifi and download it." He looked around the room. Lots of books and paintings and stuff. Not a lot of technology.

Tony glanced up at Steve. Steve was hovering close, but not too close. Tony hesitated, then patted the seat beside him. "Sit. I won't bite."

The moment he said it, he realized what a ridiculous statement it was and he started laughing. He couldn't help it. He'd already bitten Steve; he'd left a huge mark on him. He struggled to stop but the more he thought about what he'd said, the funnier it seemed, the alcohol in his system amping up the hilarity even more. In seconds, he was laughing so hard he was crying, clinging to his ribs and giggling maniacally.

Tony seemed a little...unhinged but he had just nearly died. Steve gently lead him to sit back down on the couch before he moved to go get his laptop from his bedroom. He almost rolled his eyes. "I have my own Wifi, Tony, I'm not that inept with technology..." Steve sighed and handed him his computer.

Tony was still wheezing out the end of his laughter. Steve had to bite back a frown as he moved to sit down next to him again. Belatedly, he realised he'd just followed an order. Or was it an invitation? Steve wasn't sure. He didn't know what to say to make everything alright. Maybe it wasn't that simple. Maybe it just couldn't be that simple.

Unbeknownst to him, Steve was fighting every instinct in his body to kneel in front of Tony again. "They're probably going to get mad at me, you know. For kneeling for you," he said. "They weren't impressed with the heat either."

Steve's mention of the other Avengers helped Tony sober up a little. He hiccuped, looking down. Feelings of guilt and embarrassment. Tony was used to feeling guilty; he was plagued by it, ever since Afghanistan. But embarrassment was a new one. Tony Stark was not a man who was easily embarrassed.

"You couldn't help going into heat," he said, fiddling with the thread on the end of his shirt. "And... and it's my fault that you kneeled. Knelt? I shouldn't have asked that. I... I dunno why I did... but, look, you can tell Fury and his goons that it doesn't matter anyway. 'Cause I don't want an omega. Steve... Steve, you know how many people I've bedded? Like... like probably..." Tony got a faraway gleam in his eye that Steve knew meant he was doing math. "Well, okay, I've been sexually active for, uh, twenty-one years... fifteen girlfriends, average about four to six months each... so... five months... that's six and a quarter years dating, so we remove that, that's fifteen years I've been stag, and if you assume two partners a week for fifteen years, uh... fourteen hundred and forty. Or a girl every four days, that's... that's thirteen hundred and sixty-eight. Every five
"I don't care how many people you've slept with, Tony," Steve said quietly. He really didn't and it surprised him how little it did. He didn't see how it was relevant, or even his business. Steve knew Tony Stark was called a playboy for a reason. It didn't exactly surprise him either.

Was Tony saying he had feelings for him? Was he? Was that the issue? That he couldn't just fuck Steve and move on? Steve didn't want that, obviously. He wanted commitment in his life...especially after he'd lost almost everyone he'd cared about. But Steve had a feeling- an itch at the back of his neck- that he would do about anything Tony asked for him. He would kneel again, he would- what would he do? Steve wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

The mark on his neck practically ached.

Tony shook himself out. "My point is, Steve, my point is, they were all betas. A thousand, fifteen hundred... fuck, man, maybe even two thousand women. And they were betas, Steve. I've probably slept with, like, less than ten omegas and they were all on suppressants. They didn't act or smell or seem like omegas. I don't do omegas. I-- I don't even like to work with them." A pause. "The problem is--"

Tony was looking away now.

"--the problem is that... with betas... I don't have to care about them. I fuck them and that's it. No... no commitment. With omegas I feel... when I'm around you. .. when I smell you... I want more than that. I want to... to protect... I don't know. I want, like... more. But I don't. Am I making sense?"

He glanced at Steve. His eyes traveled to the bruise on Steve's neck. Tony felt bad about it. But also found it arousing to see it on Steve's pale throat. "TONY WAS HERE," it screamed, bold, unapologetic.

"...you're gonna have to wear turtlenecks for a while," said Tony, cracking a sad grin. He looked away again. "...I don't know why you do this to me. I've never... felt..." He trailed off. That was it, that was the problem. Tony didn't like to feel things. He liked to do things. He liked to make things happen. Intimacy scared the hell out of him.

He decided to change the subject. "Look, I'm drunk, just... forget everything I said, okay? Scratch it. Here, give me your laptop. I just wanna hang out." He pulled up the command prompt and began typing rapidly, occasionally stumbling over the keys and having to go back to correct errors. His coordination was shot. Nonetheless, within minutes there was a download bar on the screen and he was re-configuring half of Steve's settings. "Welp... okay... you had two Trojans, I got rid of 'em... doesn't look like you've ever defragged, tsk... bam, there's your Wifi, it should be free from now on, you're welcome... I'm going to set up a few proxies so you can browse the internet in private, looks like SHIELD tapped you... asshats... did you know they were monitoring you?... well, they're not anymore... there ya go." He handed the computer back to Steve, drew his legs up onto the couch, curling up. "I'm probably gonna fall asleep," he informed Steve, fixing his gaze on the computer screen. "I'm crashing here tonight. I'm... I'm pretty wrecked. Good night, Steve."

"They were what? Monitoring me?" Steve echoed, frowning deeply. But Tony was already passing out in a lap. He let the information wash over him slowly and felt a sudden surge of anger. How dare they?! When Steve first woke up they kept him in isolation for two weeks, refused to answer his questions- and now this.

Tony wasn't kidding about crashing. Within the first ten minutes of the movie he'd closed his eyes,
letting the alcohol drag him down into a deep, dreamless sleep. He was barely conscious when he cuddled up to Steve. It wasn't a purposeful action; Tony craved Steve's warmth, his smell, the texture of his skin. He wasn't thinking about what it meant, what anything meant. He just knew it felt good and that the last forty-eight hours had been an emotional war for him. He needed the serenity that came from being close to Steve, from holding him, and being held.

Gently, he carried Tony to his bed before Steve began to systematically search his apartment. It took a good few hours, going through his books taking over an hour in itself.

Steve found two bugs. One in his living room and one in his bedroom. He smashed them under his feet. Before he knew what he was doing he was calling Pepper Potts.

"Stan?" Her voice sounded almost timid. "I thought you were...fired."

"Yes. I was."

"I am terribly sorry about that. You know how Tony is. You deserved better."

Steve swallowed thickly. "Pepper. I need a favor."

"Sure." She sounded a little hesitant. "What is it?"

"I need you to put me into contact with the best publicist you know."

"You're not going to tell on Tony, are you? Not that I would blame you but I didn't think that was your style."

"It isn't," Steve assured her. "This is about me. Not Tony."

"Okay...sending you the number over now." Pepper paused. "Stan, can I just ask? What was it that made him...exactly?"

"I lied about who I was," Steve said quietly.

"You what?"

"I lied. And it's Steve. Not Stan. Sorry, Pepper." And then he hung up.

Steve paced around in his living room for a while, checking on Tony occasionally to find him still sleeping peacefully in bed. It was nice to see him relaxed, without that frown on his face.

Eventually he came to a resolve and called the number. A sharp, female voice answered. "Who the hell is calling at this hour? You better have a good-

"I'm Captain America," Steve told her simply. "I woke up five months ago after being frozen in the Atlantic for sixty-five years. The government's been using me as a spy. I can prove it. And... I'm an omega, and I want the world to know. Get me an interview with the New York Times."
Reveal

Chapter Summary

Here's your long-awaited smut. Warning, explicit content, et cetera. And trust me, there's more where that came from. Wink.

Please be aware that this chapter has NOT been beta-read yet, and therefore may contain typos. We'll clean it up shortly. Thanks for your patience!

Tony was woken by the smell of bacon and eggs in a pan. Steve had a radio station on in the background, playing softly, one with alternative folk music that eased a person into the day. Clint had recommended it to him; apparently radio came from satellites nowadays. He cooked with well practiced ease, quite contently lost in his own world as he fried mushrooms and tomatoes, adding them to the plates. He ate his own food in less five minutes (embarrassingly) and then made a tray up for Tony with the food and a cup of coffee. Steve had slept on the couch that night, not wanting to intrude upon Tony's space.

"Hey," Steve murmured in greeting as he stepped into his bedroom. He couldn't help but smile at a sleepy Tony pushing himself up in bed. It was kinda nice to see Tony in his own bed, actually. Steve sat on the edge of the mattress gingerly and placed the tray over Tony's lap. "Made you breakfast."

Tony groaned as he sat up. His whole body ached. Every muscle, joint, tendon, ligament. There was a stabbing pain behind his eyes. His stomach twisted slightly at the smell of food.

"Oh, sweet Sagan, my head... fuck..." He squinted at Steve, running a hand through his hair, aware that it was sticking up and he probably looked like hell. He looked down at the food in front of him. He felt like he had woken up to another dream. Everything felt surreal.

"You..." Tony's voice was hoarse. He cleared it. "...you made me... breakfast," he said, staring at the tray in front of him. He looked around the room. Not his room. Definitely not. Tony's room was stark, spartan. Large but empty. With an enormous bed, with silk sheets. This room was... homey. Comfortable. One of his suits was standing by the window. Tony couldn't remember taking it. Or rather, he did, but fuzzily. He was pretty sure he'd hit something on the way; there was a few scuffs on one of the suit's shoulders.

Now that he thought about it, he couldn't really remember most of the night. He had made a new element. He and Steve had shared a moment. He'd panicked and yelled at Steve and kicked him out, and after that, everything was lost to the alcohol. Disjointed images of Rubik's cubes and a heartfelt discussion on Steve's sofa floated to his mind, but nothing specific.

He was still wearing jeans and a wifebeater. He reached up slowly to touch his chest. His arc reactor was warm. The skin around it felt... okay. He wasn't dying. Not anymore.

He was okay.

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed. There was a bruise on his neck. Tony felt sudden panic. He remembered making that bruise. They had been sitting on the couch, yes. He had touched
Steve's face, and Steve had closed his eyes and nuzzled into Tony's hand... and then Tony had... he had pinned Steve down, licked him, bit him... and... then what? Something with a computer? Had Steve carried him to bed? Had they...?

"Did I...?" Tony let the question hover uncertainly in the air. Steve had made him breakfast. That's what people did, right? After sex? Made each other breakfast? Tony wouldn't know, he had never done that. When he was done, he would sleep, then let himself out before his partner woke and let Pepper handle the aftermath. Tony Stark did not make people breakfast. He also didn't cuddle or do any sort of post-coital pillow talk. Not his style. "Did we...?"

Oh, fuck.

Panic was coursing through him. Had he fucked Captain America? Pepper would kill him. Fury--all of the Avengers, probably--would kill him. His father would rise from the grave and kill him. One day after fixing his fatal heart problem and now he was dead. An ironic, fitting end.

"No. We didn't," Steve said quickly, seeing the panic in Tony's eyes. "My virginity is still very much intact," he joked weakly and moved to steal the second cup of coffee off the tray. Tony frankly looked adorable with his hair sticking up in every other direction. Steve wanted to run his fingers through it and push it back from his forehead.

"I slept on the couch," Steve said quietly. "Just so you know, I have somewhere to be in an hour." He glanced down at his phone. "But you're welcome to stay here and sleep, or just... hang out," he finished eventually.

Steve was already showered and dressed. He wore dark jeans a casual white shirt. He looked presentable, but not quite the PA he had been.

"And for the record, I don't take advantage of drunk people," Steve added softly. He noticed the way Tony was looking at the food. "You don't have to eat it."

Tony felt relief when Steve said they hadn't slept together, but it was nothing compared to the relief he felt when Steve told him he didn't have to eat.

"I'm... I'm just gonna drink some coffee and go back to sleep. Do you have aspirin? I need about... ten, twelve aspirins." He reached for the mug and sipped the dark, bitter liquid, examining Steve over the rim of the cup. Steve's style had changed slightly. Tony didn't dislike it. In fact, he liked this new, more confident, more assertive Steve. Steve was, hands-down, the most self-assured omega he'd ever met. It was disappointing to know he'd have to find a new PA. But he and Steve had something better now. They were friends. Steve wasn't on his payroll, and he was still bringing him breakfast. Taking care of him when he was drunk. That's what friends did. Tony felt a swell of affection for Steve.

He sipped on his coffee again, wishing he and Steve could hang out all morning. But Steve had somewhere to be. Where was "somewhere?"

"Where are you going? Hot date?" he joked, hoping Steve would spill the beans. He lay back down, kicking off his jeans, yanking off his shirt, and pulling up the covers, getting comfortable. Tony's bounce-back ability was unparalleled, but he needed at least a few more hours of sleep and a shower before he would be able to shake his hangover. He'd definitely had too much last night.

Before Steve could answer, Tony's cell phone went off. He grabbed the pants he'd discarded on the floor, searching the pocket, and pulled out the phone. Pepper.
"...yellow?"

"Tony! Tony, I got your messages, are you okay? Oh my God, I'm at the house, your house is a wreck, Tony... what happened? Where are you?"

"I'm fine," said Tony. He glanced at Steve. "I'm... I'm at a friend's. Oh. And I made a new element. Look, it's a long story, and I was about to take a nap. Let's do brunch tomorrow. I'll tell you all about it."

"Wait, no... Tony... Tony, you can't take a nap, it's eight-thirty in the morning... wait, you made a what?"


"Tony--!"

Tony hung up, turned the phone off, and then snuggled back into Steve's bed. The sheets smelled so good. Tony was looking forward to Steve leaving so he could jerk off to the smell. Maybe rifle through the medicine cabinet once he was done sleeping.

Since Tony had been planning on dying, he hadn't made many plans for the week. His schedule was wide open and he planned to spend the day digging through Steve's private life, learning who the real Steve was. Getting to know his new friend.

"I have some aspirin in the bathroom, yeah," Steve murmured. He smiled a little, expression and tone soft like he was afraid he might scare Tony off. "I'm going somewhere good," he promised him. "But... I kinda want it to be a surprise. You'll see tomorrow."

He blushed a little when Tony began to strip down but the phone call gave Steve a chance to gather himself. He rubbed at his cheek and then at the back of his neck. Whilst Tony talked to Pepper he went to get him aspirin, sitting at the bedside again as he set the box down on the tray.

"I better go," Steve said. "I don't want to be late. Seriously, help yourself to whatever. SHIELD certainly did," he muttered and stood, tucking his phone back away into his jacket pocket. "I'll be about three hours, give or take. If anyone from SHIELD calls around, don't let them in."

...a surprise? Tony was an impatient person and disliked surprises. He doubted he could be more surprised than he already was, though, after learning who Steve really was. He threw back the aspirin Steve gave him, watching the other man leave. "Uh, Steve? You might wanna... you know, wear a scarf." Tony pointed to his own neck, indicating where the bruise on Steve's was.

He waited until Steve had left and been gone for five minutes before getting out of bed. It felt good to stretch out his limbs. In his boxer-briefs, he began an exploration of Steve's apartment. He checked for bugs first; he didn't trust SHIELD not to watch Steve. After all, they had sent Steve to spy on Tony, and Tony wasn't even yet a member. But his search came up empty. No bugs.

He went through Steve's medicine cabinet and his vinyl record collection, then his bookshelf, and found nothing of interest. He vomited up the coffee he'd drank (unsurprising, considering his hangover). He took a long, warm shower, singing to test the acoustics (they were decent) and leafed through one of Steve's sketchbooks. He was surprised to see several drawings of himself, and concerned to see a few more of the man from the photograph on the refrigerator.

He choked down some dry cereal just to settle his stomach, drank nearly a liter of water, used
Steve's toothbrush, and finally went back to bed, huffing Steve's pillow and jerking himself off to the scent.

After he'd finished, he lay there, snuggled up in a pile of Steve's sheets, contemplating his own curiosity. The only person who had ever captured his interest like this was Pepper. He didn't know what it was about Steve. He was attractive, yes, and Tony was sucker for blonds, but there were lots of beautiful blonds lining up to sleep with him. Steve was an omega, sure, but there were other omegas in the world. Steve was built like a Chip n' Dale's dancer, but it wasn't like there weren't other equally athletic men in the world, with chiseled torsos and perfectly proportioned abs. So why Steve? Tony had no idea. Maybe it was all those things combined. Maybe some other unmeasurable, unobservable force. Some deep, deep part of Tony was attracted to Steve in an intense and unshakeable way. He knew he wanted Steve in the same way he could sense when Pepper was disappointed or when someone was standing right behind him or when he met two Alphas and could immediately identify which was more dominant. He just knew. He felt it in a place he rarely had access to. Steve made him feel... home.

The possibility that they were scent-mates lingered and it bothered Tony. It seemed like a crack in his intellectualism. A primal marring on his otherwise flawlessly evolved brain.

But as much as Tony hated to be vulnerable, he'd decided already to pursue this. He was, after all, a scientist, and curiosity drove him. Besides, he had nothing better to do. Pepper was running the company now. The Expo was going smoothly. Rhodey and the rest of the US government were probably tearing the suit Rhodey had taken to pieces and arming it, maybe slapping on a new coat of paint. Everything was turning its gears, marching steadily forward, into the future, and it was all happening without Tony. Tony rarely had the opportunity to be as not busy as he was now. Besides, the crushing feeling he'd felt after kicking Steve out had been torture. An agony worse than death. He sure as hell wasn't going to try it again. He didn't want to be separated from Steve. He wanted to explore Steve and Steve's life and if he got hurt, at least he wouldn't have any regrets about not traveling down that particular road of inquiry.

He fell asleep shortly before noon and slept until he heard the front door open. Waking this time wasn't painful; his hangover had faded to an idle and easily ignored throb in the back of his skull. He remained curled in Steve's bed, warm and comfortable, waiting for Steve to come to him.

Steve was interviewed by a nice beta man named Marcus. He had a high pitched lilt to his voice and wore a plaid jumper and skinny jeans, along with glasses that were too big to his face. He was friendly and polite and welcomed Steve with a handshake, telling him it was an honor and that he liked Steve's scarf. For the interview itself he led Steve into a small room, pointing to a sofa for him whilst he took an arm chair for himself. On the way through the Times building a lot of heads had turned; it seemed Steve's arrival had been highly anticipated.

He knew SHIELD would pissed about this. That Fury would probably kill him. But Steve didn't care. They'd been spying on him, when he was on their side. They said SHIELD was founded by Peggy, but Peggy would have never treated Steve like this. He wouldn't let them control him anymore, keep him in hiding. Steve wanted to open and honest for goddamn once. He wanted people to know Captain America was an omega. He wanted to just...make a difference. If he just inspired one little omega kid growing up that they were strong enough, that they could do whatever they wanted...that would make this all worth it for Steve.

If there was one thing he'd learned in his undercover operation to observe Stark, it was not about Stark, but about himself. Steve did not like being undercover. He liked being himself.
Proving he was who he said he was wasn't difficult. Not with all of the IDs: the SHIELD ID, his social security card, his new driver's license. In Steve's time, unbonded omegas could not get licenses. Another novelty.

The questions started out easy. What Steve was up to, how he found the food, the culture, the clothes. Marcus complemented Steve's style again. But then they got a little heavier.

"So, Steve, part of your reason for coming here was to talk about being an omega. Tell me, how different do you find attitudes towards omegas now to back in the forties?"

"Not different enough," Steve found himself saying without thinking. "There's still a lot of issues in education around omega needs. There isn't enough accessibility for suppressants and safe spaces for heats. And there's still a lot of prejudice. I can't even believe, that with today's technology, there's still issues surrounding the availability of abortion. Everyone talks about equality, but not nearly enough people actually practice it. Even with the way I am now, I still have Alphas objectifying me. Though," Steve added quickly. "I feel I should say I'm still impressed with some changes we've made. I think the way people see gender has improved a lot. Alphas were always pressured to be masculine and omegas to be feminine, and it's nice to see that that's mostly died out. I think that people are a lot more free to be who they want to be now, even if it isn't always easy for them. It's nice for me, because, you know, the serum, it... made me... you know." Steve gestured to himself.

Omegas were not built like Steve. Steve was a singularity, and he knew it.

"What was it like for you before the serum?"

Steve paled a little at that. "If I hadn't had my friends looking out for me I wouldn't be here today," he said simply and he chilled a little inside when he realised it was the truth. "I was poor and not very well most of the time. I didn't have a means of defending myself and I shouldn't have had to."

Marcus nodded and quickly moved on to the next topic of conversation. "So... you say you've been awake for almost five months now. You're still unbonded..."

Steve nodded. He knew what was coming.

"...is there anyone special in Captain America's life?"

Steve almost felt his cheeks heat up. "I've met some incredible people," he said. "Maybe there's potential...but it's hard to find someone who could handle dating...well, me. I mean, I'm ninety-two, it's weird, there's a big learning curve for me. I still don't really understand how emojis work."

That made Marcus laugh.

The interview ended on a high note. Talking about his experiences was easier than he'd expected; he'd had plenty of time to think about it over the last five months, and he was surprised to realize how much he had to say, about the twenty-first century and being an omega, things he'd never been allowed to say in his own century.

"...you mind if we do a quick shoot?" asked Marcus.

"Shoot?" repeated Steve.

"Photo shoot," clarified Marcus. "People will want to see you. Back from the dead and all."

"Oh. Sure," said Steve. He let them drag him to another floor of the building and plonk him into a makeup chair before he could protest, a woman had removed his scarf.
He turned bright red.

"Don't worry," the make up artist winked. "I'll cover that up for you."

A smudge of concealer and foundation on top got rid of the mark. They didn't worry about dressing him up; they simply took photos of him as he was, in the clothes he'd arrived in, some more close up ones of his face and others of his full body. They did playful, warm poses. Nothing too dominating or serious; Steve didn't want to still look like he was trapped in a forties mindset. They even took a few shots of him with the shirt undone- Steve knew that would just piss Fury off even more.

The one alteration to his wardrobe they made was to put a waistcoat on him, over his shirt. Typical omega fashion. The vest was a bit small but they made it work.

"We have a fun idea!" one of the photographers announced and rushed forward with a makeup palette. "Picture this, okay? We'll paint the American flag on your abs." The woman was an omega, young. Her hair was done up into pigtails; they looked cute.

Steve blinked, not really knowing what to say. "Er...okay?" he said.

She squealed with excitement and helped pull his shirt off, whistling and shaking her head at his torso. "I can't believe you're a mega," she said.

"Me neither," joked Steve, looking down. He winced at the coldness of the brush on his abs and sniggered as she began painting a flag on him. "Oh-- oh, geez--"

"Are you ticklish?"

"N-no--"

She dragged Steve back toward the lights to show off her work. Everyone agreed it was "daring."

"Are we sure about--" began Steve, but cameras were already clicking.

Steve wasn't sure what to do with his hands; the photographers hollered out suggestions. Some made sense to him ("Now drag your fingers through the paint!") and others, not so much ("Now give me some bedroom eyes!"") Mostly, he just tried to not look awkward or to second-guess letting them paint a flag on his stomach.

They thanked him when it was all over and shook hands before Steve went to clean himself up and leave.

"...Marcus? This is going to be... tasteful, right?" he double-checked.

"Sure, absolutely, Cap," said Marcus, reaching up to slap him on the shoulder. "You did great. I promise, you'll look good, we'll make sure."

On his way home Steve ditched his phone (just to clean up the rest of the SHIELD trail) and got a new one, also grabbing a tray of Danish pastries too for a second late breakfast. Marcus's reassurance had done a lot to ease his misgivings about taking off his shirt. He stepped into his apartment quietly in case Tony was asleep and left the pastries in the kitchen before going to investigate.

"Hey," Steve breathed as he stepped inside, smiling at the sight of Tony still curled up in his bed. He leaned in the doorway. "How are you feeling?"
"Like a billion dollars," said Tony lazily, smiling back at Steve. "Did you have a good secret meeting? Was it about me? Was it with SHIELD? Is that the good news? ...you forged my signature and put in an application and now I'm officially an Avenger? Because I already told you, I don't play nice with others. ...you look tired. I smell something amazing. Did you buy a cake? Is that the surprise? A cake? Is a sexy lady going to pop out of it?" Tony paused to take a breath, then pulled back the covers invitingly. "...wanna nap with me? I kept the bed warm for you. Also, I jacked off on one of your shirts. I'm not going to apologize for that, though. Most people would kill for me to do that. I'm Tony goddamn Stark." He fixed Steve with a smile, his usual confident smirk.

Now that his hangover was under control, Tony was basking in Steve's apartment. He hadn't been unplugged in forever. Not having JARVIS around, not having his phone on, not touching a computer... Tony felt like he was on vacation. Like Steve's house was a perfect place to let loose, relax, have fun. Tony's idea of fun was sleeping and maybe tearing apart Steve's microwave later. And of course, getting physical. Not that he planned on sleeping with Steve. No. He stood by his lifelong fear of commitment; he would never let himself sleep with an omega. But cuddling wasn't off-limits, right? Friends could cuddle, right?

"It was nothing to do with you," Steve assured him, a smile tugging at his lips. "And I'm not currently speaking to SHIELD right now," he added and sighed. "I found two bugs in my apartment last night after you fell asleep. One was in my bedroom. I'm not impressed. And yes, I bought pastries," he affirmed and pushed away from the doorway to walk over to the bedside. Steve blinked when Tony mentioned jacking off, however.

"Are you serious? You're gross," he told him but there was no bite to his words. At least Tony was being honest, he supposed. But still, it was enough to make Steve blush full-on and he didn't bother to try and hide it this time. He dropped his scarf down onto the floor. The makeup was still half there, hiding the mark on his neck somewhat. "A nap sounds perfect," he hummed quietly and sat down on the edge of the bed. "No funny business, though," he added firmly. The sight of Tony in bed like this, pulling the covers back was maybe just a little too inviting to refuse. Steve moved to take his shoes off and then raised a brow. "Which shirt? It better not be one that I liked best."

"Green V-neck," said Tony. "How come there's make-up on your neck? Is that the surprise? Did you enter a beauty pageant, Rogers, is that it? Because that's not fair to the other contestants, you know..." He trailed off as Steve began taking shoes off.

"No funny business?" Tony was nothing but funny business. What constituted "funny business," anyway? Surely anything they'd already done was on limits. Licking Steve's neck, stroking his hair... these things were okay, right? Tony didn't ask, because he strongly believed that asking forgiveness was easier than asking for permission. He couldn't stand it if Steve said no. He wanted to lick him again. But this time he would absolutely not lose control and mark him. He just wanted one quick taste, while he was sober. That was it.

He rolled onto his side, propped up on one elbow, watching Steve with undisguised interest, the sheets draped at his waist. The arc reactor was glowing, strong and steady, the triangle sharp in its center. Tony wondered if Steve thought the scars were gross. He had, for a while. The light had kept him up, too, for months. But now, two years later, he was so used to it, he couldn't imagine it not being there. Sometimes, if he woke up to a dark room, a pillow pressed over the reactor, he panicked, thinking it had gone out and that he would die. Its glow was comforting, a promise that he wasn't going to buy the farm... not yet, anyway.

Steve wiped at his neck and rolled his eyes. "Yes. I'm going for Miss United States in hopes of pissing off Fury more than I already have," he hummed bemusedly. He hesitated a moment before
pushing off his jeans too. It wasn't like Tony was decent right now and Steve wanted to get comfortable. But still, no funny business. "And then green one? Damn. I liked that one." He almost pouted. "You owe me a new top," he decided before moving to lie down in his own bed. Next to Tony Stark.

"You look better without a top," said Tony dismissively.

Steve moved to lie on his back, head tilted up as he studied Tony's face. He knew the curve of his jaw now; he'd drawn it enough times. He admired the curve of his bicep that he'd propped himself up on. Tony was handsome in a rugged kind of way Steve never would be, even with the serum. He had the naturally masculine features of an Alpha despite being of low dominance. He reached out without thinking and traced his fingertips around the edge of the reactor with unconcealed wonder in his eyes. "You're going to be okay now, aren't you?" he checked in a whisper.

Steve slithered under the sheets next to him and studied his face. Tony studied his back, trying not to ogle his body. Steve's physique was so ridiculously flawless it was almost criminal. His pecs. His abs. God, it was like they'd crossed a beefalo with a linebacker. Tony was by no means scrawny; he worked out, he boxed with Happy, he dragged heavy equipment all over the lab... he was actually pretty proud of his body. But next to Steve's, it was nothing.

Steve reached out to touch his chest. Tony's entire body stiffened and Tony's pulse and breathing both jumped.

He reached up and grabbed Steve's hand. "...yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine," he said, swallowing. "...sorry." He let go of Steve's hand. "Only, um... only four people ever touched it. You included. I'm... I'm weird about people touching it. It sort of powers my heart, y'know." He dropped his hand with a nervous laugh. Steve had held it before; he didn't have to worry about Steve. Still, it was disconcerting, having someone touching it. Tony had had a lot of partners reach for it, and that was one of his few deal-breakers. He'd kicked more than a few supermodels from his bedroom at 2 am, half-naked and furious, for trying to touch his chest. (Pepper hated dealing with these especially but did so without complaint when Tony had explained to her why.)

It wasn't just the reactor. It was the half-inch of scarring around the base plate. Before the arc reactor, Tony's chest had been hooked up to a fucking car battery. Half the nerves were fried, and the flesh surrounding the original shrapnel wounds was melted into pale, raised whorls of pink. It was not a pretty sight.

Come to think of it, Tony's whole body was a train wreck. The small, circular scar on the back of his neck, the one that matched those on his arms and shoulders and back; faint criss-crossings on his sides and back and chest; the uncomfortable pop-crunch his right shoulder had done ever since he dislocated it in Afghanistan...

How the hell had Steve managed to get through World War Two and still look better than him? Younger, with less stress lines, less scars, less problems? The world was hilariously unfair and unpredictable sometimes.

Tony didn't pull the covers up. He should feel self-conscious, but he didn't. Not around Steve.

"Shit. Sorry." Steve frowned a little. The last thing he wanted to do was make Tony feel uncomfortable. To Steve, the arc reactor was beautiful. It was Tony's own creation, proof of his genius and creativity. And not only that, but proof of his endurance, too. Tony wouldn't be alive without it. He resisted the urge to lean forward and trace his tongue and lips around the rim,
knowing it would make Tony shiver.

Jesus Christ, since when had he had such dirty thoughts?

Steve's own body actually didn't scar, not that he'd found. Bullet wounds disappeared eventually, broken bones lasted a matter of days when he was lucky. Steve looked untouched- but he wasn't, not really. He still knew the horror of war and death and torture. He'd still felt pain. He'd still felt combat, and endured it. But he had no physical proof for it etched into his person. He only had his memories. And even they could be patchy at times. A consequence of the ice, they told Steve. His mind needed catch-up time.

"So..." Steve rolled onto his front and crossed his arms underneath his head, looking up at Tony through his lashes as he stretched out like a cat might. "A nap?"

"Nap," agreed Tony. He scooted closer to Steve. Steve was stretching out, looking up at him coyly. Bedroom eyes if Tony had ever seen them. Steve wasn't moving. Tony scooted a little closer, slipping an arm over Steve, pressing their bodies together. Steve was deliciously warm, his skin smooth, inviting.

Tony leaned forward and nuzzled his neck. "I liked it better when it wasn't covered," he murmured, his lips brushing Steve's skin. He could feel Steve's skin rippling an involuntary response. He bit Steve's earlobe playfully, then ran his tongue over Steve's neck.

Oh, God, it was as good as he remembered. He lapped Steve's skin with soft, gentle flicks of his tongue before biting him again, a playful nip, nothing painful.

"So... so I'm guessing... since they jacked you up on super-solider serum... you haven't gotten to be little spoon much," murmured Tony breathily. "You want to roll over so I can..." He trailed off. So I can hold you. Tony wasn't sure he'd ever really wanted to hold anyone before. Oh, sure, he occasionally threw an arm around a girl after a particularly juicy conquest. He'd let them curl up under his arm while he smoked. (Back when he'd smoked; he'd quit after Afghanistan.) But he'd never wanted to just cuddle someone. Not actively. Not for any emotional reason.

Well. Not until now.

Hey, how hard could it be, though, right?

Steve shuddered underneath him as Tony's wet and hot mouth dragged over the curve of his neck. He couldn't help it. It was an instinctual reaction. He wanted to squirm underneath him, whine to encourage Tony to suck at his neck more...but he didn't. He resisted. This was just cuddling. No funny business.

"Okay," he said softly, a warm kind of smile breaking out onto his features as he turned around. Tony's arm felt strong as he curled it around Steve's waist and he was tucked back against the Alpha, their bodies slotting together surprisingly well. Steve reached down blindly and pulled the duvet up over their shoulders. He sighed contently and curled against Tony, happily pressing against him as his eyes drifted shut. Steve wasn't sure he'd ever felt so safe. So... at peace.

"I'm glad we ended up here," he mumbled, half into the pillow his head was cushioned on, but his words were sincere.

Steve couldn't think of anywhere else in the world he'd rather be.

Steve was taller than him, but they still fit together surprisingly well. Tony wrapped his arms
around Steve's waist and set his chin on Steve's shoulder. Steve pulled the covers up. It was perfect. Tony had never realized spooning was actually pleasant before.

"'M glad too," mumbled Tony. He nipped Steve's ear again before dropping his head onto the pillow that smelled like his omega.

My omega, he thought sleepily, lazily. Even though he'd slept for the better part of the morning, the excitement of the last few days was catching up to him and that, combined with the comfort of the bed and Steve's back pressed into his torso, were enough to push him into a perfect, restful sleep, clutching Steve tightly, protectively, breathing on the back of his neck lightly.

Steve woke later that evening to Tony's arms around him and his breath hot against his neck. He stirred a little and blinked, rubbing a hand over his face and sighed. This felt so strangely perfect. He grunted quietly and sat up. Steve moved to go take a piss and then devoured a few pastries and three glasses of water before returning to bed.

He saw Tony half awake in bed when he returned and slipped back under the covers, leaving a plate with the rest of the pastries on the bedside table. Steve curled back up next to him, not wanting to be anywhere else for the rest of the day and night. He'd figured they'd earned an almost 12 hour sleep in all honesty. The serum gave him so much energy. But when he crashed, he crashed.

"You want food?" Steve asked, voice thick with sleep.

"Not really," mumbled Tony, immediately wrapping himself back around Steve when he came back to bed. Based on the light streaming in through the windows, it was around dinnertime. They'd slept away most of the afternoon. He should probably eat; he'd only had a bowl of cereal all day. But there was nothing he'd rather do than this. He nosed Steve's neck, kissing him again, biting his neck. Reclaiming him, as if he might have forgotten who Tony was during his brief trip to the kitchen and Tony had to re-establish that he was Tony, the guy who had left the earlier bruise, the guy who had been holding him all day.

Tony was feeling groggy but significantly more well-rested than he had that morning. He pressed himself against Steve, noting dully that he had morning wood-- more accurately, late afternoon wood-- and that the back of Steve's thigh felt incredible when he rubbed against it. He was half-asleep. Aware enough to know this probably constituted "funny business" but sleepy and aroused enough not to care very much.

No. That wasn't true. He cared about Steve. He cared a lot.

"...is this okay?" he mumbled, pressing his erection against Steve. He felt stupid. He'd never had to ask before. Women threw themselves at him. Asking permission was so far down on Tony's list of questions for new bedmates that it was less than even a footnote.

But Tony didn't want to risk getting kicked out of the bed, or Steve pushing him away. Or, perhaps worst of all, Steve being mad at him. He wanted Steve so badly it ached, physically and emotionally; Steve's love and approval meant everything. He was willing to ask permission and get on his knees and grovel if that's what it took to keep Steve close to him. He wasn't sure where this sense of longing was coming from or how the hell to get rid of it. He was operating largely under gut feelings and hoping that that was sufficient to lead him to where ever this crazy train was taking him to. It seemed like the more time he spent around Steve, the more his brain was screaming at him to hold and caress and protect and nurture and love him. But he also felt like it wouldn't keep building; there was some inevitable conclusion that his gut was telling him was the most desirable thing on the planet. It wasn't sex. Sex was a component, yes. But it was much,
much, much more than that. Something Tony didn't have but now was certain that he needed. Something that Tony couldn't believe he had lived his whole life without, because whatever it was, it was absolutely critical to get, through any means necessary.

His brain was telling him that the best two ways to get it were by being ass-kissingly kind to Steve and by tearing apart anyone who dared look at Steve. Since the second one was impossible (it was just the two of them), Tony was focused on the first one. If Steve had told him to jump out the window, suitless, Tony would have launched himself off the seventeenth-story balcony in a heartbeat. He wanted to impress Steve, to show him that he was the perfect Alpha, that Steve should definitely consider Tony as his newest mate. Because, in addition to being capable and willing and eager to throw himself off of buildings and get into fights with other Alphas, Tony could also be incredibly selfless and caring and would trip over himself to do whatever Steve wanted, as long as Steve indicated what that was.

Of course, Tony didn't have the words to express any of that. It was just a feeling. Words didn't really seem important, for once. Normally Tony was a babbling, rambling mess. But now, his attention had shifted from the verbal to the physical. Every kiss of Steve's neck was worth millions of useless, worthless words. Words seems pointless. What they were doing now, holding each other, snuggling up in the bed, seemed vastly more efficient. It communicated a promise that words would have cheapened. Tony was over words. He was a man of action. He was tuned completely to Steve, wanting Steve to give him permission or even a command. If Steve only told him what to do, Tony would do it and Steve would be so, so impressed with him, so blown away by Tony's prowess, that he'd accept Tony was, by and far, the best, most capable Alpha, and then Tony would rest easy knowing that he didn't have to prove himself anymore, and would have a lot less heads to rip off.

Currently, though, he would have gladly torn a few heads from their necks, if he thought they were eyeballing Steve. Steve was his. Or would be, soon, anyway.

"I think that counts as funny business," Steve mumbled, already half asleep himself. He was almost aroused by it, his body responding in turn but he didn't think he was quite ready for that yet. This...them cuddling. That was a big step for Steve in itself. The intimacy, the physical closeness, even the trust. If Tony carried on Steve probably wouldn't stop him, he wanted the Alpha to be happy. But he was tired and sleepy and when they did... stuff for the first time a part of him wanted it to be special. Maybe it was cheesy. Maybe it was his old forties values peeking through. But maybe that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Maybe...maybe in the morning?" He murmured, words half muffled by the pillow again. "M'kinda dead," he admitted. Steve would usually do this. Run on too little sleep for weeks on end and then his body would just...crash. Need a recharge. His heat had been a mess of fevers and stress dreams and then Tony had been dying. He hadn't gotten enough sleep in about a week and now he was safe and warm and with his Alpha--

No, he mentally corrected. Not his. But Steve hoped... one day. Although they both needed time.

It felt good when Tony had sucked at his neck and re-established his claim there and Steve's body had responded in turn, shivering in delight. But that was enough for Steve right. Baby steps.

Steve smirked lazily, so lazily the gesture barely curled onto his lips. "Don't want you thinking I'm easy, Stark," he rumbled, tone gently teasing as he let out a small sigh. He snuggled back against him, doing his best to ignore Tony's hard on. It wasn't easy, mind. A part of Steve wanted to straddle Tony and wondered what it would feel like if he-

No funny business.
"Wanna just sleep some more?" He asked with a yawn, stretching out his legs as the sound escaped from his lips.

"...yes," said Tony eagerly, seizing onto Steve's request with delight, pulling away from his leg. Denying himself wasn't pleasant, but that was fine. Tony wanted it to be unpleasant. Wanted Steve to see just how serious he was. Wanted Steve to know he'd gladly sacrifice his own comfort for Steve's.

He wasn't tired, not really, but he held Steve, waiting until his breath was slow and steady, before slowly, slowly untangling them and getting out of bed. He eyed the plate of pastries next to the bed, grabbed one, and bit into it. He barely tasted it; he put it back. God damn. Now that he was awake, he was restless.

A sudden moment of clarity. This is Steve's fault. Ever since he went into heat, I've been feeling weird, thought Tony, annoyed. The whole scent-mate thing struck him as the omega's fault. After all, it was Steve's heat that had triggered it in the first place.

Maybe he just needed some fresh air.

He hovered over the bed, over Steve's sweet sleeping form, for several seconds before tearing himself away. He wanted to stand there, hovering, all night. But that was insane. Steve hardly needed someone to guard him.

Tony let himself out onto the balcony and leaned over the railing with a groan, holding his head in his hands. He caught a whiff of another Alpha; two balconies away, a man was smoking on his own balcony. Tony stared. The man, sensing his gaze, turned and looked at him. Tony snarled automatically, the hairs on his arms and neck standing up.

Get the fuck away from him, you ass. I will fight you.

The man held up a hand and pointed to a wedding band. Tony was still tense.

"I'm already bonded!" he called across the expanse, sensing Tony's aggression.

Oh. Alright, then. Tony couldn't smell if he was bonded from this distance but the knowledge was enough to calm him down a little.

Tony went back to surveying the street from the balcony, but after only about ten minutes, he let himself back in. He spent the next few hours pacing impatiently between the bed and the living room, making sure Steve was safe. He choked down some food because he felt like he should and rummaged through the cupboards looking for alcohol. None. Goddamn it. He'd never be able to fall back asleep without a nightcap.

Inspiration!

Tony pulled on one of Steve's shirts (too big, but God, it smelled amazing), let himself out of the apartment and walked down the hall to the guy who had been smoking.

A female omega opened the door and blinked at him. "Can I help you?" she asked. Clearly, she didn't recognize him. She was wearing a pair of silk pants and a long black tunic with embroidery around the neck; she had on reading glasses that magnified her deep brown eyes. She was pretty in the understated way that people who like reading nooks tend to have.
"I wanna talk to your mate."

"Who, Sean? SEAN!" she yelled.

Sean appeared. He was younger than Tony, but not by much; he had on a pair of slacks and a button-up shirt and he'd loosened his tie. Clearly, the guy had just come home from wherever he worked. He smelled like cigarette smoke. "Oh, hey." He held up his hands. "Listen, I don't want to fight. I'm happily married, and bonded."

"I know," said Tony, confused about why this guy seemed so submissive. "You told me you were. I just wanted to know if you had any scotch."

Sean laughed. "Uh, well, we have wine. Come on in."

The pair moved aside and let Tony in. Sean looked him up and down. Ill-fitted shirt, no socks or shoes, ridiculous bedhead. "You've got it bad, huh?" he said, leading Tony into the kitchen. "I thought you were coming over to kick my ass."

"Why would I do that? I don't even know you," said Tony.

"Well, you were getting pretty worked up outside, before you know I was bonded. I know how it is. You get obsessed and everyone seems like a threat. ...do you like chardonnay? We have chardonnay and a sauvignon. ...Meha only drinks white, I'm afraid, so if you're a Merlot guy, then you're out of luck."

Tony stared at Sean as he peered into the fridge, feeling confused. Why was Sean being so nice to him? He had been prepared to offer the guy money, grab a bottle, and run back to Steve's place. He hadn't expected to be invited in and poured a glass.

"You look really, really familiar. Have you been in something?" asked Sean, squinting at Tony.

"No," said Tony. "I just... I got one of those faces." He accepted the glass of wine and tried not to down it in a single go. "Well... I don't want to, uh, overstay my welcome. Look, can I just buy that bottle from you?"

The woman laughed and waved her hand. "Oh, just take it, it's a cheap bottle."

"Thanks," said Tony with relief. He polished off the glass, took the bottle of wine, and let Sean lead him to the door.

"Hey, man, good luck," said Sean, sticking a hand out.

Tony shook it, even though he had no idea what Sean was wishing him luck with. "Thanks for the wine."

"My pleasure. I know what it feels like when you find the one."

"Find the wine?" repeated Tony, even more confused.

"The one. Your omega."

"I don't have an omega."

"Yet."

Ugh. Tony was officially creeped out by Sean. He took the wine and scurried back to Steve's
place. At least he knew Sean wasn't a threat, though. Sean had been surprisingly pleasant and submissive, and he already had someone, so Tony didn't have to defend Steve against him, which was good.

Back in the safety of Steve's apartment, he double-checked on Steve, then drank the wine straight from the bottle in the kitchen before pulling off his jeans and crawling back into bed with Steve. The wine did exactly what he wanted it to; he was buzzed and sleepy again, ready to pass out for the night. He slid an arm around Steve's waist and slowly stroked his hair as he slept, admiring the strength of his jawline, the delicacy of his eyelashes, the bow of his lips. Steve's face was perfect. All of him was perfect. An effect of the serum, maybe? That must be it. Tony had never been so fascinated with an individual and he could only conclude that his attraction was unnatural, a response to the serum. Of course, that didn't keep Tony was enjoying it. He stared at Steve's sleeping form with the intensity of an artist ogling one of their master's creations, petting the soft hair on the back of his neck, letting his eyelids slowly droop. He sank into the bed, hugging Steve, his confusing, fast-paced world shrunk to a simple apartment with homey smells and down pillow and a gorgeous blond who knew how to drop-kick a man and also how to paint a skyline in watercolor paint.

Steve woke with a start when he heard the front door of his apartment open and close. There was no force. Someone had a key. He frowned and sat up in bed. "Tony..." He whispered and nudged the Alpha's shoulder. "Tony, wake up."

Tony groaned when Steve nudged him. "Five more minutes," he mumbled automatically, yanking the sheet over his head. Tony had a personal rule against getting up before eight. He could tell that whatever hour it was, it was early.

Of course Steve would be an early riser, he thought grumpily.

Steve reached down to grab his shirt and pulled it on before slowly moving out of bed. And where had the bottle of wine come from? A question for another time. Steve smelled...nothing of note and frowned, hands flexing by his sides as he stepped into his living area--

"Rogers." Fury's voice was smooth like coffee. The man's gaze flickered over Steve slowly, calculating. Like he just knew Steve was keeping Tony back there. He dropped the special copy of the Times onto the table, a picture of Steve on the front (fully clothed.) He was mid-step with his hands in his pockets, his smile a naturally warm one. Steve was glad they chose such a human picture for the front. He looked happy in it. It was nice.

The headline read: "Captain America back from the dead: our favorite superhero on statusism, the forties and being an omega in both centuries."

And then underneath they had a direct quote: "Being an omega doesn't limit me. I don't let it. It makes me stronger."

Steve glanced back up at Fury and crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes narrowing. "You should have let me know you'd be here for breakfast," he said coldly.

Fury tilted his head a fraction. "Why, Captain? Do you have company?"

In the bedroom, Tony had dragged Steve's pillow over his head, not wanting to leave the comfort of the bed just yet. He rolled over to where Steve had been moments before. It was still warm. He buried his face into Steve's pillow with the softest moan of delight.
Well, he was sure as hell awake now. Steve was probably making breakfast. Tony was starving. He crawled to the edge of the bed and found his jeans, pulling out his phone. Notifications: 100+. Not surprising, considering what had happened in Monaco and at his birthday. He went to delete them, but before he could, a new call came through.

Happy.

Tony answered. "What'd you want, Happy? I'm on a hiatus right now."

"You owe me five thousand bucks."

"... what?"

"Seven years ago, you were telling me your stupid theory about Captain America being more than one person, that Steve Rogers was a media invention designed to sell war bonds and make people feel patriotic during the war... and I told you what I read in the Enquirer, that it's one guy, one real guy, and also he's an omega, and you said, 'Happy, if that shit's true, I'll give you five thousand bucks.'"

Tony blinked, trying to remember the conversation. "Okay, first of all, my theory was not stupid. There's lots of people who aren't real people, like... like Mavis Beacon or Betty Crocker."

"...Betty Crocker isn't real?"

"And second, more importantly, why are you calling me at six am?"

A pause. "...didn'tcha see the headlines?"

"What headlines? About my birthday?"

"No, about Captain America."

"What about Captain America?"

"That he's alive, and he's an omega. He gave this big interview about it and everything."

"What? Happy, lemme call you back." Tony hung up and yanked up the Associate Press's website. There it was: a picture of Steve, giving a cocky, friendly little salute, with the tagline OMEGA IN AMERICA: ONE MAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE ALPHA-OMEGA DYNAMIC.

He went to Fox next. STARS, STRIPES, AND OMEGA BLUES: CAPTAIN AMERICA'S SHOCKING CONFESSION. There was Steve, leaning against a wall shirtless, an American flag splashed across his six-pack.

"Oh shit," said Tony out loud, his mouth watering.

Huffington Post: CAPTAIN AMERICA: "BEING AN OMEGA DOESN'T LIMIT ME." A picture of Steve with his shirt undone, looking serious.

MSNBC: AMERICA'S FAVORITE PATRIOT TALKS CIVIL RIGHTS. Steve standing soldier-straight, feet planted, smiling bravely at the camera.

Rutgers: BREAKING NEWS: CAPTAIN ROGERS REVEALS OMEGA STATUS, TALKS PROGRESS THROUGH THE CENTURIES. A candid picture of Steve mid-laugh.

CNN: OMEGA OPPRESSION, PATRIOTISM, AND PREJUDICE. CAPTAIN AMERICA
Steve's story had taken over the headlines, overshadowing Tony's scandals completely. Only MSNBC still had a small story on the front page about Tony's birthday. (DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE RESPONDS STARK MALIBU DEBACLE.) Huffington Post and Fox had stories on Monaco, but both were secondary to the news about Steve. (Huff Po: MONACO MANIAC DECLARED DEAD FOLLOWING PRISON RIOT. Fox: SEN STERN PUSHES FOR SANCTIONS AGAINST WEAPON DESIGNER TONY STARK FOLLOWING INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT INVOLVING RT-POWERED MECH SUITS.)

The Bugle was tragically behind. Their headlines were about Tony, not Steve. (MYSTERY ATTACKER OF IRON MAN KILLED IN CUSTODY. TONY STARK HAS PERSONAL MELTDOWN AFTER NEAR-DEATH ATTACK AT THE MONACO GRAND PRIX.)

Tony swung out of bed and hurried into the main room, excited to know when Steve had found the time to let someone paint an American flag on his perfect stomach.

He stopped dead the moment he left the bedroom.

Nick Fury was leaning on Steve's counter, looking ominous in a leather trench coat and gloves. Tony stared at him like a deer in the headlights.

"...well. Good morning, Patch Adams," said Tony, sarcasm bubbling to the surface before he even had time to comprehend what was going on. "This is so weird, because actually, I just had a dream about you... funny how that happens, right? ...how you doing? Coffee? Tea? ...I could use some coffee myself. I'm not a morning guy. You look kinda tired yourself."

Fury said nothing. He just glared.

"...I created that new element," blurted Tony, trying to fill the silence. He was suddenly very aware that he was only wearing boxer-briefs.

This isn't actually the most worst position I've been caught in the last year, thought Tony. Hell... probably not even the worst in the last forty-eight hours.

He looked over at Steve. Fuck. Steve was in a t-shirt and his neck had two large bruises on it.

Tony turned back to Fury. "This looks super bad, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't matter what it looks like. It's none of his business," Steve said simply, not taking his eyes off Fury. To his credit, the director's face remained neutral when an almost naked Tony appeared. He didn't even look surprised.

"This wasn't part of the plan," Nick said.

"And was part of the plan bugging my phone and my laptop and my apartment?" Steve asked, voice sharp and unforgiving.

Nick sighed. "So this all some form of retaliation?" He stepped forward. "I thought you were better than that, Captain."

"Guess that makes two of us. Get out of my apartment."

Fury raised a brow. "Am I to take it that you quit?"
"I will never quit the Avengers, and I will never quit my country, but I will quit you." Steve breathed, voice trembling a little in what was probably anger. "You can't force me to keep hidden anymore. You can't bug my goddamn apartment. And you can't make me spy. I can't trust you, Nick. You've ruined this relationship. You've been lying to me since the day you unfroze me. And you've been making me lie. And that's not the man I am. So get out."

Nick straightened up, like he was seeing Steve in a new light or something. His gaze flickered between Tony and Steve again. The cool-headed beta almost looked uncomfortable. "Please tell me you aren't thinking of getting pair-bonded. You can't--"

"I can do whatever I goddamn well like. Get out."

"This is so awkward," said Tony in a stage whisper.

Steve's phone chimed. A single text message from Clint: :)

"The Avengers Initiative was formed as a task force to protect the world. Not to push political agendas," said Fury. He pointed to the paper. "You talking about education, suppressants... abortion for omegas? SHIELD isn't a partisan department, Cap. You just made us a whole lot of enemies. Maybe it's time to start talking about where your priorities lie."

"Ah, the ol' security versus liberties debate," said Tony, crossing the room and rooting around in the fridge. He pulled out a carton of orange juice and began drinking from it.

"The world needs Captain America. Not as an omega, not as a person... as a symbol, Rogers. You signed up for this, you took that serum knowing that you were giving yourself to your country. And now you're losing your head over..." Fury's eye traveled to Tony, who was still drinking orange juice from the carton.

"Look, Cyclops, obviously I look crappy right now, but I clean up nice, alright?" snapped Tony. "And Steve asked you to leave. So get out before I kick you out."

Fury looked unfazed, but he pushed off the counter. Tony could feel himself getting defensive, his muscles tensing. His earlier desire to beat someone up to demonstrate his strength to Steve was coming to the surface again.

But Fury was already striding to the door. "Let me know when you wanna start fixing this. Your mess, your clean-up," called Fury over his shoulder. He closed the door a little harder than was necessary.

Tony snatched at the newspaper. "So Cap's pro-choice now? Oh my God, no wonder Fury was having a hernia." He flipped open the paper eagerly. "This is crazy, Steve. ...you know I lost five thou' because of you? Naw, it's good, I don't care, that's walking around money... oh my God..." He flipped the paper and pointed to a picture of Steve lounging, shirtless, a smeared American flag on his naked skin. "This is the sexiest thing I've ever seen." His eyes scanned over the paper. "I just found out the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles... ha, ha, cute... it's hard to find someone... what am I, chopped liver? ... I don't understand emojis; they're just smiley faces, Steve, that's it... well, except for the eggplant, the eggplant means penis, but the rest are just smileys... the objectification of omegas is still a serious issue. Yeah, okay, look, I'm sorry I slapped your ass, you can stop whining about it..."

Tony devoured the article with unconcealed delight. He knew a media shitstorm when he saw one, and Captain America coming out as omega and giving a personal, candid interview about major political issues was a class-5 hurricane. Howard, reflected Tony, would have thought the entire
mess to be hilarious. He had already pegged Fury as a man with zero sense of humor; he was guessing that Howard and Fury had butted heads a lot back in the day. Howard, the same guy who would insist on an omega leading the team, would have been equally amused to watch said omega kick up the dirt and throw himself into the spotlight for the hell of it. Begrudgingly, Tony admitted he and his father were alike in this way. They both firmly believed that any publicity was good publicity.

"This is me helping protect the world more than shooting a gun ever will," Steve breathed. "I can't stand by and do nothing. It's the twenty-first century! Omegas should be... you know."

"People?" suggested Tony, still browsing the paper.

"...yeah! Yeah, People!" said Steve, seizing on Tony's suggestion immediately. The truth was, Steve felt guilty. They'd told him not to come out in the forties for the same reasons Fury had. But what if Steve had? Would he have made a difference today? Could he have made things better for omega rights? He had a feeling he could have. But he hadn't. Steve had done nothing because a load of beats and Alphas had warned him it would be a lot of 'hassle.'

"I already died for this country once," Steve huffed as the door slipped shut after Fury. "What goddamn more does he want from me?" He sighed and leaned back against the counter, running a hand over his face. Tony telling Fury to get out of his apartment had been pretty hot, at least.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, actually. Ever since being unfrozen."

"About this?" asked Tony, holding up a color picture of Steve shirtless.

He blushed a little when the shirtless picture was held up. "They wanted to do it," he shrugged in a weak defence with a small smile on his lips. Steve had to admit... he looked alright. Well, it had been better than when he'd toured with the USO. They'd had him in shorts and boots and he'd never been more embarrassed in his life.

"And..." Steve pushed away to stand right in front of Tony, smirking faintly. "The reason I keep 'whining' about you slapping my ass is because you're not sorry you did. Not sorry at all."

Tony stared at Steve. They were less than an arm's reach from each other. Steve was taller.

"...you got me," admitted Tony. "I'm not sorry. In fact, I take great pride in having slapped your ass, and I'll probably do it again in the next twenty-four hours." He took a step toward Steve; their chest were almost touching. Tony slipped his arms around Steve's waist, putting his hands on his hips, feeling the hardness of Steve's muscles. He nuzzled Steve's chest. His hands slipped down to Steve's cheeks and he gave him a squeeze. "Let the record show..." he murmured into Steve's throat, "...that this does not constitute a slap. This is more of a grope. ...that all-American picture of you, Steve. My God. Makes me feel like a real patriot, if you know what I'm saying."

Steve's breath hitched as Tony squeezed at his firm buttocks and he couldn't deny that he was aroused. His eyes darkened a fraction, especially at having Tony so close with his breath tickling at Steve's neck. "I think I get the picture," he breathed, voice soft as sin.

Tony laughed suddenly, kissing Steve's throat and pulling away. "Now, where's my coffee? I wasn't kidding around with Fury, I really do need coffee- I'm like Garfield. I hate mornings. ...no, wait. Mondays. He hated Mondays. Never mind. Do you even know who Garfield is? The cat that eats lasagna? Not the president... never mind, Steve. It's for the best. Those comics aren't
even funny. So. Coffee." He gave Steve an encouraging slap on the ass.

He caught Tony's hand reflexively, his hand a blur. He squeezed firmly, but didn't hurt him as he promptly backed Tony up against the fridge. Just because he could. "What's the magic word?" Steve asked, smile and expression serenely innocent despite the fact that Tony's arm was pinned against the fridge.

Tony's brain cycled through emotions rapidly. Surprise at Steve's sudden movement; fear at feeling his hand grabbed; excitement as Steve body-checked him.

He stared at Steve, pinning him. There was something delightfully perverse about it. Steve, an omega, pinning Tony, an Alpha. Tony was feeling the same sort of thrill he got from having the girl on top. (This happened to be one of his favorite positions.)

"Rogers... if you think I'm going to say please to get you off of me, you are sadly mistaken. This is really doing it for me, actually," breathed Tony softly, staring into Steve's eyes. Then, barely audible, suddenly serious, he added, "...I trust you."

If anyone else in the world had pinned him, he would have been losing his mind. But Steve was different. Tony didn't know why or how. He just was. Everything Steve did seemed fun, playful, personal, special. The pressure on Tony's hand felt wonderful. Tony was practically melting against the fridge. Steve was so strong, so ridiculously strong.

Tony almost wanted to give Steve what he wanted, offer him a pleasant, token "please," only because he thought Steve might like it. But he had always been obstinate, and he was an Alpha, and he thought manners were stupid. Case in point: moments earlier he'd been drinking from the carton in his underwear while Fury watched. Tony considered his irreverent attitude a fundamental part of his person. And a strong Alpha didn't take orders from an omega. Even if the omega in question was taller, heavier, stronger, and currently had him pinned.

Tony stared into Steve's deep blue eyes. Steve stared back. Tony maintained his gaze, waiting for Steve to glance down or away. He could hear both of them breathing; their breathing had synced up automatically, unintentionally.

But Steve didn't glance down. Not yet. He held Tony's gaze like the captain he was, jaw set and expression determined even though his blue eyes were bright with mischief. He liked Tony's reaction- he liked that the Alpha could handle him. In whatever form Steve was presented.

"Doing it for you, huh?" Steve echoed, voice still soft like he knew just how wild he was driving Tony. Then his expression shifted a little, becoming more sincere. "I trust you, too," he whispered just so Tony could hear it.

Eventually, he let go of Tony. His fingers trailed over the inside of the other's wrist before he pulled away entirely. Steve smirked subtly and went to go fill the kettle up to boil. "Grab us both a mug, will you? Cupboard to your right."

"What's the magic word, Rogers?" teased Tony, already going to the cupboard to get the mugs. He set them on the counter and walked past Steve, trailing his fingers over his back as he passed.

God, this was so... domestic. Since when had Tony ever felt this way with anyone? Pepper, maybe, but they had known each other, what, a decade, more than--

"Oh! Fuck me, I'm supposed to meet Pepper for brunch." Tony hesitated. Larchmont was only thirty minutes, due east, probably only a minute in the suit. But he didn't want to leave Steve.
"...lemme just call her real quick and see if we're still on." Tony slipped into the bedroom and shut the door behind him. He was conflicted. He wanted to see Pepper, let her know he was okay. Was she mad? By now she probably knew all about his birthday. He didn't feel like having anyone ruin the high he was getting from Steve's presence. Then again, brunch meant mimosas, and Steve's home was woefully devoid of alcohol.

He picked up his phone and dialed, sitting on the edge of Steve's bed. He thought about how he'd gotten the mugs, running a hand over his goatee thoughtfully.

He was acting weird, feeling weird... he didn't know why. Could it be the new arc reactor core, screwing with his brain somehow? An after-effect of Steve's heat? Tony had never spent a morning like this with anyone. These were uncharted waters.

"Anthony Edward Stark!" Tony could tell in an instant she wasn't in a good mood. "Do you have any idea--"

"Uh-oh."

"--the fire I've been trying to put out, Rhodes has one of your suits, Happy went over to your home and the place looks like--"

"I know, I know, listen, uh... about brunch... I'm kinda... I'm with someone... can we catch up later?" asked Tony. Yeah. She was mad. He was definitely not going to brunch with her if she was mad. Which, he thought happily, meant he could spend more time with Steve, cuddling up on the couch, watching the news...

The line was silence for a moment while Tony thought fondly of spending a lazy day with Steve, holed up in the apartment.

"Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me, Tony?! After Monaco, after Malibu, after disappearing for two days, avoiding my calls, now you're cancelling on me? I've been up to my ears in phone calls, Tony, they took the Mark II platform, I've got three different patent lawyers on hold right now and the Department of Defense is breathing down my neck, and you can't even drag yourself to come get breakfast with me? I think the least you could do for me, literally the very least, is give me some sort of explanation--"

"Do Alphas go into heat?"

"I mean, I'm trying to run a company, Tony, I'm--" She stopped dead, frustration arrested temporarily. "What?"

Tony lowered his voice. "...do Alphas go into heat?"

"...are you on drugs?"

"Because, you know, sometimes Alphas kind of go crazy, get a little feral..."

"Is this about what happened on the plane between you and Stan? I mean, Steve? Is that it? Oh, that's another wonderful PR mess, by the way, you fired your omega days after he went into heat, and, I don't know if you've seen the headlines, but now Captain America is championing omega rights and if anyone gets ahold of what you did--"

"Focus, Pepper, we're talking about me."

"It's always about you, isn't it?"
Tony ignored her comment. "If an Alpha is acting around an omega like the omega is in heat, but the omega *isn't* in heat, but they're still driving the Alpha crazy--"

"Did no one ever teach you any of this? You're forty years old, Tony. You two are obviously scent-mates. Just accept it."

"You're not helping me." Tony leaned over, pinching the bridge of his nose with exasperation. And also to try not to breath in too much of Steve's smell. It was intoxicating. "You're sure it's not a heat-related thing?"

"I don't know, Tony, I'm not an expert on this stuff and I'm not an Alpha. Maybe during courtship? I don't know. Alphas definitely do not have heats. I think you're just scent-mates."

Tony gestured in the air. "But, okay, courtship, that's for pair-bonding, right? Let's say they're *not* pair-bonding..."

"Tony, pair-bonding isn't like marriage, it's not a purposeful thing, you don't really choose... I mean, you can choose... you *should* choose, but sometimes it just happens. It's natural. ...like pregnancy, I suppose."

"Accidental pair-bonding is a thing? ...why the hell don't they have PSAs about that?"

"My God, how did you get this far without knowing any of this? ...you know, Captain America is actually pushing for omega education--"

"Funny, I thought he meant educating omegas, not educating people *about* omegas."

"Tony, you have to come back home. *Now.*"

"I'm going into an elevator, the call's probably gonna drop."

"Tony! Tony, I need you to come in *this* instant, the company--"

"Tsssshhh... bad connection... tsssshhh..." said Tony. He hung up, heart hammering. He definitely wasn't pair-bonding. Definitely not. Wasn't courting. No. He wasn't sure where all these feelings about Steve were coming from, but ever since his heat, Tony had felt obsessed. Pepper hadn't been any help. She'd only made him worried. She was right, too, about what a PR nightmare it would be if anyone happened to notice that Tony's omega PA had been fired. Not that it was his problem. It was hers- she the was CEO of Stark Industries- Tony was no longer in any real authoritative position. He was equal parts consultant and mascot. Nothing managerial. Thank Tesla.

He couldn't think of anyone else to ask about his feelings. There was Rhodey, who was an Alpha, but the last time they'd spoken, Tony had thrown him through a wall. He didn't have anyone else, except Steve himself, and he didn't want to ask Steve why he felt this way. He didn't want to look foolish. And what if he asked and then Steve admitted that Tony's feelings were one-sided? It would literally kill him.

Welp. Fortune favored the bold.

Tony got up off the couch and walked back into the kitchen. Considering the shock of Monaco and his party and the whole nearly-dying-of-a-poisoned-chest-implant, maybe he was overthinking things. Maybe he was just high on life. Yeah. That was probably it. Probably, any omega would drive him crazy right now. He was just a little shell-shocked. Surely everything would right itself in a few days. In the meantime, why not have fun?
"So that was the surprise," said Tony, emerging into the kitchen. "Your grand debut as the omega man? ...I canceled on Pepper. I wanna spend the day with you, watching this historic mess unfold. People are gonna be going nuts. Everyone always assumed Captain America was an Alpha."

Tony paused. "I did," he added. He didn't add he'd had a poster of Captain America over his bed for years and considered Captain America to be an excellent role model for a strong, dominant Alpha.

Dad probably thought that was fucking hilarious, thought Tony bitterly.

"And that's exactly why I had to come out. Because everyone assumed," Steve said quietly as he poured hot water over coffee grounds in a cafetière. The hot water pooled at the bottom and chocolate coloured water bloomed within it. "I want people to know that stereotypes are sometimes wrong. That an omega can do anything, can lead if they want to. Fury says I started a mess...but I'm not sure I could live with myself if I kept hidden," Steve admitted quietly as he slid his cup over. "I can't help but think what would happen if I'd been open in the forties? Everyone told me not to make a fuss but...what if I'd made a difference? I'll never know now, but." he shrugged. "If an Alpha tells me to stay quiet, I won't listen to them anymore. I'm sick of doing things other people's way- I want to see what I can do on my own, for once."

Steve laughed quietly, almost shyly and ducked his head down. "Sorry. I didn't mean to give you a full speech. But I'm glad you're staying for the day. I wanna spend time with you."

Tony listened, interested, captivated, taking the mug from Steve and sipping the coffee gratefully. "Wow, Rogers. That's... real... I dunno. Brave, I guess. And cheesy. But brave." Tony looked up contemplatively. "Dad never mentioned you were an omega. But he never said you were an Alpha, either. Dad never really said what anyone was. In his own way, I guess, he... he did care about, you know, civil rights. He was progressive, for a guy born in nineteen-seventeen. Maybe he didn't want anyone to assume, you know? Either way." Tony shrugged one shoulder. "Rogers, listen. Don't tell anyone I can be serious but, seriously? I, uh... I respect you a lot. As an omega. And a friend."

Embarrassment was creeping up again. Tony sipped his coffee and avoided Steve's gaze. Tony's experience with omegas was so woefully inadequate; he didn't want to admit that to Steve. But wasn't that, too, indicative of the problem? Omegas weren't expected to run businesses, to get high-paying government jobs, to make a difference. Tony mingled with betas and Alphas; as the CEO of a Fortune 500, he'd rarely had to speak to an omega, unless he was giving a drink order or directions to a night club. The omegas he saw always tended to be assistants, secretaries, or paired to a high-ranking Alpha. He'd never questioned it, but yes, even in the twenty-first century, it was true... omegas were treated as second-class citizens, and no one thought that was weird. They were all so used to it... Tony felt a pang of guilt. He was sure he'd probably objectified omegas before without even thinking about it.

Pepper was involved in social issues; Tony had long avoided them. Now he was sitting almost-naked in the room of a guy who'd just cracked open the Pandora's Box of civil rights.

Goddammit.

"Rogers, make me some breakfast? I'm starving over here." He paused, and then added, "Please ", giving Steve a wink. "You, me, brunch, couch, TV... it's a perfect... what day is it? Monday? Tuesday? It feels very Monday-ish to me."

Tony pushed himself to his feet and went to the bedroom to drag Steve's sheets into the living room and make a nest on the couch. Tony had always had only two modes: wired, manic, and restless... or sinfully lazy. He felt that the events of the last few days entitled him to a few sinfully lazy ones.
The only real problem was the lack of alcohol. He was tempted to see if he could steal another bottle off Sean-Down-The-Hall, but Sean had creeped him out a little last time, so he decided against it.

"...maybe after breakfast we could just run down the block... get a bottle of scotch or something?" he ventured hesitantly, aware that asking at this time in the morning probably made it look like he had a problem.

"Whilst it's none of my business, I'm not going to encourage your alcoholism, Tony," Steve said plainly, tone gentle but also unforgiving. "I can't get drunk anymore so I'd appreciate if you didn't." And he meant that. Steve didn't like feeling...left behind, almost.

It felt good, though. When Tony said he respected him... Steve was almost surprised by how good it felt to just hear it. He didn't think he'd heard it from anyone but Phil since waking up, and Phil was obsessed with the legacy. Not really him. "And it's Friday," Steve added with a slight frown on his features. "Are you gonna be alright without a PA?" His tone was teasing but the concern was genuine.

Steve moved to make pancakes. His ma had taught him to cook growing up. It meant that when Bucky worked and Steve hadn't been well enough to, he'd always provided something. Even if it was only a hot meal for Bucky to come home to, the other still appreciated it. Especially in the winter times, when it was so cold outside Bucky used to tumble straight into bed from work and Steve had to bring him dinner on a tray. He missed those days sometimes. Being smaller...knowing what it was to struggle. He didn't miss the stress but he missed the comradeship, how close it had brought him and Bucky together.

"Here you go," Steve told Tony as he handed him a plate and fork, the plate laden with pancakes and syrup. He tugged up the edge of the sheet and snuck underneath himself with his own plate of food. He took the time to reply to Clint's text before he started eating.

> Fury's pissed. Do you think it was a bad move?

Clint was an omega. Steve especially cared about his opinion on this matter.

"Having your respect counts for a lot, by the way," Steve said quietly just after swallowing a mouthful of pancakes down.

"Mmph," replied Tony, mouth full, waving Steve away dismissively. He had said his part, let Steve know he was respected... he didn't want to go on and on about it. Worse, now he felt guilty about his drinking. Tony didn't consider himself an alcoholic, even though he did shake a little if he went too long without it. But he was a functional drinker and functionality had always been Tony's top priority in accessing whether something was good or bad.

Steve's phone chimed.

> It took brass balls. I'm behind you 100%. Phil too. Fury doesn't know what it's like, forget him. Besides, you wouldn't be able to hide your status forever.

"You can't get drunk?" asked Tony, watching Steve check his phone. He chased a bite of food around his plate. "...when Fury said you can't pair-bond... did he mean... I mean, you can, right? How much stuff did the serum and the ice screw up? I mean, you're okay down there, right? I mean, you can't be that screwed up, if you went into heat a few days ago. ...right?" He was trying to act casual but the truth was, he was suddenly worried about Steve. It wasn't, surprisingly, a selfish concern. Tony wanted Steve to be okay. Steve looked so incredibly healthy that it was
easy to forget how much his body had actually been through.

> Thank you, Clint. Means a lot.

"I don't know," Steve admittedly quietly. "The scientists guessed a lot of things wrong so far. The infertility thing is pretty much confirmed. But that's okay. I'm a soldier" He pressed his lips together in a thin line. Did It bother him?

Before the serum Steve had entertained the idea of having children, fantasizing about coming back to a full house after long days at work or whatever. But since the serum it had never occurred to him. He was a soldier. No children for him. But Steve did resent the fact that the choice had been made for him by his body before he could.

"Down there. I'm fine, Tony." Steve rolled his eyes fondly. "But I don't know if my body would let me mate. It's so resistant to change. There's only one real way to find out what it will or won't do though, I guess," he shrugged.

"Steve," said Tony with sudden seriousness. He set his plate aside and reached out, placing a hand on either side of Steve's face and looking deep into his eyes. "When you say that there's only one way to find out... look. I know what you're thinking. But Steve..." He took a deep breath and then sighed out. "...Steve, those psychic phone lines are all fake. Miss Cleo doesn't know all."

He went back to eating breakfast, keeping a straight face. He was glad to know Steve was okay. Sort of. Unless Steve couldn't mate. What a terrible fate, to have to endure heats and never be able to get relief. Then again, they made suppressants. And lots of omegas chose to suffer through their heats instead of pairing up with an Alpha. Hell, that's what Steve had done only days before.

Tony wondered whose idea it had been. Steve's, obviously. Pepper and Happy were betas; they wouldn't have sensed it; Steve must have told them, asked to be locked away so Tony couldn't take him. Tony had to admit he felt a little hurt. He liked to think he was someone who could control himself. Who flirted a lot, but knew when to draw the line. Who could be trusted. Then again, the effect Steve had had on him was so profound, he honestly wasn't sure. Besides, who knew what Steve would have done in the heat (ha!) of the moment? This was one of the hardest parts of omega rape trials: the question of how in control an omega was when they were in heat. For some, heats were so intense that they destroyed any ability to think clearly. They couldn't give consent any more than if they were piss-drunken.

...Tony remembered Steve's comment to the Times about safe spaces for omegas and felt guilty all over again. Tony had never before spared a thought for any of these issues.

He set his plate on the coffee table and snuggled up to Steve comfortingly. He reached up and began stroking Steve's hair absent-mindedly. "You wanna watch the news? I'm guessing you're their new favorite celebrity trainwreck. ...there's gonna be assholes, Steve. You know there's gonna be assholes. But you gotta do what you gotta do." He let his arm fall over Steve's shoulders and he pulled Steve's body against him, tugging the blankets around them.

Steve curled against him quite contently, making sure to keep his hands away from Tony's arc reactor as he settled against his chest. "I'd love to," he hummed. "And I'm not bothered by assholes. In fact, I take a great a deal of pleasure in annoying them," he smiled as Tony flicked the TV on.

"-Captain America back from the dead??" It was a blonde woman in front of a desk, a few men to her left just half on screen ready for her to interview. "The world’s favourite superhero managed to survive what should have been a fatal plane crash and has just come out as an omega and advocate of omega human rights. Before, it was assumed Captain America had to be an Alpha. Here with us
today with have experts on Alpha and omega dynamics. We have a psychologist who specialises in omega behaviour, and also a leading omega rights activist campaigner."

"Now, Tina-" the presenter turned to the activist. "Do you think progress will actually come out of this? Do you think Captain America has the chance to cause real change or will the hype will die down?"

Tina was a middle aged woman dressed in a suit that probably fit her better a few years ago. Her features were soft but her eyes steely. "I think he has a platform to speak from that no other omega does. I think he proved the stereotype is wrong and that I think his disappointment in how far we've come in 70 years puts us to shame. I think that with Captain America now we finally have a real chance at equality."

Steve's body was warm and heavy against Tony's. He settled into the couch with delight. The only thing that could make this better was alcohol, which Steve had vetoed. Tony wasn't aching for it yet, however. He was much more interested in Steve. This, more than anything, made him realize how badly he had fallen.

"World's favorite superhero?" repeated Tony. "Oh, that's great; thanks a lot, jerks. I dedicate myself full-time to being Iron Man and I've practically stabilized the Middle East, but sure, let's hear it for Stars an' Stripes over here." He was half-joking. He was much more interested in this omega psychologist. Was she an omega? You couldn't tell in pictures or on the television, something Tony often found disconcerting. He wanted to ask if the guy on the fridge was an Alpha, because if he was, Tony might have to kick some ninety-year-old ass. But Steve's tone when Tony had asked about him in the first place had held some sort of quality that had made Tony hesitant to ask anything else.

As for the omega psychologist onscreen, though, Tony was intrigued. He wondered if he could get Pepper to get him a meeting with her. Maybe take an hour to talk to her about how omegas worked, try to make up for the last forty years of ignorance.

His best metric for "normal" was Jarvis, but using one person to represent an entire group of people was obviously not ideal. Worse, now that Tony knew about his relationship with his father, he was forced to re-evaluate nearly everything. Was Jarvis loyal because he was inherently a loyal person, or because he was pair-bonded to Howard, or because he took his job as the family butler seriously? Jarvis was long-dead and Tony couldn't ask him. He remembered at least once seeing bruises on Jarvis's neck and asking about them, and Jarvis laughing lightly and telling Tony he was clumsy. Damned liar. Tony knew perfectly well where those bruises had come from now.

Also he felt like a fucking idiot for not being able to tell they were pair-bonded. Although, in his defense, before puberty, you just didn't notice that stuff, and Tony's father had died when he was sixteen, so he could be forgiven for not noticing that the guy was bonded.

As for speaking to an omega psychologist... where would he even start? I have spent decades being willfully ignorant of how omegas work but now that I know Captain America is one, I am desperate to learn more? That was probably everyone. Tony was certain that Google would be clogged with inquiries about omegas and that the library was probably experiencing a stampede of Alphas who were suddenly very, very interested in omega rights.

"Everyone's thinking about omegas now," said Tony, holding on to Steve, nosing his hair. "Bet you ten thousand bucks that there's gonna be a charity concert before the end of summer and that you're gonna have at least a few more celebrities come out, too. ...I bet you Phil is creaming his pants with excitement somewhere. He looks at you the way I look at Pepper when she's adjusting her bra. ...you know, I never met that many omegas in a security and intelligence outfit before?"
You, Phil, Clint... that's not why I don't want to join up, by the way. I don't care that you're omegas. I just hate teamwork."

"Hey, I died," Steve pointed out with a soft laugh. "I earned a bit of favouritism, don't you think?" He pointed out and realised he was drawing circles over Tony's bicep with his fingertip without even noticing. It felt natural. Being his close to him. It felt good.

"Teamwork isn't something you're born with." Steve pointed out quietly. "You have to learn it, and you have to want to learn it. We're a team. I'm the leader, sure, but it's a democracy- not a dictatorship. The key is communication and respect. And you'd have to respect me as an omega and a captain. Do you think you really could?" Steve asked softly, voice empty of judgement and more curious than anything else.

But before Tony could respond the psychologist started answering a question. "I think it's well and good saying an omega can lead, but there's always risks. His nature makes him vulnerable. What about heats? What about Alphas? Captain Rogers has proven we should never underestimate omegas and what they're capable of- but because of him, omegas will be encouraged to put themselves in more dangerous situations. What happens if an omega captain is captured and forced into a heat? That's why they aren't allowed into the army. Their biology is a strength, but it's also a weakness."

Steve pressed his lips together in a thin line. He was obviously frowning, not impressed by what he heard. The psychologist wasn't an omega- no way. "Anyone can be tortured," he pointed out. "Does it really matter how?"

"I respect you as an omega," said Tony diplomatically. He wasn't sure if he could respect Steve as a captain. He wasn't a military man and he treated Rhodey like crap most of the time. Tony loathed taking orders; Pepper could attest to that. Tony liked doing things his own way, and he always had. Maybe that was part of the problem. Tony rarely got told "no."

He was much, much more interested in what the psychologist had just said. "Omegas can be forced into heat?" he asked. Was this common knowledge? Tony wasn't sure, but he was intrigued.

He knew they weren't allowed in the army without suppressants, which made sense to him; this was one reason he'd never put two and two together that Steve Rogers, omega assistant, was Captain America. In modern times, there had been plenty of stories of omegas hopping themselves up on suppressants and joining anyway as honorary betas, but in Steve's time, suppressants weren't available yet. According to the Captain America legend, Steve Rogers had been a patriot who had tried to sign up five or six times, but was too sick. Now, Tony realized, that wasn't it. He hadn't been allowed to sign up because he was an omega.

Tony would bet dollars to donuts that Howard thought the idea of injecting a sickly omega with the serum was utterly hilarious. Also, Howard had a flair for the dramatic, and there was no doubt that the change had been flooring; if you started with less impressive materials to begin with, then the resulting product would look better by comparison.

Tony's arm broke out in goosebumps as Steve traced his skin.

"Thank you," Steve said softly. Hearing Tony say that he was respected, out loud, meant a lot. It really did. "Maybe if you see me in action I can show you that I know what I'm doing," he promised him with a subtle smile tugging at the edge of his lips. Steve was by no means an arrogant person, but being on omega meant one couldn't afford modesty in the forties. If you didn't big yourself up, no one else would. "You don't have to join. But maybe tag a long for the ride
sometime, the suit will keep you safe...and I really want to show you what I do, Tony."

"Yes. With drugs," Steve said quietly and his eyes glazed over a little. He swallowed. "It happened
to me once. It's quite terrifying, honesty," he said, hands dropping back down to his sides. "It's
often used like a date rape drug, I think. But it's by no means easy to get hold of. It's some pretty
hardcore stuff."

Steve turned to his head to look up at Tony. "Did you really not know?" He asked softly. "That
Alphas do that?"

Tony looked down. "...that happened to you? What...? How? Who?"

Steve was looking up at him, but Tony's hackles had already risen and anger was coursing through
him. The idea of anyone touching Steve was bad enough, but doing it like that... Tony was
instantly alert, ready to fight, his body flooded with adrenaline.

Of course he didn't know heats could be forced; he didn't know the first thing about heats except
that if your omega went into one, you didn't get to see your butler for a few days. Tony knew about
as much about heats as he did about pregnancy. It was a strange, slightly gross biological function
that didn't concern him. End of story. It wasn't until he'd experience Steve's that he'd cared to
learn anything about it.

Now he was doubting, though, whether he wanted to know more. The idea of Steve being taken
advantage of, of anyone trying to hurt him, made Tony equal parts furious and devastated. Steve
was so impossibly special to Tony for reasons he couldn't comprehend, and thinking of Steve in
any sort of danger was almost unbearable. He'd only ever known Steve as a smug, confident,
uppity, modern omega. He just couldn't imagine Steve ever being compromised by his status.

"Just before I 'died.' The plan was always to walk through the front door right into Schmidt's plan."
Steve's eyes blurred over a little at the memory, his face paling as he recalled the violence.

He could still remember Schmidt's fingers squeezing around his neck as he hoisted Steve into the
air and threw him across the room. He could remember all the foul things that man called him.

Schmidt was the worst Alpha Steve had probably ever met. A man who thought his status entitled
him to everything.

"He was going to mate me," Steve said like it was the simplest thing in the world, his voice
terrifyingly calm. "So then I killed him."

People often spoke about Captain America like he was simply hero. It was easy to forget he was a
soldier. A soldier who'd hurt people, who'd killed people. Steve had done a lot of things during the
forties which made it hard for him to sleep some nights.

Steve's calm proclamation settled into the apartment like a heavy blanket of dust, muffling
everything, stilling time.

The women on the television were still talking but Tony couldn't hear their words. Anger was
coursing through his veins, white-hot, anger and something else; how dare anyone touch his
omega; how dare anyone try to hurt him? It wasn't just a sense of protectiveness. No. It was a
memory, a memory of two years ago, Afghanistan. At the end, it wasn't about escape. It as about
cold, raw vengeance. Tony had had every intention of going out in a blaze of glory if necessary,
laying waste to his captors, as if, once he killed them, he could regain what they had taken.
But it hadn't worked out like that. There were some things you just couldn't get back. Lesson learned.

Tony realized he was clinging to Steve, squeezing him protectively, his breath coming out in sharp little huffs. The mere idea of Steve being compromised set him off, hit some button he didn’t know he had; he hadn't felt this way since... well, two years ago...

Tony wanted to find the guy and exhume the corpse and kill him all over again.

He struggled to get his emotions under control. "You're safe..." he murmured, his voice deep and rough. "You're okay. It's okay." He was equal parts reassuring Steve and himself. The hair on the back of his neck wouldn't go down. Not being able to do anything, knowing Steve had had to protect himself... that he hadn't been there... he should have been there...it was driving Tony crazy...

He heard a suddenly, soft ripping and he glanced down. He had been clinging to Steve's shirt and managed to tear a hole in it.

"Sorry," he blurted. Goddammit. This was the second time in two days he'd been unintentionally destructive. Tony's type of destruction was normally much more conscious and purposeful.

"Sorry, I... it just.... fuck, Steve. That makes me so goddamn angry. I didn't know. I didn't know that happened."

He buried his face in the back of Steve's neck and inhaled deeply, trying to find a sense of calm. "You're okay now. You're safe. You're with me."

Steve hadn't expected that reaction. He didn't quite know what to think of it. If he hadn't had the serum in him Tony's tight grip probably would have left bruises. And then there was his top. "You can't just stop ruining my shirts, can you?" He asked, trying to joke weakly to calm Tony down.

He ran a hand over the Alpha's arm and moved to cup his cheek, dragging Tony's furious gaze back to his face. "Hey. Just breathe for me. It happened 70 years ago. I left him very dead and I made him regret everything he tried to do," Steve promised lowly, eyes a fraction darker with the memory. "I'm safe." Steve brushed the pad of his thumb over Tony's cheekbone gently. "Please don't be angry over this. He really isn't worth it."

Tony ground his teeth together, leaning into Steve's touch. "You're right... you're right, he's not worth it... I just... I should've been there, to protect you..."

Insane. Tony's words were insane. He couldn't have been there seventy years ago, and even if he could have, he wouldn't have added much to Steve's defense; Steve was more than capable.

"Sorry. Sorry, no... you're right... it's okay now..." said Tony, forcing a few slow breaths. "I don't want any other Alphas--" He stopped himself. No. That wasn't right. It wasn't about what he wanted; it was about what Steve wanted. Steve wasn't his.

Tony huffed a few more times, then tried to make light of the subject. Humor had always served him well. "...that guy got what was coming to him, huh? Poetic justice. An Alpha trying to... trying to do that and then getting killed by the omega. That's actually sort of... beautifully ironic, huh?"

Tony forced himself to loosen his grip on Steve. "...sorry about your shirt," he added grudgingly, shifting Steve in his arms.

On the television, a third man had shown up and was arguing animatedly with the other two.
"...while everyone is talking about omega rights and safe spaces," he was saying, "you've got Alphas, good kids, whose lives are being ruined by these omegas who waltz in pre- or post-heat, drive them up the wall, make them do things they regret--"

"--are you seriously suggesting Alphas are the victims here?--"

"---you're going to ruin a lot of Alphas' lives, yes, absolutely; a lot of promising young students' lives and a lot of military careers, because omegas want to be treated as equals and they're not, that's the reality, okay--"

"--going back to Captain America, he's an omega, there's never been a scandal with him--"

"--right, so he's on suppressants, but what about omegas that don't want to take suppressants, are all the Alphas around them supposed to suffer just because they don't want to take suppressants?"

"This is getting ugly," observed Tony, finding the remote and turning down the volume. "...kinda weird that all three of them are arguing about omegas but none of them look like omegas, huh?" He placed his hands on Steve's shoulders and began kneading his muscles. "...you think Fury is his real name?" he contemplated.

"I doubt it. But you never know, maybe he was born an angry looking baby," Steve hummed. He had to bite back a moan as Tony began to knead at his shoulders. The engineer was good with his hands- that was nothing new.

He could still remember killing Schmidt. Steve could still remember the sound his shield made as it sliced through and snapped his spine in two. He could still hear the sickening wet snap that had followed and how it good it felt to have the Alpha shuddering as he died beneath him. Steve has probably enjoyed it more than he should have but the forced heat had left him aroused and confused and too hot all over.

But there was always a strange satisfaction in killing Alphas who'd tried to take it what wasn't their right to.

"I kinda want to punch that middle guy," Steve admitted in a mumble. It probably would have annoyed him even more if he hadn't heard all of this a hundred times already. He moved his hand to push Tony's hair back from his forehead. "And, for the record..." He breathed softly. "I don't want any other Alphas either."

Tony leaned forward and kissed the back of Steve's neck, still rubbing his shoulders. "No, I mean... sorry... I mean I didn't want any other Alphas to... to have you. But I'm... I'm being a dick, obviously, you can have whoever you want." Tony shivered as Steve pushed his hair back. "Although... for the record... I'm told there's at least one eligible billionaire here now, you might want to check that guy out, I hear he's pretty awesome."

He rolled his thumbs over Steve's spine, feeling the tension slowly drain out of him. He was only teasing. Steve had made it clear he didn't want Tony, but that was fine. Tony was happy just to hover around, pleasing him, protecting him, watching TV and talking politics. Being around Steve was, in and of itself, a reward; for some reason, just being close enough to smell his was staggeringly wonderful.

Steve had no one and he'd made it pretty clear he wasn't on the market. But he was letting Tony cuddle him and massage him and that was good enough. Tony resisted the urge to bite his ear. He'd never felt this *mouthy* with anyone before, but Steve's skin was like a siren's call, begging to be marked.
"I kinda like that you don't want someone else to have me," Steve admitted quietly. Tony's fingers felt like magic, making him shiver with pleasure. He bit back a whine poorly as his hands dipped down to his spine. Since when would he ever let someone touch him like this? "Eligible, hm?" A smirk teased at his lips and his tone matched his expression. "I dunno if he can handle me..."

But Steve was just winding him up now, his tone playful and eyes as mischievous as ever. Tony's touch felt nice, he hadn't felt this relaxed in so long. Especially considering he'd just come out to the world...but he didn't really care. Steve just kinda wanted to kneel for him again and what the hell did that even mean?

"Do you know what it means when an omega is off their suppressants?" Steve asked curiously, focusing on the feeling of fingertips trailing down his back. He was half tempted to ask Tony to take his top off altogether.

"I don't really, uh..." Tony concentrated on stroking Steve's spine, watching him arch into his touch. "I mean, I know... I know that omegas smell like betas when they're on suppressants. And they don't have heats. And you can't knock them up. That's kind of the situation in a nutshell, right?"

He hoped there wasn't more because he was certain Steve would laugh at him if he knew the depths of Tony's ignorance. Then again, he probably wouldn't. Steve was such an incredibly nice guy, noble in his way... Tony knew if he admitted his inexperience with omegas, Steve would be patient and kind and gentle. But that didn't matter. Tony had his pride and he wanted Steve to see him as a powerful Alpha and asking for a crash course in sex and status ed was definitely not what a confident Alpha would do.

He heard the softest of pleased gasps from Steve as his fingers slid over his spine; he shifted a little; the noise got him aroused in an instant. Steve had said he liked Tony's possessiveness. Was he just being nice or...?

No. He'd knelt. That went beyond "being nice." Steve had knelt and pressed his face into Tony's leg, and Tony had stroked his hair.... and then fucking Coulson had ruined it.

Admittedly, Tony knew why. Kneeling was one of those incredibly intimate things mates did. They weren't mates. Just friends.

Tony sighed longingly, unintentionally.

"Yes, all of that," Steve hummed. He breathed softly and shifted a little and suddenly became hyperly aware of Tony's body slotted over his own. The rise and fall of his chest with his breath. How hot and skilled his fingertips felt. Suddenly this all felt so much more intimate. He felt hotter too and tried to focus on his breathing and keep calm. "And it changes their smell. Omegas...you can sense our emotions more easily. If we're distressed, you can smell it, especially when you're close to us," Steve said slowly, carefully. "And when we're aroused you can smell it too. And when they're aroused they..." His cheeks turned a little pink. "They get wet. Down there. Sort of like women do. Suppressants make that not happen."

He laughed a little awkwardly. If Tony kept touching him like this Steve was in a serious risk of giving a live demonstration of said behaviour. "So...yeah. That's about it."

"I know," said Tony suddenly, mouth watering. He hadn't known it until Steve had said it, but... "When you were... when you were in heat... I could smell..." He trailed off. On the plane, God, yes. He'd known Steve was in heat, known how aroused he was, how slick between the legs... he had wanted him so badly. Tony was remembering it now and he could practically smell--
"I'm arousing you, aren't I?" demanded Tony, pushing the heel of his hand into the muscles of Steve's back. "You like back rubs, don't you? This, us, cuddling... I'm not just imagining that, am I?" A pause. "Why don't you take suppressants, Rogers? Since you're, you know... since you can't mate and don't want an Alpha. Wouldn't it be easier? I mean, what happened on the plane..."

He let the question hang. He suspected what had happened on the plane was equally embarrassing for both of them. He wanted to ask Steve, just like he'd asked Pepper and Happy, if that was a normal reaction, why he responded so dramatically to Steve. But he didn't. He felt awkward, like he ought to know already.

"That was a very exaggerated version of that kind of reaction though," Steve warned him. "Everyone agrees that wasn't normal. And honestly, heats aren't all that sexy. They're desperate and messy and painful. But they can be intimate...and I guess that's ultimately the point of them. I mean, I wouldn't know. I've had two and I never spent one with an Alpha."

His breath hitched as Tony asked the very question and his touch became a little more firm. Steve swallowed thickly because, fuck, Tony was right. He was getting aroused and he maybe was responding a little down there. "Suppressants don't work on me. You think I would have gone undercover without them if I could help it? Phil brought me an injection that night at the hotel to try and prevent the heat- I burned it up in a minute. Also suppressants wouldn't stop me being aroused," he pointed out. "It would just mean you couldn't tell."

Steve frowned a little. "When did I say I don't want an Alpha? I mean, I shouldn't...who could cope with my lifestyle?" He didn't deny that he was aroused, because it was true and Tony could already tell. "And especially with the stunt I pulled yesterday."

"I love stunts," said Tony quickly. "Remember Monaco? Bad decisions and impulsive behavior are the cornerstones of my entire system. I mean, that makes up about seventy, eighty percent of everything I do. Seriously."

The sarcasm petered out and Tony felt serious again, excited and interested and intimate.

He leaned forward to give the back of Steve's neck a gentle bite. "...any Alpha would be lucky to have you," he murmured. "Even if you don't get emojis, or know who Garfield is." He slipped his arms around Steve's waist, brushing his fingertips over the other's abs softly before pulling Steve closer to him. "I bet now that everyone knows you're an omega, you're going to have Alphas busting down your door to get to you..." Tony's hair stood up. He'd been joking but the moment he even considered it, he felt defensive, furious at the idea that anyone would dare try to take Steve.

He shifted his weight again, trying not to dig his erection into Steve's leg, even though it was difficult because Steve was practically sitting on his lap.

Steve shivered noticeably at the bite. "If anyone even thinks about breaking my door, I won't be impressed," he mumbled, breath hitching again as he was tugged closer and he felt- yep. Tony was half hard against the curve of Steve's thigh and ass and he doubted that would be going away anytime soon.

"Tony-" He started but soon stopped, feeling his body responding again to knowing Tony was aroused and pressed right up against him. Fuck, the other would be able to smell it. Steve swallowed and realised he was arching his back into the touch on instinct, his head leaned back against the other's shoulder. He tilted his head a fraction, hot breath tickling Tony's cheek.
"I've only known you, for like, three weeks," Steve pointed out in a murmur.

"Well, I've only known you, uh... what... thirty-six hours? Because before that, you were undercover?" replied Tony with a hint of displeasure. It still hurt. Tony already had trust issues, and why shouldn't he; after Stane, who was like a father to him, has double-crossed him so badly? Frankly, he should've be trusting Steve at all, after what he'd done. But he had nothing to lose. Until a day ago, he had been certain he was going to die. So why not go out on a limb with Steve? Wasn't that what second chances were for?

And you had to wonder, too, if Steve would have ever ended up as close to him as they were now if he'd never gone into heat. What if Steve's sudden openness toward Tony wasn't genuine, but a result of his body's hormones? Forcing them into intimacy, when Tony was only really a job to Steve? Steve's confrontation with Fury, though, implied that Steve bore no loyalty to SHIELD, however. His loyalties were his own. What they were, Tony had no idea, but he no longer thought of Steve as working for anyone but Steve.

"You knelt for me," he added grudgingly, accusingly. How was Tony supposed to interpret that except as Steve submitting to him, Steve wanting him, liking him? Kneeling wasn't something that omegas did lightly. Tony knew that. Kneeling was deeply, deeply intimate and he'd been out of line to ask it. But emotions had been so high. The thrill of not dying. If Pepper were there, Tony would have dipped and kissed her (and probably been slapped). Steve's willing response... that had to mean something. Even if Tony couldn't trust a word Steve said, he could trust that.

He thought.

...he hoped.

Steve felt a pang of guilt in his chest when Tony pointed that out. If he could go back in time he would have done things differently, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was proving to Tony that his intentions were genuine and that he'd never once compromised the Iron Man designs. And after everything Steve didn't even know if he could continue to work for SHIELD...not after finding all the bugs in his own flat and laptop. Trust had to go both ways.

He sucked in a soft breath. "Yeah...I did," Steve wet his lips and was glad Tony couldn't exactly see all of his face right. He had no doubt he was betraying a great deal of emotions- including both arousal and embarrassment. "You asked me to," he said like it was the simplest thing in the world. Like that was all the explanation required. "I'd..." Steve glanced away, not able to look at Tony as he spoke. Maybe it his old submissive habits coming into play. He'd never look at Tony too long, his blue gaze always flicking to the floor out of respect. "I'd do it again if you asked me to," he confessed in a whisper.

Tony stroked Steve's abs longingly, his breath catching at Steve's words. "...would you?" he asked, also in a whisper. Why were they whispering? It felt right, somehow. "...what if I asked right now? Right this instant? Would you then?" he asked, softly. He wanted to believe it, wanted to so badly. Steve on the floor, Steve on his knees, Steve gazing up at him, his face against his thigh... Tony craved to go back to that position so badly. He'd never felt anything like that in his whole life; it felt natural, perfect... Tony had to believe that that feeling had been mutual.

Kicking out Steve after they'd shared that had been so stupid and Tony regretted it. He'd been hurt, and having the others there to remind him that Steve was an Avenger... he'd felt duped. He'd felt like they were all laughing at him for falling for Steve. But if Steve was actually offering to do it again... without the Avengers here, without any ulterior motive...

He shifted very slightly under Steve. He could smell the other's arousal and it was creating a
positive feedback loop. Both knew the other was turned on; neither was acknowledging it, not consciously, pretending they couldn't sense it, like a pair of awkward teenagers at a prom. Tony couldn't remember ever being this shy around someone before. The word "shy" was not part of his lexicon. Tony treated his partners with a bold, forward, assertive attitude that most found appealing. But those were betas. With Steve, everything felt... sacred, almost, like there was a right way to it, an ancient etiquette that needed to be followed at all costs.

Tony's fingertips over his six pack were distracting. It took him a moment to answer. Steve found himself whispering too. It would have felt rude to speak any louder. "I would," he affirmed softly, cheeks heating up at the confession. Does this mean Tony would ask him right now? Did Steve want him to?

Steve sucked in a breath when Tony shifted underneath him and he felt his arousal pressing up against the swell of his ass. Were they going to talk about it? Do anything about it? Because it was getting harder to ignore and Steve was only getting wetter down...there. He wished he wasn't so inexperienced with all of this now.

It fell quiet for a moment and the news was still on. One man spoke quietly in the background. "-no one would want an omega like that. Captain America is practically feral."

Tony grabbed the remote and muted the television. "...they don't know what the hell feral is," he growled softly. Like most, Tony had seen more than a few viral videos on YouTube of Alphas losing their minds. Normally it was because there was an omega in heat nearby. Two perfectly reasonable people would suddenly be snarling, biting, clawing, hysterical animals, trying to kill the other one. It happened more in low income, disenfranchised areas, where there were more omegas, fewer omegas on suppressants, and, in general, bad education and worse impulse control. In his own life, Tony had never seen an actual, real-life fight, because in business and politics and high culture, that simply didn't happen.

"And you don't need an Alpha anyway, right? That's the whole point, isn't it? That omegas are strong and can do whatever they want and don't need approval from an Alpha to do it. ...what a dick. Besides, anyone, anyone, would want you." He ran his hands over Steve's arms and added, almost casually, "I want you."

Neither one of them was looking at each other.

On the silent television screen, Tina and the man and the blonde newscaster were all gesturing wildly and passionately.

Tony swallowed. Steve had said he would. It was practically an invitation to ask.

Tony ran his hands down Steve's arms again. He leaned forward to press his lips to Steve's neck, to run his tongue over the skin. His mouth was so close to Steve's ear.

"...kneel," he whispered.

Steve shivered beneath him at the touch, his fluttering closed as he sucked in a soft breath. The hot wet touch of Tony's mouth and tongue were enough to make him tremble. Make him wet. And then...then he was...Tony was...

Steve moved on instinct and this time he didn't hate himself for it. He savoured the delicious tremble down his spine as he moved to kneel on the floor before Tony, hands grasped behind his soldier straight back in a perfect posture as he bowed his head down in the ultimate submissive gesture. It was as simple as breathing.
The people on the TV were ignored. It was all about Tony now. Steve had no words. No, he didn't need an Alpha but that didn't mean he couldn't want one. This said it all.

Steve knelt in an instance, and it was the most beautiful thing Tony had ever seen. It was like the Northern Lights or the Great Barrier Reef, a unique, natural, incomprehensibly lovely thing and Tony felt like he could literally weep. He was still curled on the couch and a part of him wanted to drop down with Steve, enfold him. But that wouldn't have been right or proper. Not yet. Because, deep down, he understood this was a power dynamic; Steve was submitting to his dominance and Tony had to accept that, had to demonstrate his authority to Steve and validate his yielding.

His hands came out automatically to stroke Steve's cheeks, his hair, every gesture a reward and a reassurance and a thanks, a complex acknowledgement of Steve's kneeling. Tony was accepting Steve's submission, wordlessly praising him for good behavior.

Steve's head was bowed, so Tony couldn't see his face, but he had an idea Steve's expression was one of ecstasy. Certainly, that was how Tony felt. It was so strange to him. They hadn't touched, hadn't kissed; this was as thrilling as anything he'd ever experienced and yet it was not sexual, at least not conventionally; admittedly, Tony was rock-hard; he could smell Steve's lust; but neither of them were rushing, there was a right way to do this, one that Tony knew somehow, had always known.

Steve was leaning his head, softly nuzzling into Tony's hands as he cupped Steve's cheeks, rubbed his skin with his thumbs; he brushed his fingers through Steve's hair, traced the outline of an ear, slid a finger down Steve's jaw, feeling the hint of invisible blond stubble; he was memorizing every little feature, reading Steve's face like it was a braille map. He could hear himself breathing, hard and soft and shallow.

"Good," he whispered softly.

Words were a tricky thing. Too many would be cheap and gaudy and wrong. But one or two of the perfectly chosen words carried hefty weight. Words were suddenly a currency with ridiculously elaborate rules. Somehow, Tony had a really good idea of what the rules were. No one had ever explained this to him but if he didn't think about it, it all came naturally. And, for once, Tony definitely wasn't thinking. His brain was on autopilot, having given the reins over to a more primitive part of his consciousness that apparently knew what it wanted and how to get it.

Steve shuddered as Tony's fingertips dragged over him. He felt serene- like he was floating. Like this wasn't quite real. Like Tony wasn't here with him- as if this was just a fantasy. He could have easily been. He often dreamed of having an Alpha who would treat him as an equal. Steve never thought that was truly possible.

Eventually he tilted his head up. Steve's eyes were glazed over. He almost looked high. He didn't say anything for a while but the word 'good' echoed around his mind for a good while.

He didn't even realised he'd spoken until he'd said it. Steve was hardly aware anything but Tony right now.

"I'd do anything for you if you asked for it, Alpha," Steve said softly.

"My omega," replied Tony. The words dropped out of his mouth before he was aware of them.

He pushed aside the blankets-- he felt too hot anyway. He slithered off the couch, kneeling on the ground with Steve, leaning forward to kiss him, his hands gripping Steve's bulging forearms. Tony's eyes closed as their lips brushed, dry and soft and sensitive; he pushed Steve's lips apart
with his tongue and slowly began exploring the folds of his mouth, working his jaw against Steve's, running his tongue over Steve's lips, letting out the occasionally, possessive growl.

"Steve," he murmured against the other's mouth. Steve's voice was almost musical. Like wind chimes. Tony's body shuddered. "Mine."

Tony had to have him. He ached for him. Steve's smell had some intrinsic property that no smell ever had before, something that triggered an unidentifiable emotion in Tony. It was the emotion you felt when you suddenly found the puzzle piece you were looking for and clicked it into place. It was the emotion Tony got when he walked into his shop late at night and inhaled the smell of oil and grease and gasoline and suddenly knew, in an instant, how to solve a complex problem he'd been working on all week. It was the emotion you got when you were anticipating a good meal and suddenly spotted the waiter bringing your food. It was something that was by no means rare but was nonetheless treasured, special: the first snowflake of the season. The sound of rain on the windowpanes. The feeling of ocean air coursing through Tony's hair on a coastal drive with the top down. It was at once familiar and breathtaking.

"Yours," Steve whispered in affirmation and then Tony was kissing him and it was like fireworks. He couldn't quite comprehend it, his thoughts were on fire. Steve had kissed people before. Okay, two. A beta blonde woman whose name he didn't know, and then Peggy, just before Steve went to fight Schmidt.

And...and...No. It would do him no good to think of him now.

Tony's tongue was hot and intruding in his mouth. Steve whimpered as Tony kissed him and licked into his mouth. He was willing and pliant, just like he should be. The growl the Alpha let out trembled over Steve's skin and the omega moaned in response.

"Yours," Steve repeatedly softly, eyes fluttering shut as Tony's lips were forced to part for air. He didn't question it. In that moment, it was the truth.

Tony nipped at Steve's lips, then leaned down to bite his neck. His hands slipped down to Steve's waist and plucked at the hem of his shirt, pushing it up, exposing his abs.

He let out a small, eager whine and his eyes met Steve's, briefly, before Steve looked away.

"Off," demanded Tony, playing with Steve's waistband. He leaned forward to nose Steve's ear, run another hand down the back of his head, feel his soft blond hair. A few brief, loving strokes; then he grabbed Steve's shirt and tugged it up, gently pulling it over his head. His body might as well have been made of gold. It was so utterly different than what Tony had always been led to think of as "omega." There was nothing soft or feminine or weak about it. It was a soldier's body, toned and taut and conditioned to perfection.

Tony bit his shoulder with a groan.

Steve let out a gasp as teeth sunk into his neck with warning, the pain piercingly pleasant. More marks meant even more of a claim, and even more pissed off Fury was just a bonus. Steve would do whatever- and whoever -he wanted and boy did he want Tony.

The smell alone of Steve was proof of that.

He almost felt nervous when Tony demanded his underwear off. But he quickly reminded himself that he was sort of designed to look, like perfect? So there wasn't really a reason for him to feel self-conscious. But a part of Steve would always feel like that skinny guy from Brooklyn, no
matter what. But his self-consciousness didn't last long because once he'd fiddled his boxers off Tony was already biting his shoulder and that made Steve let out a moan. His blue eyes fluttered shut as he tilted his head back and settled back into his kneeling position.

"Steve," said Tony, his mouth still full of Steve's flesh. He glanced up at Steve and, almost begrudgingly, he stopped biting Steve's shoulder. "Steve," he repeated with uncharacteristic seriousness, his hands running hypnotically down Steve's arms. "I want to mate you now."

A pause. Tony felt like someone else was taking through his mouth. *I want to mate you now?* Tony felt like he should be saying, *I want to make love to you*, but that just didn't seem right. He did want to take Steve. He wanted to mate him.

Tony reached down to kick off his boxer-briefs.

Surreal. That's what it was, surreal, the two of them sitting naked on the floor of Steve's living room, while the muted people on the television gesticulated wildly.

Steve's posture was very, very slightly hunched and it took Tony a moment to recognize it as self-consciousness. Why the hell would Steve of all people be self-conscious? His body looked like a Greek statue. Tony was the one who should be embarrassed, with the arc reactor stuck in the middle of his chest like some sort of grotesque night light, and the heavy scarring surrounding it, and with numerous faint scars marking him. But he hadn't felt self-conscious about any of that for a long time. He was, after all, Tony goddamn Stark and he had a "playboy" reputation to maintain. Three months after his ordeal overseas, he had resumed his usual lifestyle, powering through any misgivings with a ferocious desire to be normal again. Or at least as normal as someone like him could ever be.

Tony reached out and ran a rough, calloused hand over Steve's thigh. He tried to catch Steve's eye. Get some sort of affirmation that, yes, Steve was on board, Steve wanted to be taken. Because Tony had a weird idea, somehow, that this was more than just sex and that it meant something. He wasn't sure what. But whatever it was, it was big. He knew it subconsciously. On the surface, his thoughts were static; the smell of Steve's arousal and the blue of his eyes and the curves of his body had thrown a wrench into the inner workings of Tony's brain and he was surprised he was able to speak at all.

Tony's words washed over him like water. They made him feel cool all over, grounded and centered. His touch felt as light as air as his fingertips glided over Steve's skin, making him shiver.

His baby blues flickered up as Tony's rough fingers explored his thigh and Steve felt his thighs part a fraction in a subconscious response to Tony's touch. It was a statement. *I'm going to take you now*. And it was true. Steve didn't think he needed to say it aloud, his voice quite lost to him but Tony didn't move. He was waiting. Something warmed in Steve's chest. Maybe Tony wasn't as much as asshole as he tried to make the world think he was. It was nice...it was good to see it. Steve liked seeing the real him.

There was challenge in Steve's eyes, almost like he was waiting on him. He held Tony's gaze for an almost uncomfortable amount of time. "Then take me." Steve breathed quietly, voice reverberating through the air.

Tony crawled forward, pushing Steve's body down with his, wrapping his arms around his torso, gathering him up, holding him, *possessing* him. Steve's chest was warm and broad and comfortable.

He drew up a knee to push apart his legs, then glanced down briefly.
"Natural blond," he confirmed, ducking his head and grinning. He couldn't help it. Tony had never taken anything seriously in his life. And this, this felt more serious than possibly anything he'd ever done. It terrified and thrilled him. He had no idea why. But he understood this was monumental, had some gravity to it.

He kissed the corner of Steve's mouth, rubbing himself against his inner thigh; Steve's skin was slick with fluid.

Tony had rules. No virgins. No omegas. No men. Here he was, breaking all three. He didn't care. Steve was different.

He pressed himself against Steve's entrance and moaned at the wetness. Normally he would have said "fuck," but instead, he let out a pleased growl, deep and throaty. He pushed himself against Steve's body slowly, feeling the resistance; then the tip was in, and after that, sliding in the rest of the length was easy. At least, up until the knot. Tony grunted, giving a few sharp thrusts; he wanted all of Steve, wanted Steve to have all of him. Steve was warm and wet and perfect; Tony had never experienced sex like this, never had such a perfect fit. He wanted to give all of it to Steve; it took a bit of effort to work the knot in, but finally he was balls-deep in Steve, and he paused, giving him time to adjust to being filled, taking a second to appreciate how perfectly Steve's body sheathed him.

"You're so beautiful," murmured Tony. There it was again. His mouth talking without his brain. Tony abhorred pillow talk and yet here he was, gazing lovingly at Steve's face, kissing him (Tony had never especially like kissing during sex, either; what the hell was wrong with him?) and nuzzling his jaw and nipping him, his arms wrapped around Steve, hands exploring his skin.

He set a slow, steady rhythm with his hips, rocking into him with a contented sigh. It felt amazing, easy and slick, minimal friction, the pressure from Steve's body driving Tony wild. His knot prevented him from pulling all the way out; he was rocking his hips against Steve's with sounds of pleasure he hadn't known he was even capable of making. The earlier hesitancy was gone, evaporated the moment he'd pushed his rock-hard erection into him, gotten the knot in; he took up a steady, pounding rhythm, moaning and arching his back.

He pressed his lips to Steve's ear; his goatee brushed his skin. "You're so good. You're incredible. Yes. So good. That's it... take it... take it just like that... my omega... my good omega, mine..."

He nipped at his earlobe, then drew it into his mouth and sucked on it briefly, burying his cock with a grunt of satisfaction. His fingers dug into his back as he tried to pull him closer, excited and energetic. It was the first time in the last two days-- no, two years-- he'd felt truly uninhibited and happy; he was like a puppy rolling in the mud, carefree and unashamed.

It was Steve who swore when Tony pushed into him with little warning. "F-Fuck-" He was hot and big inside of him and when his knot squeezed inside Steve felt breathless. He felt like a skinny guy with all the air knocked out of him by just a simple flight of stairs. His mind couldn't almost comprehend it. Tony's member was pulsing inside of him, thick and demanding in its presence- so much so it was hard for Steve to even comprehend.

Welp, there it went.

Captain America's virginity to Howard Stark's goddamn son.

Fate really was a funny thing.

The growl Tony let out trembled over the surface of Steve's skin. He was busy trying to catch his breath back, his cheeks pink and flushed, blue eyes dark with lust and something more. Steve
curled his arms around Tony's neck, fingers tangling in the dark, thick hair at the nape on instinct. He needed something to hold onto. When Tony kissed him it was languid and Steve licked into his mouth, unafraid to explore as his body adjusted to the intrusion. When the alpha drew his mouth away Steve had even pincher cheeks than before.

"Oh fuck." And Steve was swearing again as Tony rolled his hips and fucked into him. He felt like he was on fire, like he was lighting up inside. Steve saw stars. His breath was hitching as Tony murmured sweet nothings to him, his beard against the omega's skin rough and pleasantly so. He wanted to respond with something equally sweet but Steve couldn't quite get his mouth to work. He still couldn't quite believe this was happening. It felt surreal, like he was floating, like he was high.

As Tony picked up the pace Steve curled his legs up, feet pressing into the small of Tony's back to draw the alpha in deeper with each thrust. He was letting out soft, breathy little moans with his head thrown back against the soft living room carpet. Every time Tony thrust inside Steve trembled around him, clenching around him too as he felt more slick gather on his thighs from just how goddamn aroused he was.

"Oh fuck- Tony, Tony please... please just- ah!" Steve's lips parted prettily in silent gasp as Tony thrust in just right and made him tug on the alpha's hair a little. His eyes rolled back in his head in pleasure and then fluttered shut. "Please," he begged even though he really had no idea what he was truly asking for.

Tony moaned loudly when Steve tugged his hair, said his name. How the fuck did Steve know he liked that? It was like the two of them were psychic and knew exactly what the other one wanted and needed. "That's right... take it in... good boy..." he panted, thrusting harder into him. "You're all mine, Steve... this is all for you..." He caught Steve's lips on his again, his tongue pushing into his mouth without any pretense. Their tongues swirled together briefly before Tony pulled away, pressing their cheeks together. "Oh my God... you're perfect... this is amazing," he moaned. He was literally trying not to cry. For Tony, sex was a biological function like eating; at times, it was a chore for him, something he did to kill time or maintain his reputation or whatever. It had never been like this. It had never been intimate or meaningful. He was plowing Steve into the carpet; they were on the floor like animals, but that didn't matter, because they were meant for each other and they could have done it anywhere and it still would have felt magical.

Tony shivered with delight at the noises Steve was making, squirming against him and burying himself as deeply as he could. He felt his balls brush against Steve's skin. "That's it... good Steve... you're doing so good..." purred Tony. He was reluctant to pull away from Steve, enjoying as much skin-on-skin contact as possible, but he needed more; he put his hands on Steve's hips and sat back, tugging Steve's hips up with him, giving him a couple of quick, sharp thrusts, looking down at him lovingly. He didn't want to get too carried away and hurt him, but it was hard to hold back. Looking down at Steve, though, there was no question as to his pleasure; Steve was writhing under him like he was in heat all over again, his erection standing at attention across his stomach. His skin was glistening with sweat, gleaming in the glow of Tony's arc reactor, and his blond hair was matted against his forehead. Tony moaned, arching, reaching down to brush Steve's damp hair away from his face. "You're beautiful, Steve, you have no idea... I can't believe I'm mating you... you feel so good..."

*Mating you?* Did Tony just say "mating?" He'd meant "fucking," not "mating."

The thought evaporated as soon as he had it. He was too interested in Steve to care about a minor verbal gaffe.
He reached down to grasp Steve's length, stroking it in rhythm with his thrusts. "Can you cum for me, Steve? I want you to cum first... please... this is for you... you're my omega... I want this to be for you..." he panted, rutting happily into the other.

Since when had Tony Stark given two shit about his partner? And since when had he eagerly jacked off another man? Every misgiving Tony had melted away in an instant; it was like he was currently incapable of having doubt or fear or any negative emotion at all. Whatever he was feeling for Steve completely dominated his brain, flooding it with affection and love and making every problem and worry in Tony's life seem utterly inconsequential.

Steve was probably getting carpet burn but he didn't even notice it or feel it. He just saw and felt Tony. He soon was soon a panting mess of moans and whines, squirming under Tony and on his cock as he plowed into him. "I-I won't break, you know," he panted, fingers digging into the nape of his neck a little as he gasped at a particularly firm thrust. He could almost feel Tony holding back on him a little. Steve couldn't get hurt easily, he was a super soldier after all. If Tony wanted any marks to remain he would have to be at least a little rough about it.

He groaned in satisfaction as Tony fucked into him harder. Yes.

When Tony curled his fingers around his cock Steve literally cried out and arced up into the touch, his feet pressing into the alpha's back all the more because of it. "Tony-Tony...ah, ah-fuck..." he stuttered breathlessly, his blue eyes glazed over in both lust and wonder. Steve had no idea it could even be this good. He didn't even know sex could be like this. Maybe he would have done it sooner if he had- but Steve was glad he waited for this. For Tony.

Steve came with a cry, his eyes fluttering shut as his body shuddered and came undone over Tony's hand and his own chest. He rode out his orgasm with rolls of his hips, clenching around Tony tightly as he did so, encouraging him to finish too. "Oh my- oh my god..." he let out a ragged breath, hardly able to comprehend how good it had felt. It was unlike anything else. "Tony- that was perfect. Oh my god..."

Tony let of a weak, strangled whimper when he felt Steve suddenly clench up around him, his body shuddering; he felt something warm and wet and sticky on his hand, and he shoved his length into him, climaxing hard.

"Oh..." he whispered with resigned pleasure, body twitching and jerking as he pumped his seed into Steve. "Oh... Steve... fuck... yeah..." He let himself come down slowly, muscles melting slowly, easing his weight down onto Steve, getting Steve's semen all over his stomach and chest. He was too tired to care.

"Fuck... good Steve..." murmured Tony, reaching up to brush another lock of damp blond hair off of Steve's forehead. Steve was breathing deeply, flushed, looking dazed but happy. Tony gave him a tender kiss on the forehead, automatically, before draping himself over him, needing a few moments to compose himself before he got up to clean up. "You did so good..." he whispered. "That was amazing... I love you, Steve..."

Everything froze.

I love you?

The last time Tony had uttered those words, it had been to a Hot Pocket. Tony Stark did not "love" people. He loved cars, money, food, electronics... not omegas.

He tried to pull out only to discover he couldn't.
"Ah, shit," said Tony, giving another tug. Nope. Unless he forced it, tearing Steve apart, they were stuck. Tony caught Steve's eye with an embarrassed grin. "This never happens, I swear," he said. He was half-joking. He'd only knotted someone a handful of times in his life and he'd always yanked it out painfully and forcefully. But Steve was a man, not a woman; he was a virgin; he was an omega who wasn't on suppressants. All these factors combined made it an impossibility to break apart unnaturally; he was too tight. "I guess we just... uh... hang out like this now. ...get to know each other. Hi. How's it going?"

Tony squirmed a little. After the "I love you" bit, he really wanted to retreat to the bathroom to clean up, but instead he was going to have to sit here on top of Steve for at least thirty minutes. Maybe more. Ugh.

His gaze flicked down to Steve's chest. There was a circle on Steve's chest, mirroring the arc reactor; Tony must have pressed that into Steve while fucking him without thinking. Tony forgot he had sharp edges.

He traced the imprint of the circle with his finger. "Sorry," he said. He gave another experimental tug. Still knotted. Not that he expected anything different after fifteen seconds. It didn't feel bad, really. Actually it felt pretty damn nice. A sort of added dimension to post-coital cuddling.

Not that Tony Stark cuddled. He was not a cuddler.

And he resented that he wasn't choosing this. He would have liked to have had a choice in the matter. Not that he wouldn't have chosen this, of course he would have wanted to be knotted to his omega. This was nice, not embarrassing; after all, they were bonded and it was perfectly natural to-

Tony's breath hitched.

One. No. No, no, no.

"Okay, but seriously, if we can just... maybe get some lube or something...?" he ventured, pulling with a grunt of effort. Hysteria was rising in him. He had the bizarre though that he should call Pepper, who would know what to do; he found himself giggling nervously at the thought. How the hell would he even explain? *Hi, Pepper, listen, I'm knotted to a guy, how do I get my dick back? I need an answer fast, before we bond, I think my brain is sort of off the rails. Bit of help? Seriously, hurry, I'm having some really weird thoughts, I think I might be going crazy.*

"Tony. Tony, oh my god. Stop- that fucking hurts. Stop." Steve screwed his eyes shut tightly. Every time Tony tried to pull out his ass burned at the attempted rejection. It made him whimper and squirm uncomfortably, his cheeks hot from embarrassment instead of pleasure. "You need to breathe. Breathe. Calm down."

He cupped his Alpha's cheeks and pressed their foreheads together. Steve slowed his breath down to try and get Tony to copy it. He squeezed the back of his neck softly, trying to get Tony's dark and confused gaze to focus on his own.

Being filled up with Tony's cum and having him knot him had felt fantastic. But this wasn't. This was stressful. Steve didn't understand what their bodies were doing. He just knew that Tony was distressed and it was because of him and Steve almost felt guilty for that. He knew he would still
do just about anything Tony asked of him.

"That's it. Just breathe," he soothed in a whisper as Tony's chest began rising and falling at a far more normal rate. "Just breathe for me. It's gonna be okay, I promise," Steve promised and gave him a captain level serious look. Timidly he tilted his head up to kiss him slowly, hoping that might help drag Tony from out of his own head. The man got lost in his own train of thought so easily.

"Okay..." whispered Tony, copying Steve's breaths. The two of them lay there, Tony letting Steve's hands soothe him. They felt cool on his face.

Steve kissed him, and Tony kissed him back, gently, softly, eyes fluttering closed.

His heart was pounding but he was struggling not to be anxious; he could smell Steve's response, Steve was panicking because he was panicking... he had to be strong for Steve. Steve's murmured comforts were helping.

He broke their kiss and lay back down, being careful not to press the arc reactor too hard into Steve's chest, resting his chin on Steve's shoulder. "This is okay," he whispered, half to himself. "We're okay... this is fine... this is normal... we're good, right, Steve? This is okay? You're okay?"

His cock was still throbbing. He was scared to move. Knowing that tugging it hurt Steve was terrifying to him; he wouldn't try again. The idea of hurting Steve in any way was inconceivable to him. He existed to protect Steve. Steve was his. He had to take care of him. He couldn't hurt Steve. No. Anything but that.

Nonetheless, he wasn't thrilled with being stuck here. He felt strange, strange in a way he couldn't identify. Whatever thing he'd been chasing, he'd caught it. He felt satisfied with himself for getting it. But what "it" was and what he was supposed to do with "it" were still not clear to him. He felt a brief, stabbing annoyance at his father. This was Howard's fault for never sitting Tony down and explaining how the hell omegas worked. Tony would have never guessed sex with an omega (one that wasn't on suppressants) would make him feel like this.

Steve's phone chimed from the couch. Tony looked over, then back. "...you can get it if you want. I'm just hangin' out here," he said, as if being stuck inside of Steve was something that happened to the best of them.

"Your sense of humour really is quite something," Steve sighed softly, relaxing now Tony was still and not trying to pull out. He pulled a hand back to run through Tony's hair, moving it out of his eyes. His Alpha looked so forlorn- wait.

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"I'm okay if you're okay," he whispered. Not even thinking about his phone. It didn't matter. It could wait. Steve would no doubt hurt himself reaching out to it in the first place. He settled back, letting his legs fall down either side of Tony as it ached to keep them curled around him. He hummed softly, eyes heavy lidded.

"I didn't..." Steve swallowed thickly and looked up hesitantly to meet Tony's gaze. "I didn't know it felt like that," he admitted in a gentle murmur. "Thank you Tony."

"Me neither," said Tony quietly, swallowing. "This is... all kinda new to me. ...that wasn't normal sex. I've had a lot of normal sex. ...and a lot of abnormal sex. But that. That was insane. Maybe because of the serum...?"

A pause. The silence in the room felt comfortable rather than awkward. Tony felt calmer than before. Steve's chest rose and fell under him; Tony matched his breaths. Their heartbeats had
synced up, too.

"...I think the Germans have a word for people who say thank-you after sex," blurted Tony. He grinned down at Steve. "You thank me like I did you a favor. You know I kind of liked it too, right? Like, uh, just a little bit, you know... I mean, it was pretty great... hey, wanna shower together? After I pull out? Your hair needs washed. ...I don't know why I want to wash your hair, you're not a poodle, obviously, sorry... sorry, I get really stupid after sex... no, yeah, we need a shower... and food... and I need a drink... does this feel good for you or not? I don't know how it is on your end. Lemme know if I can make this more comfortable for you. I'm sorry. I... I don't normally knot." Tony glanced down. "So circumcision wasn't a thing in the nineteen-seventeen, huh? ...cool, cool... I'm not gay, for the record... I know that sounds, uh, weird, because my dick happens to be stuffed into you... I just wanted to clarify, I'm not really into guys... I mean, I'm into you, you smell amazing.... I sound so stupid right now... shut up, Stark, shut up... no, I'm... I'm very into you, Steve, you... the way you smell... your smell..."

Without warning Tony felt tears in his eyes.

What. The. Fuck.

"...holy shit, I'm sorry... I swear, Steve, this has never happened before... it's your smell, I lo--"

There it was again!  No. No. No. Tony was not going to say the "L" word again. No, no, no, no, no. He would not. He wasn't sure what the hell his body was doing; he wasn't sad, but he was struggling not to cry; the intensity of his emotions was hitting him harder than he'd ever been hit before. He was tempted to ask Steve if he knew what was going on, but didn't dare. He didn't want Steve to know the depths of his ignorance, and besides, Steve wouldn't know, either. Steve was just as naive as he was.

He blinked rapidly, embarrassed. Surely his body would get its shit together eventually, stop reacting so strangely.

He gave a small, experimental tug, wanting to get out of Steve. Still too early. He heard Steve give a small noise of pain and he buried himself back in quickly. "Sorry."

"They never said the serum would affect things sexually," Steve said carefully. Maybe it had? It was possible, after all. Sure, it meant Steve had a shorter refractory period (don't ask how he knows that) but that was about it. And sure, his body could cope with heats but now he wasn't half dying all the time that was hardly surprising.

"Just calm down," Steve said gently. He curled his arms around Tony and tugged him against him, peppering kisses along his jaw before nosing at his neck in a calming gesture. "It's okay Tony. I promise." With the pads of his thumbs he brushed away all possible threat of tears. "You make me feel different, too." He nudged their noses together. "I never thought I would kneel for anyone. I never thought I would even have sex with an Alpha, that I'd ever want to," Steve admitted softly. "But you changed everything and after my heat I couldn't ignore it anymore. It's the scent-mate thing."

Steve tried for a smile, a small but genuine one. "A shower sounds good," he said softly. "Perfect, actually. Just relax for now, yeah? We don't have to talk."

"Relaxing. Relaxing," said Tony, biting back panic. Steve's voice was like balm. The feeling of his thumbs on Tony's cheeks was wonderful.

Tony pushed his nose against Steve's, going slightly crossed-eyed. They smiled at each other.
Tony had never been good at not talking, but he fell silent, draping himself on top of Steve, closing his eyes. This was so weird. Tony hated having emotions and here he was, an emotional mess. He'd reacted less dramatically to being kidnapped, to being attacked and almost killed. But this. This moment in time was getting to him.

When he matched his breaths with Steve's, though, he found himself in the eye of the storm. Steve was the answer. Steve was the rock, the anchor. Steve's body was warm under his and as he relaxed on top of him, he began to feel drowsy. He stifled a yawn and put his lips on Steve's neck, kissing him softly, sucking one last bruise onto him. "Mine," he mumbled. Half-word, half-growl, said only half-consciously.

Tony fell asleep holding onto Steve, his face pressed into Steve's neck, savoring the comfort of the other man's body, every thought blissful as he drifted off.

"Yours," Steve whispered as he ran his hands through Tony's hair and soothed him off to sleep. Eventually he managed to half drift off too. He dozed off peacefully with his Alpha curled around him. He felt safe and home for once. Steve would never want to be anywhere else. He woke to-Steve groaned when he heard his mobile ringing. Tony was asleep on top of him and soft inside of him. Gently, Steve rolled them over and then pulled off Tony, pressing a kiss to his cheek and wincing himself at how sensitive he felt.

Steve stood and felt spent run down the inside of his thigh. He shivered. No longer a virgin, he reminded himself. Steve ran a hand over his face and then blindly searched for his phone. It was Natasha calling. He answered. "Nat? Hm?" He tried to sound normal, like he hadn't been impaled on Tony's dick about ten seconds ago. "What is it?" Steve asked. "Now isn't a good time..."

"How isn't this a good time? You said you'd call me, Steve!" There was a note of annoyance in Natasha's voice. "You said you needed some you time... and then you went and came out as omega to the whole world. Fury is on the warpath." She lowered her voice slightly. "And Phil's about to undergo spontaneous combustion. ...you know how he is."

Her voice returned to normal. "I didn't think you time meant taking off your shirt for the Associated Press and letting them body paint you. ...did Stark rub off on you? Is this like a midlife crisis? Because trust me, Steve, I know how sometimes you get hurt when you go under, but..."

She trailed off. "I can't even imagine how hard this has been for you, Steve. Мне очень жаль. There will be others. But you can't hole up in your apartment and refuse all of my calls and then go crazy like this over a bad job. There were better ways to tell everyone than doing it behind everyone's back like this." She sighed. "Come on, let me and Clint take you out tonight, and let's go in together on Monday to try to sort things out. You'll feel better once you get back to work. I always do."

Tony rolled over, aware of Steve's absence. He groped sleepily for the omega; not finding him, he jolted away. He sat up groggily, hair sticking up. "Steve?" he mumbled, looking over at Steve blearily. "Whaddya doing, who's that?" He ran a hand down his face, feeling the stubble; he needed a trim, his goatee was starting to lose shape.

"...I think you did the right thing and I'm 100% on your side..." Natasha continued on the other line. "...but you can't burn bridges with the agency, Steve, SHIELD needs you, right now they're all doing damage control, but I talked to Fury myself and I think he's willing to work with you--" Tony stretched and got up, wobbling toward the kitchen to drink orange juice out of the carton.
"--because obviously he recognizes that it's 2010 and omega rights are still a big issue, and Clint's backing you up all the way--"

In the background, Steve heard Clint yell, "Yeah!"

"--shut up, Clint-- so, please, Steve, can you stop shutting us out and let me and Clint just talk to you? We don't even have to talk about Stark, if you don't want to. But we're worried about you."

A pause. "As friends," she added. Steve knew that for Natasha, such statements carried a lot of weight; she didn't trust easily and she reserved actual friendship for a very, very elite few.

There was some muffled scuffling on the other end and suddenly Clint was on the line. "Hey Steve. That was epic. Everyone's talking about it. Do you know what Twitter is? You're trending on Twitter. ...Nat's really worried about you, though. She says you looked like shit when she dropped you off last night. I just got back from New Mexico and you won't believe--"

"Seriously, who is that?" demanded Tony, leaning on the counter, oblivious to his nudity.

"Nat, I'm 27...sort of. You can't have a midlife crisis when you're 27," Steve sighed, touched by her concern but frustrated by it too. "And you know very well that if I hadn't done this on my own bat Fury would have persuaded me not to. I just had to, Nat. I found bugs in my apartment. And on my laptop. I'm not willing to work with him now, at all. He was spying on me. I can't trust him anymore. He's ruined this relationship, whatever it was. Maybe if he apologised we could try to repair things, but that will never happen."

"Steve, it wasn't-"

"Don't try and defend him Natasha," Steve said firmly. "You're better than that." The Alpha went quiet. "But...going out sounds nice," Steve murmured, accepting the offered olive branch with a softness in his voice and an almost nervous twist in his belly. "I'd like that."

"It's Nat and Clint," Steve answered automatically when Tony asked and then realised what he'd just done. He blinked and swallowed thickly.

"...who the hell is there with you? You with someone? I thought you were moping?" Clint asked, both curious and confused. "Have you finally decided to get laid now that everyone knows how brave you are, huh?"

Steve swallowed. "It's...er..." He locked gaze with Tony and sighed. He walked over and tugged the orange juice carton out of Tony's hands. "That's rude, you know," he told him, words without bite as he raised a brow at the Alpha. "Sorry- Clint. I'm kind of busy right now, but text me later, yeah?"

"...You're busy?" The grin behind Clint's voice was evident. "Who you getting busy with, huh Rogers?"

"You know what's rude? Pulp," replied Tony, watching Steve, listening to his conversation. "What do they want? I thought you were over the Avengers now. You can't go out with them. Go out with me - I'm starving. tell them you can't Avenge anymore. Fury was spying on you. Forget him. He's history. ...are you really going out with them? ...Steve?"

Nervousness was coiling in Tony's stomach. Steve wouldn't go undercover again, right? They were past that. Steve was Steve. The idea of him pretending to be some other Alpha's assistant...

"Seriously, you're not going out with them alone, right? I can come, right? Steve?" pressed Tony. "...will there be booze? If there's booze, I gotta come, I'm so sober, Steve, sober as a judge..." He
made a playful swipe for the phone. He was half-joking, but also, he didn't like or trust any of the
others and he didn't want Steve slipping off alone with them. It was ridiculous; Steve could defend
himself. Tony couldn't possibly defend against Natasha (or even Clint, probably) without the suit,
and as far as Tony could tell, no one at SHIELD posed a real threat to Steve. What they were
having was a political disagreement. But still. Tony felt like he should be there, by Steve's side, standing up for him.

Steve put a hand over the microphone so Clint wouldn't hear him speak. "Clint and Natasha are my
friends. Not just Avengers. I'm not quitting my team; just my boss." Steve pointed out and reached
a hand over Tony's shoulder, slowly shutting the fridge door. He'd made them closer in the process,
their noses almost touching. "When I woke up and I had nothing I still had Nat and Clint," he said,
voice a touch gentler.

"You can come, but I'm not really comfortable with watching you drink, Tony. You have a
problem, and you're no longer dying, or my boss. So I feel like I have to say something." He hated
saying it. Steve didn't want to push Tony away from him. But he also wasn't going to ignore a
problem when it was staring him right in the face and he was doing nothing about it. He put the
phone back to his ear. "Can I bring a plus one?"

"Who?" Clint piped up. "Sam?"

"No, not Sam...speaking of, how is he?" Steve asked. "I haven't seen him for over a month."

"I do not have a prob-- who is Sam? " demanded Tony, hair standing up. "Is he an Alpha? Steve?
Who's Sam? Sam's not an Alpha, is he? ...Steve?"

Tony had never felt this jittery without espresso. His whole body felt charged up. He felt *alive*.
...must be the new reactor.

Steve wasn't reacting to Tony's nagging. Tony changed tactics. He came up behind Steve and
slipped his arms around his waist. "Steve," he whispered against Steve's back. "Hang up. We
need to shower." He nuzzled Steve's skin and gave him a gentle kiss "...and who is Sam?"

Tony forced himself to let go of Steve, trailing his fingers over Steve's skin before making his way
toward the bathroom. He expected Steve to follow him. He somehow knew he would, if only he
lead. As tempting as it was to continue annoying him, Tony needed to brush his teeth and to wash
the dried semen off his stomach, and do something about the beard situation. He wouldn't be
caught dead with his facial hair the way it was now. Tony rarely let himself be seen in public
unless he was dressed in a three-piece suit and immaculately shaved. Around Steve, he didn't care.

"Yeah...yeah. I'll catch you later, okay? Thank you for calling, honestly. And tell Nat thanks, too. It
means a lot. I'm sorry I've kind of been a dick recently," Steve sighed. "It's been...a confusing few
weeks," he murmured and then hung up, finishing the conversation. Steve set his phone down on
the side and saw Tony slip away into his bathroom.

He walked in on Tony using his toothbrush and found himself smiling. Steve moved to turn on the
shower, waiting for it to get warm before he took Tony's hand and dragged him into the shower
with him. It felt good as the hot water ran down them and over the curve of his back and ass. It
would feel good to watch away all those dried...fluids. "Sam is a friend. But yes, he is an Alpha,"
Steve told him and ran his hands down Tony's biceps. "But he's not a threat. No one's a threat,
ookay?"

Tony flexed slightly under Steve's hand. "You have a lot of Alpha friends," he observed. He
looked over Steve's body. "...I know they're just friends," he added suddenly. He did know. They weren't threats. He wasn't sure where this revelation had come from. A day ago, he'd been ready to fight a man he didn't know two balconies over just for being an Alpha. But now he felt... secure. Like it was obvious that Steve was his, and that he didn't have to prove it.

"It's because of my line of work. It doesn't...mean anything..." Steve let out a quiet sound of approval as Tony's fingers rubbed shampoo onto his scalp. He was still too good with his hands. He blushed at the compliment, but the steam from the shower meant his skin already had a pink tinge to it. He whined low in his throat and quiet as Tony massaged at his shoulders, easing away all the stress after talking about Fury.

Sure, if anyone tried to mess with Steve, Tony would fight to the death to defend him. But now, the idea of anyone stealing Steve away just seemed stupid. Which was weird, because nothing had changed.

"Turn around," commanded Tony. "You're a piping hot mess, Rogers- you looked like someone fucked you stupid an hour ago. ...someone brilliant and handsome and irresistibly charming..." He grabbed the shampoo and began massaging Steve's head slowly. He'd never done any of this intimate stuff but it came as naturally as breathing. And it felt great, watching Steve roll his head appreciatively, watching the water stream down his body.

"You're beautiful," said Tony before he could stop himself. Fuck. He scrambled to make the situation less serious. "...almost as much as me."

There.

"...which is why we're such a good pair," he added, serious again. Fuck!

Tony decided to just shut up for once and focus on washing his omega. He rinsed Steve's hair tenderly and ran over his body with a washcloth, working the tension out of his muscles, drinking in his physique with the sort of attention he normally reserved for building circuit boards.

Before Steve knew what he was he was turning around and kissing him. He smiled against Tony's lips. "So," he murmured and bit down on the alpha's bottom lip softly. "What do you wanna do for the rest of the afternoon, huh?" The way Tony was simply looking at him was making him feel hot all over in plenty of different ways.

And Tony just said they were a pair, that meant his Alpha wasn't going anywhere, right?

Tony kissed him back automatically, eagerly. "I need to eat before I die," he murmured against Steve's lips, smiling, staring into his eyes. "And then... I dunno... whatever you wanna do."

He felt a bloom of heat in his groin when Steve bit his lip. He glanced down. He and Steve seemed to both be in similar places.

Tony looked up. "I'm not waiting until this afternoon to eat. Seriously. Food," he said sternly. His mouth twitched. "...and then dessert," he added with a wolfish smile, pecking the corner of Steve's lips.

He waltzed out of the bathroom before Steve could get him any more aroused and slid one of Steve's towels around his waist. He wiped away the steam from the mirror. "Steve, do you have a razor I can borrow? ...please tell me you don't still use a straight razor. My face is a disaster, Steve. My beard is supposed to look like the Stark Industries logo and instead it looks like someone from Nike tried to shave me in my sleep. Ugh."
Tony examined his face. He looked... okay. More well-rested than he had in months, that was for sure. He congratulated himself on fixing his arc reactor, not dying in Monaco, and taking Captain America's virginity. All in all, a decent week. Maybe an 8, 9 out of 10. Yeah.

"Where are we going out to? You like Italian? Spago is good, uhh... Il Cielo is amazing, actually... I'll pay... Natasha's not gonna, like, kick my ass, is she? Last time I saw her she looked ready to kick my ass. In her defense, I was being a real dick to you." Tony turned suddenly. "...I'm sorry," he said softly. "...for being a dick."

Steve sighed quietly when he saw Tony's expression through the misty glass of the shower. "I forgive you," he told him and he was surprised to hear that he really meant it. Steve swallowed and went back to washing the eyes out of his hair, blinking when a bit of shampoo threatened to get in his eye.

"I'll go wherever you wanna go," Steve told him, all those different names not really meaning anything to him in particular. "And Natasha might not kick your ass... if we don't let on that we just...you know." He was glad the shower hid his blush again. But seriously, Natasha would probably kill Tony. She wanted the best for Steve; it was all in good intentions, but it meant her and Clint got protective pretty quickly.

"There's a razor under the sink, I think?" Steve said. "I dunno. I don't really have to shave all that often," he admitted sheepishly. "Y'know... omega."

"Oh," said Tony with forced casualness as he dug around Steve's things for a razor.

Not tell Natasha. Sure. That was probably for the best. Why would they possibly tell Steve's friends?

Tony wasn't even sure why he had wanted to come in the first place. He didn't know Clint or Natasha; he wasn't an Avenger. He'd just wanted to spend more time with Steve. But they would have a hell of a time explaining why Tony was there at all.

"...actually, you know, you go on ahead- I just remembered have a lot of work to do, I kinda trashed my house recently. And I should take the suit back home. Yeah, I have a lot of stuff to do, actually. And, you know. Iron Man stuff," said Tony, concentrating a little too hard on rooting around under the sink. "...I talked to Pepper and she was spitting mad, I think she's gonna unhinge her jaw and eat me next time I see her... I should swing by her office, bring her a peace offering... also I have no idea what the number is for my contractors but my house is seriously like missing walls... y'know what's weird? This isn't even the craziest birthday I've ever had, ha ha..."

Tony was rambling; he abandoned his search for the mythical razor and walked out to find his clothes. The Mark V was standing blank and dull in Steve's room, looking thoroughly out of place. A perfect metaphor, really, for Tony. He was out of place in Steve's life, too. He wasn't a person who especially liked structure or discipline, and he'd never be able to work with the Avengers- he was pretty sure- and Steve obviously had a commitment to them, plus the whole omega rights platform... Steve's life was filled to the brim and Tony felt like he'd overstayed his welcome. Of course Steve wouldn't want to admit to Natasha or any of his friends that Tony had stayed the night; Tony was Steve's antithesis; he was selfish and rude and brash and there was no place for him in Steve's admirable life. Plus, Natasha was an insanely dominant Alpha... maybe now that Steve knew how great sex was, he was going to try to jump ship, shack up with someone more powerful... Tony would happily fight anyone who tried to take Steve from him, but if Steve wanted to leave, he couldn't really prevent him. But she had Clint. Tony felt confused. Steve probably didn't want to hook up with her, he just... didn't want Tony.
Which was fine because actually, Tony was very, very, very busy. Far too busy for Steve. Frankly he'd already wasted a ton of time; he had notes to take on the particle accelerator he'd built, which was currently rusting away in the shop.

He pulled his shirt over his head and stretched, trying to get the kinks of out his muscles.

There was something slightly ironic, probably, about Tony Stark being the one to take the walk of shame. Traditionally, he kicked his one-night stands out himself... not the other way around.

Tony examined the scuff on the shoulder of the suit. He didn't really remember flying it over. But he'd definitely hit something on the way. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Eh... that was probably buff out, maybe.

Steve could feel like a tug in his gut and he felt sick almost instantly. Tony was upset. Tony wanted to leave. Tony was...disappointed? Steve blinked and rubbed a hand over his face, pushing wet hair back from his forehead before he stepped out of the shower. Why had Tony flipped? What had- was it about- really? Steve blinked in surprise and grabbed a towel. He dried himself once over quickly before draping it around his shoulders and stepping out of the bathroom to find where Tony had gone to.

It was...strange. He could feel Tony's presence- like, really feel it. It was like a pull towards him. Like Steve was drawn to him without thinking (more so than before). He could feel the pang of confusion practically throbbing in his chest and it made Steve's own heart feel heavy. His Alpha was upset- he'd upset him. They were automatic thoughts, Tony was his on instinct now. What did that even mean? Steve knew a lot about omega biology but nothing really beyond that. His sex ed back in the forties had been non-existent. Clint had joked about it being much easier for people to prevent pregnancies now...Nat was on, what was it called? The pill? Steve didn't really understand it. He hadn't thought he'd need to any time soon.

"Tony." Steve sighed when he saw the Alpha in his bedroom, by the suit. "You can't seriously leave now. Not after..." Not after you just took my goddamn virginity. Asshole . Steve hesitantly stepped forward, as if he wouldn't be welcome in his very own apartment. Tony evidently didn't feel welcome anymore. "You do know why I don't want to tell Nat and Clint, right?" he asked and raised a brow.

Another step forward.

"Because if they find out, they will hound you. They eased me back into this world, I'm probably the closest they'll ever come to feeling like parents. They won't leave you alone. They'll threaten to kill you in fifty different ways, demand to know what your intentions are...all that shit. And I...I don't want you getting scared off," Steve admitted quietly. "I want us to work out what this is. What we want. What we just...did. Jesus Christ, Tony, I can feel how you're feeling and I know you want to leave, but don't. Please." Another step. "You can go home tonight, that's fine...I get you need to get shit done. But you promised me Italian." His Brooklyn accent crept back into his tone. "And it ain't polite to leave a guy hangin'."

Tony had a million comebacks but they were gone the moment Steve started dropping the gs off the ends of his sentences.

Tony had grown up in Long Island, not Brooklyn, but he recognized the accent in an instant.

"...you are so cute ," he growled, teeth clenched. He jabbed a finger at Steve. "Stop it. Stop being cute. Stop making me like you. Ever since you showed up in my life I've felt weird and I hate feeling anything other than drunk, smug, and productive. There's nothing to work out, is
there? You and I had earth-shattering sex, which we both agree should be kept a dirty little secret, and I'm gonna go home now, and you're gonna go rub shoulders with your super secret league of justice or alliance of liberty or whatever the hell it is."

Tony paused. He didn't move. Steve asking him not to leave was like a spell. He couldn't do it, not with Steve's blue eyes pleading with him.

"...and I didn't promise you Italian," he grumbled. "...and they can't scare me off, I'm not scared of... what, she's a super-gymnast and he's Robin Hood? Why the hell would I be scared of them? Like I've never had protective friends getting on my case about my intentions? I don't have intentions; I never plan anything, Steve. I just do shit and it inexplicably always works out for me for some reason."

He paused again. If this were the usual blonde beta bimbo, Tony would leave now without looking back. But he was rooted to the ground. Because Steve had asked him not to leave and he could feel Steve's emotions as clearly as his own, and leaving would hurt Steve and therefore hurt Tony. He couldn't do it.

"...besides, I can't come to dinner with you guys," he said reasonably. "They'd wanna know what I was doing there. I was a job. Job's over. I doubt they're gonna buy that we decided to hang out afterwards, play some Parcheesi, have a latte. ...speaking of lattes, I still haven't had coffee, or breakfast, so... so if you could tell me I can go now..."

He felt so stupid for asking permission. Standing there in torn shop jeans and a rumpled wifebeater, no shoes, hair and goatee a mess... Tony felt vulnerable. He wanted to demand to know what Steve had done to him but he didn't want Steve to know how susceptible he was to Steve's suggestions. His body had tuned itself to Steve's frequency; every emotion Steve felt was communicated to him via scent and Tony felt almost like a mind reader. Worse, he was pretty sure it worked both ways and Steve could sense what he was feeling.

Certainly, Tony understood the need for discretion. But Steve had made it clear that Natasha and Clint were his friends. The idea of being Steve's dirty little secret hurt him. Tony wanted everyone to know that Steve was his. He wanted to keep his neck covered in marks, keep him smelling like sex, and keep him within an arm's reach for a while, demonstrate to everyone that Steve was his, he'd claimed him, after all, and Steve had accepted him.

He needed to talk to another Alpha about how he was feeling. The combination of possessiveness and hypersensitivity to smells and emotions was freaking him out.

"Also, I need a drink," mumbled Tony, hovering beside the suit, still unable to leave.

Steve sighed fondly and stepped forward, putting his hands on Tony's arms. He squeezed lightly and then stepped in closer, brushing the damp hair out of Tony's eyes.

Steve was smiling and trying not to look smug. "Cute, huh? Well, I sincerely apologise for being so...cute," Steve murmured and then leaned in to kiss, his hand moving to the back of Tony's neck. The kiss was slow and languid and Steve shivered as their tongues slid together. When they parted it was reluctantly, Steve's cheeks pink from more than the just the shower now.

"Whilst I might not completely understand just what happened," Steve whispered. "I'm glad it did," he said and then sadly stepped back, a softness in his eyes. "Just...promise you'll come back okay? I'm not being another notch on Tony Stark's bedpost." His voice was teasing, but there was a serious look on his face. "Over my dead boy," he tried to joke.
"So...fly safe? Okay?" Steve murmured with a small shrug.

Tony pushed into the kiss immediately, eyes closing, working Steve's jaw gently with his own. Steve was touching the back of his neck, where one of his scars was, but Tony didn't care. Steve's touches electrified his skin, sent a warm tingle down his spine.

"I'll come back," promised Tony. "...don't wanna leave you hangin' after promising you Italian, after all." He smiled slightly. It took him an enormous amount of effort to climb into the suit; he wanted to throw Steve down and take him again. But he couldn't stay here all day.

"Just lemme know when you, ah, want me again," he said, voice distorted within the helmet. "Cause if you change your mind, I, uh, I'd like dinner." He turned with a whirling of gears, opened Steve's window (breaking it), and climbed out heavily. "Bill me!" he yelled before dropping.

It was a bright, beautiful day; Tony pulled out of the dive and shot himself straight into the cloudless blue eyes. It was the same blue as Steve's eyes. Tony's heart hammered.

"Hey, JARV, set a course for... I dunno, east. I don't care, I just need some me time," said Tony.

"Yes, sir," said JARVIS.

Tony brought himself to cruising altitude; within minutes he was at 12,000 feet, his ears had popped four times, and he was making his way east. He was on autopilot and was relaxing in the suit, letting it do the work for him, skimming over the cloud tops and occasionally getting odd looks from the triangle of cranes that was flying above him. He wasn't sure where they were going. He wasn't, for that matter, sure where he was going. Just that he was going east.

...maybe to Brooklyn.

Or maybe just where ever he wanted. He was alive, renewed, and in love, and the horizon was his for the taking.
Pair-Bond

Chapter Summary

It's official. They're in wuv. :) More smut, more fluff... enjoy.

Tony was cruising lazily at about 12,000 feet up when he called Pepper.

Her picture came up automatically in the right corner of his digital display. His heart ached, but his feelings for her weren't the same as they were for Steve. He couldn't explain it. He liked Pepper a lot- loved how she looked and walked and sounded; the freckles, the way her nose wrinkled when she laughed... he'd always felt strongly toward her. But this thing with Steve. This was something else. He wanted to take Pepper out to dinner, dance with her, flirt over a bottle of white wine. With Steve, Tony wanted... he wasn't even sure. Something more. He was hoping Pepper could help him parse out his feelings. She was good at that kind of thing.

The call went through suddenly. "Virginia Potts, Stark Industries. How may I help you?" The voice was utterly unfamiliar and for a moment Tony was confused. Then he realized what was going on.

Fuck it all, she had an assistant.

"This is Daniel Rand, with Rand Corp," lied Tony. "She's expecting my call."

"...I'm sorry, Mr. Rand, I don't see you on her schedule."

"What the hell does she pay you for? Put me through," demanded Tony. "I've got a half-hour before I meet with my board and if this deal falls through, heads will roll."

Say what you will about Obie, but he was dynamite at this sort of thing, thought Tony nostalgically. "Heads will roll" was a phrase that had been uttered loudly and often in his presence, back in the days when business was business.

The assistant must have been new because she said "One minute" and put him on hold. The hold music was tasteful jazz.

"JARVIS, what is this stuff?"

"Django Reinhardt."

Tony scoffed. When he was CEO, it had been Led Zeppelin.

"Hello?" Pepper's voice was cautious. She knew it wasn't Rand.

"Hiya, Peppercorn."

Her voice went from cautious to frosty. "Hello, Tony. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I, uh..." Shit. How did you ask this sort of thing? I'm really into this omega and he makes me feel funny? What was he, twelve years old?
He flipped in the air from his stomach to his back. The cranes were banking northward. Tony flicked his hand and his body jerked forward as the suit increased power to the thrusters, and watched the birds fade away over the horizon. "...I just wanted to say hi. How are things?"

"Things are going well, thank you."

"...things are going good for me, too. I'm sort of seeing someone. I think. Maybe?"

"I'm happy for you."

"Question. About omegas."

"Tony, I do not have time for this."

"Sure you do, you're on your lunch. It's eleven-thirty so you're probably eating lunch, right? Probably something healthy."

"Tony, is there something you need from me? Other than validation?"

This was not how Tony had envisioned the conversation going. She didn't sound angry. Just tired. Just... disappointed. He was disappointing to her. His heart ached again.

"The guy I'm seeing, he's an artist," said Tony, remembering the easel in the corner of Steve's living room.

"That's nice. I didn't know you liked art. I seem to recall you giving away a collection I curated. It was the biggest privately owned modern art collection in the world and it took me nearly a decade and you gave it away."

Tony leapt onto her bitterness like a drowning man gasping for water. *Any* reaction was better than this cold, awkward, artificial conversation. "His art is *good*, though. Not like your modern crap. It *looks like stuff*."

The other line was quiet for a moment. "Tony, you're baiting me. I *know* you like abstract art." A pause. "You're with a man?"

Tony swooped down to startle a hawk that was diving past. It stumbled in the air, shrieking indignantly.

"It's 2010, Pepper. Men date men, omegas are allowed in the military, and coed chess is a thing!"

Pepper couldn't resist correcting him. "Well, no, actually, national chess tournaments are still separated by gender, and omegas aren't allowed in the military without suppressants."

"Which, let's be honest, it's probably for the best, because when they go into heat--"

"Tony, seriously, I can't talk right now. Why don't you talk to your newest conquest instead? About *art*. ...assuming you even have his phone number."

"As a matter of fact, yes, he's number one on my speed dial."

Another pause. The only person Tony ever put on speed dial was his assistant. But that would mean-- "Tony, please tell me he's not Steve Rog--"

"Line's breaking up. Bye, Pepper!" called Tony, hanging up before she could finish.
Tony felt worse than he had before calling Pepper. She had been thoroughly unhelpful, actually.

He dove down. He wasn't sure where he was without checking navigation. Somewhere in the midwest? He was landing in a cornfield. That seemed Midwest-y. On the ground, the field of green was endless, the stalks swaying languidly under the perfect, clear blue sky.

Tony walked over to a silo and gave it a punch, leaving a dent the size of a grapefruit in the steel wall.

Tony pulled off his faceplate and flopped down on the dirt. Maybe he could just hang out in this corn field forever. Be a scarecrow. "If I only had a brain," he muttered to himself darkly.

"Steve Rogers, who the hell did you have around at your house this morning?" Natasha demanded as Steve met them at the bar they'd chosen. Somewhere a bit grimy and yet all the wooden walls felt classy somehow and Steve liked their whiskey selection. Although they always gave him a funny look when he ordered a whole bottle it took him a bottle to get tipsy. And sometimes more. It was expensive but working for Tony Stark had helped Steve jump-start his bank account in the 21st century. As had, funnily enough, the Social Security checks he'd begun receiving as a 92-yr-old veteran.

"Nice to see you guys, too," Steve sighed as he sat opposite the couple. They were against every stereotype Steve had learned in the forties. Men shouldn't submit to women, only to other men. And yet Clint wasn't at all emasculated by it. If anything it felt like the opposite. They empowered each other. Steve often thought he'd like a relationship like theirs; now maybe he'd found one.

Just thinking of Tony made something warm in his chest.

"I heard a man's voice!" Clint insisted. Steve could tell by the empty glasses on the table that they'd already been here an hour. An hour ago Steve had been on the phone with his publicist no more interviews for now. She said they had to let everything 'settle down.' It was a relief. He didn't want to be in the public eye. H just wanted to make a difference.

"Have you finally had sex?" Natasha asked, raising a perfectly defined brow at him. "Because your neck says yes. Oh my God, was he a vampire?"

Steve tugged his scarf up against his neck subconsciously and sighed. "Guys--"

"I'm happy for you, seriously. You've become infinitely awesome in the last few days," Clint said and raised his hands at Steve. He reached over and pat his shoulder. "Did you use protection?" he asked suddenly and Steve blinked.

"What? No- I'm not in heat!"

Natasha groaned and slammed her forehead down on the table. "It's not the forties anymore. Goddammit, Steven!"

"He loves me... he loves me not... he loves me... he loves me not..."

Tony was peeling his eighteenth ear of corn when he heard the rumble of what could only be a
four-stroke diesel engine.

He followed the sound to the edge of the field. Sure enough, a tractor was moving along a packed dirt road. There was a young, sandy-haired boy driving it with his bare feet, arms crossed, chin tucked down on his chest. He was wearing a straw hat. Tony gawked. Was this what all farmers looked like, or was this kid just remarkably rural?

He stared too long. The kid looked up suddenly, immediately say the glint of bright red metal, and promptly drove the tractor into a ditch, where it turned over.

Tony swore in surprise and ran over to lift the tractor. The kid wasn't underneath, thank God. He was lying in the dirt beside the machine, dusting off his jeans frantically, jumping to his feet, uninjured.

"Wow! Iron Man!"

"Shut up," said Tony, setting the tractor back onto the road. "Is that your corn?"

"What? Yeah! I mean... it's my family's, yeah! Wow! What are you doing in Illinois?"

"Battling with my intimacy issues. But more importantly, I have an important corn-related question. Can you eat that stuff raw?"

"Uh... yeah, I guess, if you wanted to. But why are you here?" The boy scanned the sky with excitement, as if an army of invading aliens or assassins or killer robots might descend upon them at any moment.

Tony cocked his head. This kid seemed... normal. And what's more, he was an Alpha, like Tony, and of similarly low dominance. Low-dominance Alphas had it rough. This kid might just have the answers to Tony's questions.

"Kid, what do you do if you like someone?"

The boy turned bright red. "Huh?"

Tony slung an arm over the tractor. "It's a simple question, kid! You're normal, you're well-adjusted! Tell me what you'd do if you wanted to take an omega out to the local sock hop or barn dance or whatever it is you do."

"Football game?"

Tony gestured toward him. "There you go! See! That's perfect! Perfectly normal! So you're asking Sally Average out to cheer on the Fightin'..." He trailed off.

"Crows."

"What?"

"Our mascot. It's a crow."


"The crow's name is Barbie."

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "I should've taken the blue pill," he muttered to himself. "Look, I don't need your life story, just tell me how you would deal with Sally Average and then
not fuck it up. Let's say Sally is an omega and you really like her, but you're getting mixed signals. Let's say she's real popular. What do you do?"

"Uh... I would... I don't know..." said the boy, voice cracking.

Tony rubbed his chin. The metal of the suit was hot from being in the sun, and he stopped quickly. "You're not being very helpful. ...haven't you ever liked an omega before?"

The boy turned even more red. "Well, uh, there's one girl I like. Her name's Tammy, but she's two years older than me. She's Brian's sister."

"That's great, but we're talking about me right now."

"Maybe you just... talk to them?"

" Talk to them?"

"I don't know. I guess you just keep being nice to them," said the boy, rubbing the back of his neck

"...it can't be that simple." Tony pointed to the boy, fixing him with an intense look. "It's never that simple."

The boy shrugged. "Maybe sometimes it is. Out here, it's always simple."

Tony looked around at the endless fields of corn. A bee buzzed past them. "...holy Euler. Please tell me you don't live in a clapboard house and eat homemade cornbread."

"My mom's cornbread is pretty good."

Tony took a step back. He felt like he'd stumbled through a portal to another dimension and it was starting to make his skin crawl. "I'm gonna go now, Huckleberry. Thanks for the advice." He slapped his faceplate back on and drummed his fingers in the air, powering up the repulsors. "Good luck with the...weird crow mascot, I guess."

"Hey, wait! Can I get your autograph?!"

"Nope!" Tony launched himself off the ground, watching the boy's straw hat and the tractor and the freshly dented silo get smaller and smaller, and then disappear suddenly as he jetted through a puff of cloud. He found where the sun was and then pointed himself west.

Talk to him. Tony hated talking. Well, no, not true. He loved talking. Just not about feelings. But he'd spent all day in the middle of a corn field trying to recalibrate his feelings and he felt no different; he still longed for Steve. He wanted to be close to him, and he knew it in the same way he knew not to fling himself off a cliff or take a deep breath while his face was underwater. His feelings toward Steve were both complex and simple, and they clearly weren't going to go away on their own. Tony had slept with over a thousand people and he'd never ached for them the next day like he was aching now.

"JARVIS, call Steve, will you? I gotta go see him, I owe him Italian," said Tony grumpily. Welp. He knew when he was beat. He had exhausted his options; he'd called Pepper, asked a random stranger, and peeled nearly twenty ears of corn. Time to wake up and smell the coffee. He was just going to have to accept that this weird attraction toward Steve was part of him now and roll with it.
...it wasn't necessarily a bad thing, of course. The truth was, thinking of seeing Steve again sent a shiver of excitement through Tony. He'd only been away from him for, what, six hours, and already, he was missing him like it had been weeks or months. In fact, the need to see Steve was currently more pressing than alcohol. And Tony was getting the jitters he got when he hadn't had a drink in a while. If he was lucky, they'd hit up a restaurant with a nice wine list, and he'd be able to knock out two birds with one stone.

So two and a half bottles of whiskey now, and Steve was feeling it. They'd told him he wouldn't be able to get drunk because his body would burn it up too quickly but they never seemed to consider what would happen if Steve just drank god-awful amounts at a time. Natasha was still pretty much sober but Clint was just gone. He was clinging to Steve and squeezed his arm and pouting.

"Why can't I have arms like this!? Sixty-pound draw strength, and you can't even tell..."

"Come on, slowpokes!" Natasha beckoned them towards the bar entrance. Somewhere that did cocktails and fancy drinks with crystallised ginger on top or some shit. Steve pulled a face as he bit into a piece. Nah, too spicy for him. They were crowded into a corner booth with Clint in the middle. He kept putting a hand on Natasha's thigh which she kept pushing gently back down to her knee. She was never one for public displays of affection and she also knew how quickly Steve got uncomfortable. But Clint was too drunk for that level of thinking right now.

"Too spicy for your delicate forties' tastes?" asked Natasha sympathetically as Steve began pulling garnishes off of his cocktail.

"I just don't see why everything needs to be complicated like this."

"So, you won't tell us who it was?" Clint complained as Steve concentrated on fishing out an orange peel from the bottom of his glass.

"No--"

"It's Stark."

Steve coughed into his drink and set the glass down, his chest wheezing a little. "I'm not--"

"I can smell him on you, Steve," Natasha said and gave him a look. A lingering one. "Not a lot of Alphas are as low dominance as he is. Unless you met another one, recently, it's Stark, isn't it?"

"Also, the guy reeks like cologne," added Clint helpfully. "What is that? Some sorta fancy, exclusive Old Spice?"

Steve swallowed. "Please don't tell Fury. Though, he might already know."

"Course we won't. Fury doesn't need to know." Clint turned to face him. "But...seriously, Steve?! Tony? I know you kneeled for him but come on... isn't he kind of a dick?"

"No," Steve frowned. "Not to me."

Natasha groaned. "Just listen to you. Already smitten, aren't you?"

Steve rolled his eyes. Then he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He answered it without thinking. "Hello? Oh... Tony? You okay?" He tried to ignore how his heart hammered in his chest.
“Tony! It's Tony!” Clint was yelling into the phone. "Tell him he owes us at least one round of drinks for suggesting you got the undercover job in the first place! Make it three!"

Tony blinked. "Steve, why do you sound weird? Either you're drunk, doing an amazing Rocky impression, or have a mouthful of marbles. ... are you at a bar?! You told me--"

He was cut off by shouting. "...is that Clint? Is he back already from his spa day in the Land of Enchantment? ...can I meet you at the bar, I really need a drink, and I--" Tony hesitated for a fraction of a second. "--I really need to see you," he muttered, voice low. Not like there was anyone up here to hear him; he was currently flying at just under seven hundred knots and he was more than ten thousand feet in the air.

Come to think of it, Steve might not be able to hear him.

"I need to see you!" he said, louder, more forcefully. "I mean-- I mean I want to see you. I--"

Oh, agony. Tony hated this mushy crap.

"--I miss you. And alcohol. Mostly you. But also alcohol. What bar are you at? I can be there in maybe, uh, maybe an hour, hour and a half? I just passed the Rockies, I think I might be in Utah... wait a second. Do you know who Rocky is? Sorry, I mentioned Rocky earlier, then the Rockies, then-- never mind. ...Clint doesn't sound too mad at me, can I come meet you guys? I have a Black Card. Ask 'em if they take American Express where you're at. Never mind, I just got JARVIS to trace your phone. Tell SHIELD they really need better security, honestly, that was too easy. I can't wait to see you. I, uh... I really do miss you, Steve. I'm just gonna swing by the pile of debris I call home first and clean up, my beard is starting to look downright Amish at this point. Tell Clint to slow down. I'll buy him a drink but he sounds like he's already pretty far gone. Ooh! You gotta try the drink I made up; it's called the Fallout and it'll rock your world... well, I already know I rock your world, but hey, it's still a good drink! Yeah! Don't move, okay, give me two hours to get there! ...ciao, Steve!"

Tony felt exhilarated. Steve's voice was a drug, intoxicating... after he'd hung up, he hit the repulsors harder. A small blink in the corner of his screen let him know he'd broken the sound barrier, but he barely noticed; aside from the temporarily, crushing g-forces during acceleration, Tony had gotten so used to flying hard and fast that it was almost second nature to him.

Besides. He had an omega to get to.

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"He's what?" Natasha asked, eyes wide.

Clint had excused himself. Presumably to use the restroom, although it was possible he was going to dance somewhere. Steve wasn't sure. The guy always got a little manic when he drank. He sometimes let his work take him too far, push him too far- or at least Steve thought so, worried so - which is why he had to let go like this. Natasha, on the other hand, always seemed untouchable. And she was easier to talk to.

"Joining us?" Steve asked, unsure himself. He wasn't drunk, he told himself. He'd caught about half of what Tony was saying and then the Alpha had hung up on Steve entirely. Not helpful really. His heart was hammering in his chest at double the speed. Was he nervous to see Tony? Maybe a little. They'd had sex, what, seven hours-ish ago? And Steve was nervous, yeah. Would they do it again? Would he still be happy with Steve again? The blonde swallowed thickly. Natasha put a
hand on his arm.

"You really like him, don't you?" she said quietly.

Steve nodded. "Yeah." The slight buzz he felt made it easier for him to say it. "I really do. I can feel how he feels, Nat-- it's.... I dunno. It's scary. But in a good way. Like ridin' the Cyclone on Coney Island."

Natasha blinked. "Wait. You can feel him? Have you mated?" She asked, trying and failing to sound calm about it. "Not sex, but mating."

"I thought he had to bite, you know, the back of my neck to do that?" Tony had bitten in a lot of places, but not that place.

"Sometimes your body makes the decision before you make a conscious one," Natasha said, choosing her words carefully. She pulled her arm away. "If you two are already starting to feel each other, then it's only a matter of time. Being scent-mates is a powerful thing." The corners of her mouths twitched up a little and for just a moment, she looked almost gooey. She glanced over her shoulder, clearly looking for Clint, then looked back to Steve, expression serious again. "Just be careful, Steve. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I know, Nat. I know...I just...if I don't take any risks in this century, then I figure I won't get anywhere. I want a shot at happiness." Her expression softened visibly at that.

Their heads both turned when they heard a disruption in the crowd. Steve frowned a little as the people parted and the clunking sound of metal shook through the floor, almost matching the low thrum of music that reverberated around the bar itself. Steve felt Tony before he saw him, smelt him before he saw him - it was distinctively Alpha and he almost felt his knees go weak. Tony walked up to their table. Before Steve knew what he was doing he was stepping onto the table and crouching before him so their heads were level. He reached forward with expert hands and found the latch, flipping the face plate open. "Never one for subtlety, are you?" Steve asked, tone unmistakably fond.

"...kinda hard to listen to a guy lecture me on subtly when he's crawling across a table," said Tony, grinning. He'd made it home in record time, shaved, and changed his clothes; he felt like himself again. Sort of.

His body was still aching for Steve. He had gotten the keys to the McLaren, then taken the suit instead because it was faster.

Everyone was staring. It wasn't every day a six-foot-five, bright red robot with a glow stick in its chest waltzed into the local bar.

Tony turned. "NO ONE TALK TO ME OR TAKE MY PICTURE, AND DRINKS ARE ON ME!" he shouted. The bar erupted into cheers. Tony turned and grinned. "That almost always works." He stepped out of the suit, dusting off his clothes; plain grey slacks, plain black t-shirt. The arc reactor shone through the black cloth stubbornly. Tony was pretty sure the new core burned brighter than the old one.

He grabbed Steve's hair affectionately, without thinking, and bumped their foreheads together before sliding into the booth, tugging Steve with him, pressing their shoulders together.
His head turned at someone laughing. Clint. His lined face looked unusually merry. Tony recognized that look. That was a man deep in his cups. Clint was watching Tony and Steve with undisguised glee.

"Oh my God, you two -- " He dissolved into a fit of giggles. Natasha didn't look nearly as amused.

Tony tried to look serious, but the corner of his mouth was twitching with happiness at being back with Steve. Under the table he fished for Steve's hand, found it, and laced their fingers together. With his other hand, he caught a waiter's attention. "I need, uh.. one martini, extra dirty, a SoCo lime, neat, a Pisco sour, neat, an old-fashioned with the strongest rye you have, an Old Spanish, and an El Vaquero."

"What's an Old Spanish?" she asked, looking confused.

"It's a fake drink made of riesling, tonic water, and olives. I'm just making sure you're paying attention."

"So... one martini, Pisco, SoCo, old-fashioned, and a Vaquero?"

"Bingo. No garnishes. ...oh, and whatever they want." Tony waved his hand at the rest of the table.

"Wait, that whole order is for you?" asked Clint, still stifling giggles.

"Um, yes, I haven't eaten all day. Those are all the food groups."

Natasha was staring at Steve with a wide-eyed look that communicated a lot more than words ever could. Tony's thumb was stroking the back of Steve's hand softly.

Now that he was in a bar, with Steve, Tony felt... oh, God, he felt amazing. It was the feeling of waking up before the alarm and getting to bury back into the blankets and sleep the day away.

Steve shot Natasha a pleading look, but Natasha's eyes only narrowed further when the waitress brought over all of Tony's drinks. Maybe service might have been denied to a lesser man, but everyone in the bar clearly knew who he was, and they were all not-so-subtlety gawking.

Before Natasha could open her mouth, Steve swept Tony's drinks to the floor.

Tony looked at Steve, aghast. He might as well have dropped a baby.

"Steve! What-- what the hell was that?" sputtered Tony. "God, Steve, c'mon, that was my dinner, what the fuck ass hell... you've had how many bottles and I'm not even allowed to have--" He squeezed Steve's hand a little harder to try to keep a tremble at bay, but it didn't work.

Natasha watched the two of them silently, her face a mask.

Tony wanted to be mad at Steve, but literally couldn't. His brain was telling him to grab Steve and fuck him over the table. His brain was telling him to nuzzle Steve's soft blond hair. His brain was telling him to shove Steve's shirt up and worship those perfect, toned muscles. None of those things, logically, would get Tony's alcohol back, however.

Tony untangled their hands and gave himself a sharp little shake. "I'm going to the bar to order. Try not to destroy any more glasses, Butterfingers. Clint! C'mere, I'll buy you a Fallout. It's a drink I made up..."
"Clint has had enough," Natasha said firmly. Clint whined in protest and tried to nuzzle against her neck. She pushed him away. "He needs water, Tony. Get him some water." Maybe this was her demonstrating her Alpha authority or maybe this was just her way of showing her concern. Clint was often went overboard on things. Tonight was no exception.

"I can't get drunk," Steve pointed out. "Unless I drink ethanol. Look, Tony-" He sighed. He'd known him for a matter of weeks. And no amount of sex felt like it would give him the right to simply say please don't drink. Because I care about you.

Wait. Shit. Did Steve just say that aloud? The way Tony was looking at him implied he had. Steve dropped his voice to a whisper so only Tony could hear, barely a murmur over the music.

"If you drink I will not sleep with you," he said matter-of-factly. And Steve meant it. He still remembered Tony trying to lick him at his birthday party. For some reason that made Steve sad.

Tony's eyes narrowed. "If I don't get a drink, then I won't sleep with you," he hissed back.

Clint leaned in, grinning. "What are we whispering about?"

"Mexican standoff," said Tony, not breaking eye contact with Steve. Steve was holding it.

"Is that a drink?" asked Clint.

"Yes, it's basically vodka and tequila, but that's not what I meant. Natasha, please heel your omega," said Tony.

"We'll talk about how that's offensive later," said Natasha, scruffing Clint and dragging him back. She shoved a glass of water into his hand. "Clint. Drink."

Tony trembled again slightly, but didn't look away. Steve's eyes were bottomless blue pools. "Steve." His voice was thick with emotion. "Please. I need a couple. To take the edge off. I won't get drunk. I'll just have two, maybe five drinks. That's it." He was pleading, but he was torn, torn between disappointing his omega and getting some alcohol in his system. He felt stupid for asking for Steve's permission at all, but that wasn't it, not really. He knew he could drink if he wanted to. It wasn't even about the threat of not getting sex. It was that Tony cared about Steve and cared about his opinion and couldn't stand the thought of disappointing him. "Look, compromise? Please? You can cut me off if I start to get rowdy. But I need a drink, Steve. Just a couple. Then we can go back to your place, with its godforsaken lack of anything even remotely alcoholic. Or get ice cream or whatever adorable couples do."

He glanced at Natasha and Clint, curious about what adorable couples did, anyway. He was aware that Alpha-omega pairings were not necessarily the same as regular romantic pairings; Alphas in particular might have two partners. It seemed unlikely to Tony that Natasha had anyone else, but who knew. Currently, Clint was gazing at Natasha with a glazed, gooey expression, and Natasha was rolling an olive over the rough wooden table with one finger, looking magnificently sexy and dangerous. Clint, decided Tony, was a very lucky omega.

He glanced back, wondering, suddenly, if Steve felt lucky to have him.

No. No, stupid thought. Steve didn't "have him." They were just... what? Friends? They'd fucked. Friends with benefits?

"Just like... two shots?" he begged Steve.

Steve couldn't deny he was still a little buzzed- he hated giving up in a fight, but he also hating
feeling like a hypocrite. He sighed, eyes flitting down in a subconscious gesture of submission for a brief moment. "One drink," he said finally. "And if it becomes more than that then I'm leaving." And Steve meant it. Captain America didn't compromise- but for his Alpha there could be some wiggle room. "I don't want to leave, Tony. I just don't want to see you like that again- my heart can't take it.

"Also, for the record, if you ever try to 'heel' me... don't."

The olive slipped off the table onto the floor, despite that, Natasha was still smiling subtly.

"Did I tell you, the test is on Wednesday?" Natasha asked abruptly and Steve perked up. He looked excited all of a sudden.

"No? You didn't."


"Not for you. Idiot." Natasha hit her omega's arm fondly. "It's Steve's field test. They'll let him go fight again after. Go on real missions."

"Oh." Clint blinked owlishly.

Natasha saw the stress in Steve's face immediately. "You'll pass; don't sweat it. You're more than ready."

"I've never had to study," said Tony, staring at Steve, concern creeping over his features. "Real missions? He nearly got killed in Monaco, what the hell is a real mission? Spying on me was enough of a real mission. Steve can't fight, he--"

Steve's look said it all.

Tony backtracked.

"--obviously he can fight, he's a soldier, he's built like an ox, but--"

But what? But I won't be there to protect him.

Tony looked between Steve and Natasha. Despite the pounding music and the talking crowds in the bar, it felt quiet to Tony all of the sudden.

"Welp, that settles it," he said, firmly, slapping a hand on the table. "I'm joining up. Where do I sign? I'll be a fucking Avenger- you guys are obviously all nuts, you need someone with a calm, stabilizing personality like mine to bring some order to this fucking outfit... I'm going to get my drink..."

"о нет..." groaned Natasha, dragging a hand over her face.

"Clint! Come with me!" demanded Tony. Since Clint was the most trashed, he felt like Clint would be the one most able to answer questions honestly. He didn't trust Natasha one bit; she was too wily. And he couldn't ask Steve about omega stuff, nor about how dangerous a "real mission" would be; Steve would try to downplay the risks. Tony needed answers and he was a firm believer in the phrase in vino veritas.

Clint looked at Natasha. She gave a tiny nod, and Clint scrambled over Steve's lap to follow Tony.
"No more drinks!" called Natasha after him.

"Water only! Gotcha!" said Clint, giving her a thumbs-up as he stumbled after Tony.

"I'm not sure he'll be able to deal with you in danger fullstop," Natasha said once they'd disappeared. "Some pairs just can't stomach it. He might not be able to join, Steve… If he's only focused on you, more than the mission, he'll be a liability."

Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Yeah. I know. I'll talk about with him… Maybe he should come to the field test. Actually see what I'm capable of."

"That's a good idea," Natasha hummed and her eyes drifted over to the bar to find and Clint and Tony among the crowd. "It's like he's high around you. That's normal for people who've just mated, Steve." She glanced over at him. Then she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Things will calm down in a few days. You'll be yourselves again."

"I sure hope so," Steve sighed.

"Sam will be there on Wednesday, too," Natasha added. "Maybe warn Tony so he doesn't bite his head off?"

"Nat, come on-"

"He would literally kill me if I tried to take you off of him. I'm not kidding, Steve." Natasha's face showed she was serious. "We get really aggressive during the honeymoon phase. Even ones who are low dominance."

"So what do I do to stop him being so...?"

Natasha squeezed his shoulder and then pulled her hand away. "You find a way to reassure him."

"Does a double count as one drink?" wondered Tony at the bar.

"It's in one glass," said Clint reasonably.

Tony chewed the inside of his cheek. He didn't want to disappoint Steve, but one drink wouldn't be enough. Not nearly enough. Tony put away up to a fifth a day.

"Okay, one double," said Tony. "What's the strongest thing you got?" he demanded. Despite the crowd hovering around the bar, the bartender was looking directly at Tony. Actually, everyone was. In the bar's dim light, his bright blue arc reactor was like a spotlight. No one was talking to him, wanting to get their free drinks, but everyone was looking. Tony was used to it; he barely noticed.

"Everclear," said the bartender.

"Great. I want that."

"...just straight?" asked the bartender.

"Throw some olives in there so I don't look like a lush," instructed Tony.

The bartender looked like the idea of drinking unmixed vodka bothered her slightly, but obediently
poured two generous shots into a tumbler and tossed in a few olives. She held the glass out to Tony.

"Just set it on the counter, I don't like being handed things," instructed Tony.

The bartender set the drink down. Clint cocked an eyebrow.

After Tony took his drink, everyone at the bar immediately ordered the same thing.

"Some fan club," observed Clint.

"Yeah, aren't they great? Come outside with me, Clint, I gotta pick your brain for a second here. You smoke?"

"No."

"Me neither. Let's go grab a smoke."

Holding his drink up to navigate the crowd, Tony slithered through the dim, crowded throng and out into the night. There were about a half-dozen smokers hovering outside the bar. Night had fallen but the streets were still busy; several cabs were already idling at the curb, waiting for fares from the bar crowd.

"So," said Tony to Clint.

"Cigarette, Mr. Stark?" offered one of the smokers hopefully.

Tony waved him away. "Don't smoke. ...so. Clint. You and Laura Croft, huh?"

"Huh?" said Clint, who, despite not smoking, had taken the offered cigarette and let the smoker light it for him.

"Natasha. She's... holy hell, she is scary. In a very sexy way, mind you. Kind of like Elvira. You two are bonded, huh? Lucky you, she is seriously hot. ...so how's that work, the whole, uh, bonding thing? ...can you please not smoke that in my face? I hate that smell."

Clint stepped to the side.

Tony took a long pull from his drink, barely wincing at the sharp taste of the vodka. He frowned and sniffed the air; when Clint moved, another smell had taken the place of the smoke. Something dark and musky.

Clint watched him, taking a drag.

"What's the weird smell?" demanded Tony, distracted.

"What, my cigarette?"

"No, that smell."

Clint lifted his head and sniffed. "...an omega in pre-heat?"

"No, that... that heavy smell... it's like... I don't know, like cloves and musk and sort of sharp--"

"Yeah, that's an omega in pre-heat." Clint was watching Tony now with undisguised curiosity.
"...why's it smell weird?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It smells weird."

"Uh, no it doesn't, it smells exactly how it's supposed to."

Tony shook his head. "Clint, I've smelled enough omegas to know what pre-heats smell like."

"Smells normal to me."

Tony felt acutely offended by the idea that Clint would ever think of comparing that smell to Steve's. But he decided to let it drop. He took another drink and, just like that, his drink was gone. He looked into the empty glass, feeling annoyed. One drink. Ugh. That had been virtually nothing. He looked up at Clint, who was taking a long drag on the cigarette. The back of Tony's neck prickled; he reached up to rub the scar there.

"So. Real missions. What's that mean? Are people gonna be shooting at him? Because like, two days ago, Miracle Whip tried to kill me and Steve... how is that not a real mission... what's in New Mexico... how's the bonding thing work? Can you two get each other pregnant, I've never heard of a male omega with a female Alpha... and who the fuck is Sam?"

"I caught about half of that," admitted Clint. "I'm very, very drunk."

"Yes, I can see that. Clint. Bonding--"

"Yeah, congratulations!" hiccupped Clint.

"What?"

"Congratulations... you and Steve... he needed to get laid, seriously."

"We're not bonded," said Tony quickly.

"Bond ed, bond ing... tomayto, tomahto," said Clint breezily, waving his cigarette around.

"Seriously, get that thing out of my face, I really hate cigarettes."

Tony grabbed Clint's forearms and moved him to the side, repositioning him so he was downwind. Clint's eyes flickered over Tony, head to toe, in a rapid, suddenly surprisingly focused way, studying him, drinking in every detail.

"What's with your neck?"

"Excuse me?"

"You keep touching the scar there."

"What scar?" said Tony, taking a step back. "Keep your elf-eyes to yourself, Legolas." Clint was being much less helpful than Tony had hoped for. "Clint. Focus. How dangerous are real missions? And who is Sam?"

"Pretty dangerous? I don't know, maybe an eight out of ten, on average? I've only been shot maybe five or six times, I mean, grazed a lot, but shot point-black, not that much..." slurred Clint. "But that's what Kavlar is for, right? Sam's Steve's friend from the VA."
"Is he good-looking?"

"Yeah, he's pretty good-looking. He was special ops, I think? Or an airman or something? He and Steve go running together."

Tony's hair all stood up again. "Running together. Shirts on?"

"I don't know, Jesus."

"It's pronounced Tony. ...I'm sorry, did you say shot? With a gun? People are going to be shooting at him?"

"I don't know, maybe? Probably? Sometimes they shoot at us, sometimes not. I mean, in New Mexico--"

"God dammit, Clint, no one told me people would be shooting at us."

"It's fine, Tones, really. We all got each other's backs, and it's not like a bullet can get through your armor."

"I don't care about me, I care about Ste--" began Tony. Clint was grinning ear to ear. Tony caught himself. His eyes narrowed. "...oh, shut up, Magoo."

"I didn't say anything," said Clint, grinning even wider.

"...we're not bonded." Tony turned and wrenched the door of the bar back open, slipping into the dark, crowded establishment and leaving Clint to finish his cigarette alone. The idea of Steve getting shot at turned his stomach. Or maybe it was the Everclear.

Either way, he hurried back to their corner table, feeling jittery after his conversation with Clint; he felt relief the moment he saw Steve. He slid into the booth next to him, setting his empty glass down with a sharp tap.

Natasha's phone chimed with a text from Clint the moment Tony sat down.

> They're definitely bonding.

Steve practically sighed in relief when the Alpha sat down next to him. He let their fingers brush together under the table and could smell vodka on Tony's breath. His nose wrinkled up a little. That would have been very strong, Steve figured. But if Tony had really only had one drink then he would only be buzzed, like Steve was. Everything was fine, right?

But Steve didn't have a drinking problem, and Tony was severely in denial. Comparing them was apples and oranges.

Natasha was looking at them weirdly. She tilted her head. "So does anyone else know you're bonded yet?"

"...we're not bonded," said Tony.

Natasha frowned. He still smelled unbonded but that would change soon, undoubtedly. "You're not?"

Steve kept his mouth shut. The question was directed at Tony and he was already pretty sure he knew the answer himself. They were, right? It sure felt like it.
Tony snorted. "Oh, please, Romanoff. I'm Tony Stark."

"Meaning...?" she prompted, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm not a guy who especially likes commitment."

"So you're not bonded?"

Tony caught himself looking at Steve. "What? ...no." Tony's stomach twisted. "I mean, who's to even say what bonding is? It's sort of an old-fashioned concept, right, like... Like that could mean a ton of things, it's pretty ill-defined, biologically..."

"Actually, biologically, it's very well-defined," replied Natasha calmly. "Pair bonding activates dopamine and vasopressin receptors in the forebrain, and also triggers the release of testosterone and oxytocin into your bloodstream. It makes your entire neurological reward system go crazy. It fundamentally alters your brain and body chemistry."

"Oh, okay. Well, thank you, Jane Goodall," said Tony, rolling his eyes dramatically. "It's still just chemistry. We're not lizards; we have conscious thought, we're a bit more evolved than a bunch of chemical signals in the brain. I think a guy as smart as me isn't going to end up--"

"I'm glad to hear you're not bonded, because there's an Alpha over there who looks really interested in Steve," said Natasha, eyes sparkling with mischief. Tony's head snapped around so quickly it was a miracle he didn't break it. "Who?!" The word was a growl. The smooth superiority Tony had been displaying moments earlier had evaporated; he looked only one step above a rabid dog in terms of rationality.

Clint appeared at the table and immediately tensed at Tony's aggression. "Whoa, what'd I miss?" he said, slipping into the booth smelling like smoke and holding a glass of water.

"Nothing, we were just having a perfectly rational little talk about pair-bonding. And Steve was about to get a drink from that guy over there," said Natasha, pointing to a man leaning against the bar, chatting up a woman, oblivious. He had an easy smile and was flirting with a petite young woman who was clearly taking advantage of the free drinks; she was barely remaining on her barstool. It was clear that the man was not paying an ounce of attention to their table; even as they watched, his hand was sliding up the drunk woman's thigh.


"...oh, no, he's not!" snapped Tony, getting up abruptly.

"Sure he is; he made a little kissy face and everything. He's playing it cool now, but he's obviously planning on going home with you, Steve," said Natasha. "он положил что-то в ее напиток," she informed Steve. "Смотри. Tony, what are you doing?" she asked with feigned innocence.

"I'm gonna go talk to him!"

"He only wants to talk to Steve," she said with barely concealed glee.

"Oh, Nat, come on, don't..." protested Clint weakly, but Tony was already on his feet and shoving his way through the crowded bar towards the man Natasha had pointed out.

"Nat, that wasn't necessary--" Steve muttered, sounding unimpressed as he watched Tony push his way past the bar's patrons.
"He sat there and told me he didn't want to commit to you. You're too good for him. The fact that he isn't prepared to is just shitty." Nat smiled tightly. "I won't listen to it."

Steve sighed. They were good friends- too good sometimes. He knew why Natasha was angry at Tony but he didn't see how this would help much- though it would certainly help prove a point. He couldn't deny that. But Tony getting into a bar fight wouldn't help much either.

But then...the man did just drug that woman. Steve would very much like to see him learn a lesson.

"What do you think he's saying?" Clint asked with a giggle as Tony approached him at the bar. "Hey- hey aren't you gonna stop him?"

"Nope." Steve closed one eye and bent the spoon back. The spoon made a squeaking sound. If pinged across the room and hit the Alpha right between the eyes. He cried out and almost doubled over.

Natasha laughed. Clint waved a hand at Steve. "You're too good at...everything," he mumbled into his cup of water.

"Hey, you!" began Tony, seething. Everyone at the bar looked over with interest.

He had barely gotten the words out before a spoon smacked the guy into the face and he let out a yell of pain and surprise, grabbing his face.

Nearly everyone stood in alarm, looking around for the source of the spoon; Tony jumped. He hadn't been expecting flying silverware. He turned, having a pretty good idea of where the spoon had come from. Natasha was laughing; Clint and Steve were both watching with identical grins.

"I got this!" he yelled, assuming Natasha had thrown the spoon. He turned back to the man, who looked dazed and was rubbing his head. "What the fuck is your problem?" he demanded.

"Wha?" said the guy, looking dazed

"I said, what the fuck is your problem!" Tony grabbed the front of his shirt. Despite taking a well-aimed projectile to the head, he man was aware enough to look scared. He glanced at the woman he'd been talking to, then back at Tory.

"Okay, hey, look, I-- I'm sorry, I fucked up, I'm sorry," he protested. "Let me go. I'll leave, I swear--"

Tony's grip tightened a little. "Get the fuck out of here and don't ever let me see you again. Ever," he snarled.

"Hey--" protested the girl who he'd been talking to.

"You can do better, sweetheart," Tony informed her, barely looking at her. "Someone call her a cab; she's drunk. You. What the fuck is wrong with you, you son of a bitch. Give me one fucking reason I shouldn't kick your ass right now!"

"I swear, I'm so sorry, I fucked up--" the man was babbling.

"Do it, Iron Man!" yelled someone excitedly from the crowd.

"Please, man, I swear, I'll never do it again. I swear, please--"
Tony gave him a shove. "Get out!"

The man didn't need telling twice; the moment Tony's grip loosened, he darted toward the door.

Everyone at the bar looked extremely interested, even if they weren't entirely sure what was going on. A few people cheered. Someone handed Tony a drink.

Without thinking, he poured it on the ground. "I can't drink this. My omega--" he began.

He stopped dead, blinking. He suddenly realized he'd nearly assaulted someone for absolutely no reason, and also dumped a glassful of single malt onto the floor.

It was like he'd just woken up to find he was sleepwalking. He looked around, startled, then smoothed down the front of his t-shirt casually, trying to calm himself down. His hair was prickling. His heart was racing.

He edged away from the bar with feigned calm, toward the table in the corner. "...Steve!" he hissed. "Steve, we gotta go home, there's something wrong with me- I just nearly killed some guy." He slid into the seat beside Steve and turned to Nat. "...I didn't need your help with that stupid spoon trick."

"That was Steve," she said sweetly.

"Oh. Good shot, Steve. ...come on, I gotta go home, seriously. That guy got me worked up--"

"What did he do?" pressed Clint.

"He was looking at -- you know what, I don't have to fucking answer to you, I just didn't like him- he was bad news--" Tony was agitated; he was too full of energy and he didn't know why. Natasha was smirking up at him; she seemed a lot less dominant than Tony remembered.

Actually, the two of them were probably evenly matched. He was pretty sure he could win a fight with her, if he got the upper hand fast enough. If she gave him a reason to.

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get the hairs there to go down. "--see, this is-- this is what happens when I don't have enough to drink. I get cranky," he said.

"Mm-hm," said Natasha, smirking, one fist propping up her cheek. She caught Steve's eye and gave him a meaningful look. "So, Steve, your field test--"

Tony was still taking deep, steadying breaths. Under the table, he found Steve's hand and clung to it. "No, no way. Come on, Clint said you guys get shot at. Are you crazy--"

"Tony, Steve fought in World War Two. On the front lines," Clint pointed out. "He'll be fine."

Tony opened his mouth to say something but all that came out was a small whine of protest. He looked at Steve in alarm. "...we gotta go home. Please, Steve."

"Yeah, go home, go to bed," said Clint, winking a little too obviously at Steve. "...but get some condoms. Seriously," he added in a low voice.

Tony was no longer paying attention; he was scanning the bar, looking for any other Alphas who might dare to set their eyes on Steve. His hand fit perfectly in Steve's; he stroked the other's skin absent-mindedly, comfortably. He didn't think he would be able to relax until they were home safe again, until he could get Steve to bed and enfold him and hold him and it would just be the two of them again, wrapped in blankets, alone in each other's arms...
"он упал тяжело," said Natasha, smiling a little at them. "убедитесь, что он зарабатывает."

"I'm too drunk for Russian," moaned Clint, setting his head down on the desk and closing his eyes. "Make sure... wait... what's he earning? You lost me, Tasha..."

"He should be earning what he deserves," said Natasha, looking meaningfully at Steve. "So make sure he deserves it. Steve. You're worth a lot. Don't forget that."

Tony looked over. "Are you coming onto him?" he demanded, hackles rising again.

"No, just giving some friendly advice. I have Clint, remember?" said Natasha with the practiced patience of someone who knew she was dealing with someone not quite in their right mind.

"Heyyy!" said Clint, raising a weak hand without lifting his head off the table.

"Will you be there for my test?" Steve checked with Natasha as he squeezed Tony's hand under the table. He'd helped retrain him in almost all combat. He couldn't imagine doing it... without her. He owed a lot to her. Natasha nodded.

"Both of us will. And Sam. Maybe you guys should go?" She prompted not so subtly.

"Seeing you do all that was actually kinda sweet, as well as wholly unnecessary," Steve admitted as they stepped outside, the suit walking alongside them with some form of AI function. But Tony wasn't stepping into it right now. That would mean no more holding hands and Steve liked the way their fingers linked together just... right.

And maybe it had been a bit of a turn on. Seeing Tony come to his defense like that. Sure, Steve could look after himself, but he sorta liked how possessive Tony was. And that surprised him. But it made Steve feel wanted, cherished almost. It made Steve feel like he was his and yeah... he liked that a lot.

"You do know I've been shot, like, a lot of times, right?" Steve asked bemusedly as he gently tugged down the street towards the drug store. He glanced back at the suit following them. It was already attracting a lot of stares. How could they discreetly buy condoms with that? "You don't need to worry about me. I can handle myself. And I enjoy fighting, Tony, it's what I was built to do. Besides, don't tell me you wouldn't enjoy watching me beat up a load of Alphas..."

Tony growled softly at the idea of Steve being shot at.

"I know, I know you can defend yourself, but you shouldn't have to, you shouldn't have to anymore, because you've got me," explained Tony. "I mean, yes, it's hilarious that you're an omega who can toss around Alphas like it's nothing, but-- but I don't want you to; it makes me feel like... I don't know... this is gonna sound crazy, Steve, but I feel like a failure. When you have to stand up for yourself. That should be me; that's what I do, you know?"

"You are anything but a failure," Steve murmured and stopped Tony for a brief moment to lean over and kiss his forehead. The gesture felt oddly tender and something warmed in Steve's chest. He wanted to curl his arms around him, hug him and comfort him but they were still out on a public street and still attracting more than a few stares.

Tony sighed slightly. "Hold on, okay? I'm gonna get the paparazzi off our tail." He turned to the suit. "JARVIS, take the suit down to the corner, go pose for some pictures, and then take it back home in a half-hour. I'm going incognito tonight."
"...isn't he great?" said Tony fondly, watching the armor turn and head off down the street. "...my long-term goal is to get implants and be able to summon the suit to myself, like James Bond, just push a button on a watch or something..."

"Is James Bond that spy guy who's a womaniser?" He asked, trying to recall the low down on pop culture Phil had attempted to give him one time.

He and Steve went back to strolling down the street together, holding hands. Tony held his other hand over his chest, blocking the arc reactor. Without the reactor's glow, they were just another pair, Alpha and omega, clearly together; people gave them space. Tony reeked like aggression, although he wasn't aware of it, himself.

With Steve's hand in his, Tony felt a sense of relief he hadn't felt in a long, long time. It was a warm, cuddly feeling that was intense enough to allow Tony not to mind Steve's ignorance of James Bond. (He made a mental note to get Steve caught up on that as soon as possible.)

"...Steve, where the heck are we going?" asked Tony after a moment. "Don't you live northwest of here?" A pause. "FYI, I'm staying at your place tonight. If that's okay. That's okay, right?" His grip on Steve's hand tightened a little and he stole a glance at his omega.

Steve was neatly groomed, strong-jawed, straight-backed... every bit a soldier. But knowing that didn't make Tony feel any better about people shooting at him. "Can I come to the field test? As, like, a personal cheerleader?" asked Tony. "I wanna be there. I should be there. ...if I join, they'll make me take a test too, probably, so it's better if I come, so that I know what I'm in for... seriously, where are we going? Are we looking for Waldo- you live that way, Steve..."

"Yes. That's okay. I want you to stay," Steve promised him. The thought of Tony going to his test made him perk up- the thought of Tony being there to support him. That was nice. It felt good. And it would make it clear to Fury that this wasn't just a fling to piss him off. This was something. "I'd really like it if you were there," he finally said, voice a touch softer. "And yes, I know where I live," he hummed bemusedly and tugged Tony into a drug store. "But we need to get supplies. Did you know there's a small chance you can conceive out of heats? I didn't. Sex ed was kind of non-existent in the forties...I hope Clint is too drunk to remember he had to inform me about that."

"Supplies?" repeated Tony, letting Steve drag him into a bright lit CVS. Tony squinted at brightly lit aisles and the annoying, tinny pop music on the speakers. He never did any sort of shopping on his own if he could help it. He hovered over Steve's shoulder while Steve stared at a wall of condoms.

Steve knew the doctors said he was infertile. But they also said he wouldn't have heats. He couldn't take that risk right now, on top of everything. Maybe he could go on the pill like Natasha or something. But until then it was better safe than sorry. Steve didn't want kids now, maybe ever. He was a soldier. They didn't fit into his lifestyle.

He blinked in surprise when they stopped in front of shelves full of sex supplies. "Why...?" Steve didn't even know how to articulate his thoughts. "There's so much. Surely all this isn't necessary?"

Steve looked at him and Tony remembered, with horror, that he was the "experienced one."
"Oh. Oh, fuck, no, don't look at me, I didn't know you could conceive out of heat," protested Tony, holding his hands up in alarm. His version of "safe sex" involved making sure women were eighteen ("You're eighteen, right?") and trusting Pepper to throw condoms in the nightstand and/or his suitcase if he was traveling. Even then, he didn't always remember to use them. He'd had a vasectomy in Tijuana in 1989 for 3,000 pesos (which at the time had been about one or two hundred bucks). Whether or not a Tijuana vasectomy was effective or not was still something Tony wasn't entirely sure of. ("You're lucky you didn't end up with some sort of terrible infection," Pepper had scolded him. Tony pointed out that he had drunk a lot of tequila beforehand and he had been 19 and that it had obviously not been a very rational decision.) He had never had a positive paternity test, though he'd had plenty of paternity accusations (17 and counting!) and had been asked to pay for three abortions (which he did; even if they weren't his, he had the money and considered himself a gentleman like that). As for STDs, Tony had managed to get the clap twice and chlamydia once. He got tested once or twice a year and lectured by Pepper twice as often. Tony's knowledge of sex was limited to the brand of condom Pepper got for him (Trojan, Woman's Pleasure, and he sure as hell wasn't going to suggest Woman's Pleasure to Steve).

"Just ask someone," said Tony, taking a few steps back. "...like, how small of a chance are we talking... one percent, ten percent? Can you give me an order of magnitude on conceiving out of heat, Steve? Because I'm not really the fatherly type. I mean, I smoked a pipe sometimes in college and I look dashing in a sweater-vest but that's about it-- look, there's a guy, he's an omega, too! Go ask him!" said Tony, giving Steve a small push toward an employee who was passing their aisle.

When Steve didn't immediately call him over, Tony yelled, "HEY!"

The man looked up. "Hi, can I help-- wow, Captain America! Oh my God, oh my God, I'm like your biggest fan!"

Tony turned away, suddenly overly interested in a display of pregnancy tests. (I might be in hell, he thought. Is that what hell looks like? A Backstreet Boys song came on the speakers, which confirmed to Tony that, yes, he was very likely in hell.)

"Seriously, oh my God, that article in the Times, wow, okay, me and my brother are both omegas, and you have no idea--" The man suddenly realized which aisle they were in. "--no idea how much it meant," he finished with a stammer.

An awkward pause. Tony was still trying not to be noticed, but he couldn't exactly make his smell go away.

"Is that your Alpha?" asked the employee, nodding toward Tony.

Ah, fuck. He turned with every intention of setting the record straight (No, I am not!), but the moment he turned, the kid went nuts again.

"Tony Stark? Oh... my... God!"

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm--" he began. He couldn't say it. He'd already denied Steve once, at the bar, and the punch to the guy hadn't been worth it. He couldn't say he wasn't Steve's Alpha. "--going to give you four VIP passes to Stark Expo in return for you forgetting that the two of us were ever here, okay?" he finished. "As you know, thanks to the Times, Steve is a very progressive, sexually liberated omega. But he is moderately behind the times, so if you can just tell him what to get so that he doesn't end up preggo with the next generation of tiny Steve Starks, that would be great. And if you breathe a word of this to anyone, so help me God, I will sic so many lawyers on you it'll make your head spin."
The omega nodded reverently. Even without the threat, Tony was absolutely oozing confidence. "Yes-- yeah, no, of course, Mr. Stark. I won't tell anyone," he reassured them, still looking a little star-struck.

Tony nudged Steve to take over. He felt he'd contributed about as much as he could to this disaster of an interaction.

"You really think I want children? When I'm the one who's going to be getting shot at?" Steve asked and raised a brow at Tony before he started summoning some poor kid over. He looked around twenty two years old, probably in college or something.

Omegas couldn't go to college back in Steve's day.

The shop assistant nodded dumbly, still very much in awe. Tony's threat didn't even seem to bother him all that much. Steve peered at his name tag and read the name 'Leo' across it in pink lettering. Leo was looking a little embarrassed. "If you just want something to get the job done these are fine," he picked up a box. "I use them with my girlfriend all the time."

Omegas with girlfriends. Steve was still getting used to that. He knew his interview wasn't all that positive on omega rights...but in attitudes he'd felt a lot of corners had been turned. "Oh and it's erm...a three percent chance on average," Leo said and rubbed at the back of his neck a little awkwardly.

Steve blinked. "Sorry?"

"To get pregnant. Out of heats. Hardly ever happens. A lot of people don't bother...especially after STD tests and all that."

"I don't think I can get STDs," Steve filled in automatically and Leo laughed. It was a gentle, warm sound.

"Lucky you," he said lightly. "Er, can I get you anything else sir?"

Steve shrugged. "That's all for now. Thanks." He tried to ignore the fact his cheeks were going red. His old forties values told him he should be very embarrassed about this. "And thank you, Leo, for being so...understanding."

"You have nothing to thank me for," Leo shook his head as he scanned the box. Steve fished around in his pockets for some notes and paid. " Seriously dude. You're gonna change everything."

Steve was kind of...stunned. He didn't quite know what to say. He just settled for smiling, small but sincere. "I hope so," he murmured.

Leo handed the box over to Steve. He cleared his throat. "It's, er, a pleasure to meet you too, Mr Stark."

"Yes. Great. Thank you. Here's my card. I'll hook up you and the girlfriend up with passes, just be cool, okay?" demanded Tony, flicking a business card out of his pocket.

Leo took it like it was made of gold.

Tony slipped his hand into Steve's and they walked back out into the cool, busy city night together. Tony shivered a little; he was looking forward to snuggling down into bed with Steve. Three percent... those were actually damned good odds.
"You, change everything," scoffed Tony. "I discovered a new element, like, what, forty-eight hours ago, and no one blinked an eye. You come out as an omega, and the whole world's gone crazy." Even though he meant to sound indignant, it came out as fond. Tony admired Steve's courage. Admired it a lot. Being an omega wasn't easy, he knew that.

He looked down at the sidewalk. "We're learning a lot of this stuff together," he admitted. "...I didn't think about it, about, you know, the public, the media... How hard it would be. You and me. We're like, you know, Bradgelina or Bennifer. A real power couple. ...a super-powered couple, if you will. Well... more of a pair than a couple. I mean... I mean... we're... well, you know, you're my omega, I guess." Tony cleared his throat. "I just, uh... I didn't really consider that... that it would have to be a secret at first. The world isn't ready for us. Not yet. I didn't think about that. About our images, and stuff."

He kicked at a leaf on the ground and then glanced up at Steve. "...wouldn't have changed anything," he added in a low voice.

He looked back down, then pushed his shoulder a little closer to Steve's as they strolled along. "I don't mind being your dirty little secret. As long as we can be us around our friends. I wouldn't wanna tarnish your whole, you know, strong, independent, I-can-do-anything omega image, you know?" He looked up, squinting a smile at Steve. "I do love it. The strong, independent omega thing. I told you: I like uppity omegas. And I'm..." Glad you're mine. "...I'm looking forward to hopping into bed, I'm completely exhausted."

As if reminded of its exhaustion, Tony suddenly had the urge to yawn. He fought it down. He wanted to stay up, at least for a little longer. For one thing, he wanted to take Steve again. Not just wanted. Almost needed. His body was crying out for it; he felt like he'd missed something last time, like there was something else he should have done and he'd screwed up by forgetting it. He had an idea if he did it again he would get it right this time around, though.

"It's not about if the world are ready for it," Steve said softly. "I just don't think I'm ready to share you with the world just yet," he admitted with a glint in his eyes. He let their shoulders nudge together as they walked. The media would be all over them, their privacy would be threatened. He needed them to iron out the kinks first. Like accepting they were bonded...and realising what that actually meant for each other.

Steve let go of Tony's hand to let them into his apartment block reluctantly. They took the lift up because it was a lot of stairs (Steve did have a good view, after all.) An old woman got into the lift with them so they had to behave. She didn't even blink when she saw them. Steve almost let out a sigh of relief when they weren't recognised. He squeezed Tony's hand gently.

He almost felt nervous as he opened the door to his actual flat. Were they going to...? Would Steve really know what he was doing...? But they'd bought protection for a reason, right? "If you're tired we can go straight to bed," Steve offered quietly as he dropped his jacket onto a hook before he bent down to take off his shoes. "If you want."

Tony, as usual, jumped on the opportunity to be irreverent.

"Straight to bed? You're just chomping at the bit to try out those new condoms, huh, buddy?" he teased, grinning. He wrapped his arms around Steve's waist from behind and nuzzled the back of his neck. "...I do want," he added, his voice deepening. He placed a soft kiss on Steve's neck.

Tony hated to admit he was wrong, but around Steve, Tony felt like he could admit to a lot of things he wouldn't dream of telling anyone else. Not even Pepper.
"Steve, I didn't do it right," he confessed softly. "I... this sounds weird but... I feel like... I missed something. When I fucked you earlier. Like I was supposed to do something and I didn't. I know that sounds weird. It was great, right? ...but I still feel like it wasn't... completely... it wasn't perfect. I want to make it right. I want to take you again. But I want it to be the right way this time. ...that sounds sort of stupid and traditional, right, like there's not really a right way to mate, right? ...but you like traditional, so... so yeah. I want to... make sure this time it's done... you know. The old-fashioned way." He gave Steve a gentle, gentle bite on the back of the neck, more of a question than a statement.

Steve trembled noticeably as teeth grazed at the soft flesh at the back of his neck. "Okay," he said only in affirmation, agreeing to Tony's suggestion. He needed it. He wanted it. He wanted to feel claimed and he wanted this- them being mated -for it to be acknowledged. Steve slowly turned around, his face tilted down towards Tony. Their noses nudged together but they didn't kiss. Not quite yet. "I think a bed is how they did it in the forties," Steve joked gently and reached out to take Tony's hand.

He tugged on it gently and lead him towards his bedroom, the sheets still a little mussed from their sleep the night before. Steve was feeling shy again. He didn't know how to do this, how to initiate this...a part of Steve was just waiting for Tony to tell him what to do again. Steve dragged Tony to the bedroom, but the moment they'd crossed the threshold, his body language changed. It took Tony several moments to recognize it: Steve was suddenly acting timid. Tony was so used to Steve being a confident person that these small, intimate moments of shyness were often unexpected. He wasn't Captain America, just Steve, Steve the omega. Most of Steve's submissive gestures were fleeting, instinctual. This wasn't. Steve was avoiding looking Tony in the eye, was hovering by the bed awaiting instructions, and he was consciously doing so.

"On your knees," said Tony quietly.

He wanted to throw Steve down and go wild, but no. There were protocols. No one had ever told Tony what exactly they were, but he had an inexplicable sense of what needed done. He'd known, for example, that he had messed up earlier. He'd bitten Steve's neck, yes. He'd marked him. But when he looked back, the love bites on Steve's throat weren't enough. It was supposed to be the back of his neck. He was supposed to have pinned Steve down more aggressively. Steve had knelt while Tony was sitting and Tony should have been standing. He shouldn't have fought against the knot. Lots of little things that he'd done wrong due to inexperience, but that could be corrected thanks to instinct's guiding hand. Courtship behavior had a right way of being done and even though Tony typically scoffed at tradition and instinct and etiquette... he wanted to do this right for Steve. He cared more about Steve more than about his own smug sense of superiority over his own biology. He owed it to Steve.

He wanted Steve as his omega and he felt that giving him anything but a perfect courtship would make him a bad Alpha. He wanted Steve to see that he cared. And he did care. A lot more than he'd like to admit.

Steve was glad he'd at least taken his shoes and jacket off as he sank down immediately on instinct. He was kneeling down with his back straight, hands clasped behind his back in a perfect pose as his head was tilted down. It felt so natural. So easy. Sometimes being the captain was a constant battle- against stereotypes, opinions...everything. And it was worth it, undoubtedly. But this was natural. It made the stiffness slip away from Steve's shoulders as his whole being just
And yet there was a tension in the air as Steve anticipated Tony's next move. Where his Alpha was, what he wanted. Steve swallowed and kept his gaze focused on the floor. He heard Tony walking behind him and resisted the urge to tilt his head back.

Steve just kept his head tilted down and focused on keeping his breathing steady as he stayed perfectly still. He waited for Tony's touch, his instruction. And he would wait as long as his Alpha deemed fit.

Tony circled Steve once, examining him. Then he turned and circled the other way.

Yes. Perfect. Acceptable.

Tony was already circling back again, a third time. He stopped in front of Steve, reached out, touched his face. Yes. Ran a hand over Steve's head, then stepping forward and giving Steve's head the very slightly nudge. An offer for Steve to rest a cheek on Tony's leg. Steve's posture was good; Tony had accepted it.

Somewhere in the back of his conscious mind, Tony felt like this was all unnecessary. Steve had knelt before and of course his posture was great. But they had to follow the entire process, step-by-step, which included this part. Tony didn't want to rush it this time. Why would he? He was inexplicably delighted with this process. Circling Steve made him feel powerful and confident and aroused. Now he wanted to take a few moments to reassure Steve that everything had been found to be satisfactory.

Steve sighed as Tony guided him and he rested his cheek against the other's thigh, his eyes slipping shut. He hummed contently in acceptance and contentment, so glad to have Tony's silent approval. The other felt warm beneath him, firm and confident. He was everything Steve was when he was at work- but that was Tony's job now.

Steve didn't need to be anything but himself right now. Anything but his nature.

It was oddly freeing.

Then he smelt his Alpha's arousal. Steve shifted a little, his legs parting a fraction as he felt his own body respond in turn. It was like they were perfectly in tune with one another. Steve knew the that the more Tony became aroused the wetter he would become. He sucked in a soft breath when he felt Tony's fingers against his scalp.

Tony looked down at Steve lovingly, petting his hair for a few moments. Steve shifted minutely beneath him, parting his legs a little.

Tony's mouth watered.

He gave Steve's hair a small tug-- Up -- and then stepped back, giving Steve room to obey.

He practically ripped off his shirt, kicking his jeans a little too hard across the room, no longer wanting to be clothed. He had an expectation that Steve would follow his cues, that words weren't necessary here; if Steve didn't undress on his own, Tony was going to tear the clothes right off him. He could smell Steve's lust and the juiciness between his legs, and his erection was almost painful with how hard it was. The thought of Steve's wet, tight, eager body was tantalizing; Tony couldn't take his eyes off the blond; he'd never felt this sort of passionate craving for anyone before.
Was it because Steve was an omega?

Uncertain. Outside the bar, Tony had smelled an omega in pre-heat, but it had smelled all wrong. And Leo, that omega kid in the CVS... he hadn't smelled right either. The world had shifted from a sea of tasty, available omegas to only one: Steve.

Steve shivered as he was summoned up. Tony was stripping and the way he looked at him told Steve he should follow suit. He swallowed before moving to pull up his shirt. He could already feel his skin growing hot from arousal and a need to please. Then he pushed down his jeans along with his underwear and stepped out of them. All his shyness from before had evaporated.

Steve walked right up to Tony, into his space. His hot breath ghosted over the Alpha's cheek, his gaze was cast downwards. Steve's body was pink and flush and wet. He was ready for the taking.

He asked it again, voice thick with arousal now: "How do you want me?"

Tony leaned forward, closing the inch between them, catching Steve's lower lip and sucking on it briefly, tasting him.

He took a step back, breaking from Steve unwillingly, and nodded to the bed. "Lay down. Stomach," he demanded. Steve's voice was like fucking ambrosia. Tony could get drunk on that voice, asking for his orders. Tony's own voice sounded wrong to him. No. Not wrong. Perfectly right, but unfamiliar, lower, growling, guttural, dominant.

Tony had only felt power like this once before. The suit. The very first time he had turned theory into practice, the very first time he'd realized he could punch through walls and flip over cars and crush people's heads like melons. He'd been intoxicated on power then, and he was intoxicated on power now, but this time, there was no fear, and he wasn't alone. This was fun and pleasant and natural and he was doing with with Steve; he wouldn't have wanted to do it with anyone else in the entire world; they were made for each other; Steve's smell was as familiar to Tony as his own. Steve's body was the matching piece of the puzzle. Tony could smell his wetness, how quickly and eagerly Steve had responded to him; giving Steve himself was what Steve wanted, and giving him that was what Tony wanted, and it seemed like a small, perfect miracle that they'd found each other and wanted the same thing.

He whimpered when Tony sucked on his lip.

Steve obeyed instantly and moved to lie down on the bed. He flattened out the sheets first before laying down, settling his hands under his chin as he listened to Tony's breathing intently. He heard the Alpha moving behind him, presumably admiring the view of Steve all splayed out- his thighs were shiny.

He couldn't see him. But he trusted him. Steve wasn't sure if he could ever have done this with anyone else. He wasn't sure if he'd ever trusted anyone his much, aside from-

No. Don't think about him now.

Steve settled down on the bed comfortably and then his breath hitched when he felt the corner of the mattress dip. "You planning on just watchin' or actually doing somethin'?" He asked, Brooklyn accent creeping back into his voice.

Tony let out a moan before he could stop himself. That a accent. Holy mother of Maxwell.

"You can't rush perfection," growled Tony, crawling on top of Steve, a knee on either side of him. His thighs were literally wet with fluid; he was practically dripping. Tony ran his hands up Steve's
back, memorizing his form; he leaned down to kiss Steve's spine, moving up slowly, smelling his skin, tasting it on his lips... *my omega* ... he wanted to know Steve, wanted to be able to recognize him in an instant by smell and touch and taste alone; he went slow, savoring it, learning it, integrating it into his brain.  *This is my omega... this is my omega* ...

His hands slid over Steve's shoulders and up his arms, following them to where Steve had tucked his hands under his chin. Tony wrapped his hands around Steve's wrists and pinned him on either side of his head; his leg came up and he kneed Steve's legs apart; Steve opened for him immediately, instantly.

"Omega," said Tony throatily, rubbing his erection against Steve's entrance.  Oh, *fuck*, the *relief*.  Tony wasn't really aware of what he was saying or doing; the only thing that seemed at all real was the warm, inviting body beneath him.

He leaned down the licked Steve's earlobe.

Yes.

All he had to do was bite him.  Bite his neck and mate him.  Make him his, forever.  Mate his omega.

At that moment, Tony probably couldn't have said what his middle name was.  This was it, the point of no return, and it was probably the most meaningful thing Tony had ever done, and he couldn't have stopped himself if he really wanted to, not while he was pressed against Steve, feeling his fluids, feeling how badly he wanted it.

"Omega," repeated Tony longingly, and he nuzzled into the back of Steve's neck before biting him.  The moment his mouth was full of Steve's flesh, his body gave an automatic jerk of his hips-- he honestly hadn't meant to do that-- and he'd shoved half of his manhood instead Steve in an instant.  Maybe Steve cried out.  Tony wasn't sure.  He squirmed, pushing, needing to knot him, his hands clinging to Steve's wrists, pressing down, while he tugged at Steve's neck with his mouth.  This wasn't sex.  This wasn't passionate and loving like it had been earlier.  This was primal.  This was a necessary ritual and while it was certainly physically gratifying, it was also much more than that.  Tony had not ever considering biting the back of someone's neck and pinning their wrists to the bed like this to be especially erotic, and yet here he was, rutting into Steve in this position, knowing that no other way would have been appropriate.

Steve whimpered as Tony crawled on top of him.  He felt like his skinny self again as the Alpha blanketed him with his own form and made him feel hot all over.  He could easily have pushed out of Tony's grip on his wrists but he wouldn't dare- physically he could have but his brain would never allow it.  He was Tony's- however he wanted him.

He cried out as Tony bit into his neck and he felt ethereal.  Like he was floating.  Not really quite here.  Steve might have just orgasmed as the feeling of ecstasy washed over him and trembled down his spine.  But he honestly wasn't sure.  He moaned, only half hearing the sound himself as he clenched around Tony as the knot squeezed inside of him.  He panted at the stretch, taking it well but it was still overwhelming.

Was Tony moving?  Steve thought he was moving.  It all felt so fucking good.  So *right*.  He moaned again, eyes rolling back as his fingers clawed into the sheets under Tony's grasp.  He wasn't thinking.  He couldn't think.  All he could was take it, move with Tony as his back arched up prettily.

This was animalistic and raw.  This was everything Steve needed and he hadn't even known it until
this moment. He gasped and squirmed underneath him, his eyes glazed over and dark with just as Tony thrust into him. Words were lost to him right now.

Tony felt Steve arching into him, or at least he thought he did; his own back was arching with pleasure and he was biting Steve, pulling his neck and head back, so maybe Steve was merely moving with him; it was hard to tell where Tony ended and Steve began anymore. He could feel Steve's body tighten around him, pulling him in, accepting him; he could feel the tendons in Steve's wrists moving as Steve's hands flexed, open and closed; both of them were making noises, maybe; Tony bit hard, gripped harder, burying himself into Steve with desperation. He didn't even realize he'd hit orgasm until he was halfway through it, pumping himself in Steve, his whole body convulsing and twitching as he released himself. He was still jerking slightly, occasionally; Steve was filled up, filled with his seed, filled with his knot; Tony was suddenly aware, for the first time, that he was coated in sweat and was panting like a dog. He was still buried in Steve; he didn't try to pull out. Instead, he relaxed into it; he gave a few slow, pleasurable rolls of his hips, feeling how perfectly Steve sheathed him, how firmly his knot fit into the other man.

His brain was rebooting.

He should say something.

"Omega," said Tony.

Okay, not that.

"Steve," said Tony.

Closer.

Tony couldn't think of anything else to say. His grip on Steve's wrists had loosened, but he was still holding him, stroking the skin softly with his fingertips. He gave Steve a tender, playful bite on the ear and wiggled his hips, appreciating their position. He'd expected it this time. When he knew this happened, knotting, it was actually kind of fun.

He turned his head, resting a cheek between Steve's shoulders. He spotted the unopened box of condoms on the nightstand and snorted softly, feel giddy.

Steve whined in fake protest when Tony wiggled inside of him. Tony's knot stretched him out just right, leaving him feeling satisfied. The touch on his arms was so surprisingly soft considering everything else that had just happened that it made Steve shiver. Made him smile. He moaned when Tony rolled his hips too and he took a moment to appreciate how fucking hot it felt when the other came inside of him. Wait- hang on. Steve turned his head and blinked blearily at the night stand. He would have laughed if he had the energy. "That was eight dollars well spent," he mumbled into the pillow, words slow and lazy as he let his eyes slip shut again.

His neck throbbed with the new mark and Steve was pretty sure Tony had broken the skin. Good. He wanted it to mark. The pain was something Steve relished in, in that moment. He clenched around Tony once to pay him back for all his squirming and smirked when he heard a noise in response. "I think we did it right this time," he whispered against the sheets, a smile audible in his voice. He could feel Tony's chest rising and falling against his back, in sync with his own breaths.

Yeah...this was good. Right. It felt right. Felt like home.

"Yeah. Me too," said Tony happily. "That was... that was how it's done, huh?" He paused. "Steve? ...Steve, did we..."
A pause.

Tony was asking but he already knew the answer.

There was only one answer.

"Yeah." Steve filled in the silence when Tony trailed off, his voice gentle. "I think we did."

His neck ached in silent agreement.

Steve knew he should probably be freaking out about this. But in the last six months he'd literally been brought back from the dead, kept in quarantine, trained, sent undercover and now...this. His life was a whirlwind of new 21st century shit that didn't make sense. But this made sense. How good Tony felt inside of him...it was perfect. Steve was so glad he'd waited to share this moment with him.

Tony couldn't tell whether or not he was happy about this. He felt content, fulfilled... lying on top of Steve, still buried in him, he felt at home. But consciously Tony had never wanted this. Bonding, like marriage, was nothing something Tony saw himself doing even under pang of death. But most people eventually paired; it wasn't that big of a deal, right?

Just a lifelong commitment.

...a lifelong commitment to bone! Why would Tony be upset with being bonded to Steve? Steve was amazing. Steve's body did things to Tony's no one else's ever had. The blonde beta bimbos had been rendered obsolete; Tony didn't care about them anymore. He only wanted Steve. Steve was perfect for him. Probably. Come to think of it, they have known each other less than a week.

But, hey, smells didn't lie. Steve was Tony's. They had lots of time to get to know each other. In fact, this was practically what knotting was for.

"Vanilla or chocolate?" demanded Tony.

He blinked in surprise at the question. "Do you mean the ice cream?" He asked, not really sure why this was being brought up, but he would indulge Tony. He always would. "Vanilla, I guess? I dunno back in my day that was basically all you had. Now you have like a hundred different flavours a place. It's crazy." He yawned, feeling sleepy. The whiskey had totally worn off by now, not that it had much of an effect in the first place.

"Maybe we should sleep now and bond later? Ha...pun totally not intended there."

"Ha," repeated Tony, with equal grogginess. "...I like vanilla, too. ...chocolate is actually kind of gross. ...I like the kind with the little black specks in it, the beans, though, not the kind made from vanilla extract." He stroked Steve's arms. Such ridiculous biceps. But Steve had let Tony hold him down; while they'd been mating, Tony had felt physically superior; he'd felt... well, like an Alpha.

"You want covers or am I enough of a blanket for you?" asked Tony. "...actually, can you roll over so we're on our side? This is kind of a weird position... I think I like it frontways better... I mean..."
I mean, I only have two datapoints, we'll have to do a lot more fucking before I can really draw an unbiased conclusion."

Tony wrapped his arms around Steve's torso, shifting, trying to find the most natural position to lay in that didn't tug. How Steve could sleep when he was filled up was beyond Tony; he couldn't even imagine. He was respectable as far as length was concerned (six and three-quarters; regrettably, he'd never broken seven, although not for lack of trying) but girth-wise he was convinced he was well, well above average. (He had once attempted to demonstrate this using a water-displacement test, which was, in his opinion, a better measurement of overall penis size than merely length alone. Pepper had told him to stop pulling off his taxes and taken away the cup of water.)

"Datapoints?" Steve echoed with a soft laugh as they eased them onto their sides. He looked thoroughly amused. "Sounds like we have quite a study ahead of us," he murmured and he found himself growing curious. What would it feel like when Steve was on top and riding him? What would it feel like to use his mouth on Tony? When he was kneeling - Sleep, Steve reminded himself. You're tired, remember?

"Was it good for you? I don't know how it feels for omegas."

"I came," he assured him bemusedly and pressed back against Tony's chest. Steve smiled. "And you didn't hurt me in any ways I didn't like," he added mischievously, his eyes bright. "I don't know how to explain what it feels like it exactly but it feels good. Feeling full feels right, and it doesn't hurt. I'm surprisingly comfortable like this. You make me feel comfortable." Steve let his eyes slip shut. "And if you have to seriously ask if that was anything but the greatest then maybe you aren't as clever as everyone says you are," he said teasingly and clenched around Tony lightly as if to make his point.

Tony still inside of him was a claim, a reassurance. Steve felt oddly serene in a way he hadn't experienced before. It almost made him want to purr.

Tony let out a small, delighted whine when he felt Steve's muscles contract around him. "Careful, Rogers, if you get me hard again, we'll be stuck like this forever."

Actually, not a bad idea, if not for the fact that Tony was already thinking of all the different ways he was going to wreck Steve. Missionary: check. Front-to-back, traditional mating pose: check. Now they could get on to all the fun stuff.

Tony reached down awkwardly for the edge of the sheet; maneuvering inside of Steve was difficult. Was this a thing couples figured out with time? How to arrange themselves post-coitally so the knot didn't tug? Another thing Tony was inexperienced with.

He pulled the blanket over them and wrapped his arms around Steve's waist, settling his front against Steve's back. "...let me know if the reactor, you know, digs or cuts or anything," he said softly. He closed his eyes, breathing against Steve's back.

At least now he didn't have to worry about Sam. Steve was his.

"I'm your Alpha," he said. A small thrill ran through him.

Oh, just wait until the Expo, he thought suddenly. When Hammer saw Stan, the assistant, was actually Steve, the Captain, and that said Captain, national treasure, war hero, combat veteran, and freedom symbol, was Tony's omega... God, the guy was going to fucking lay down and die. Tony
found himself grinning at the fantasy.

And Pepper! Maybe once she saw that Tony could make a commitment, see how stabilized he was now, with his new omega, how awoken he was... surely she would forgive him and they could go back to being almost-dating. Hell, maybe this was the maturity leap that she had been waiting for. Maybe they would start actually dating.

Tony had a sudden, vivid mental image of himself on the deck of his yacht. (Tony had two, actually, the Something Classy and the Business; he had not realized you were supposed to name a boat, so when he obtained the first one, he'd responded to the question, "What will you name her?" with "I don't know... something classy?" He had prepared for the second yacht christening, however; Business was named so that Tony could legitimately and truthfully inform the board that he couldn't attend meetings because he was "away on Business," meaning that he was adrift somewhere in the Pacific, drunk and trying to nail a pair of Swedish Olympic gymnasts.)

In his fantasy, it was a bright California day and they were just off the coast. Tony had one arm around Pepper as she curled against him in a string bikini, while Steve lazed next to him on a deck chair, tanned, muscled torso gleaming in the sun, hand outstretched, their fingers loosely laced together... yes, that was the life Tony wanted... he added a glass of scotch to the mental image and some sunscreen for Pepper's benefit; she would probably burn even in a fantasy.

Perfect.

Almost... almost as perfect as reality, being snuggled into Steve's bed, their breaths and heartbeats in sync.

Tony kissed Steve between his shoulders again and yawned, drifting off into the happy fantasy he'd drawn up for himself. With the problem of the arc reactor solved, and Edward Whippyhands dead (he'd seen it in the news before getting a call from the GIGN; Ivan had been killed from an IED blast during a failed prison escape, the body burned beyond recognition), Tony Stark was once again on top, ready to take on the world. His omega was Captain fucking America. Nothing and no one could possibly stand in his way.

Steve drifted off into a deep, deep sleep. He didn't usually sleep so well anymore. He often went through the plane crash over and over, went through his lungs filling up with ice water and his fingers turning blue. He went through the fear of dying slowly and alone and desperate. The burning cold pain of everything-

But not tonight. In fact, Steve didn't dream at all and it was goddamn perfect. He hadn't slept so well since waking up in the 21st century in the first place.
The sleep he had after they'd mated was perfect and uninterrupted, and it was just what the doctor had ordered. Steve had not been sleeping as well as he normally did because of his test on Wednesday, the one that would make or break his chances of being assigned to more serious missions for SHIELD. Steve knew the physical side of the test would be easy; he’d pass, no problem, with flying colors. But the mental test...Steve was scared to see how far they’d push it. They didn't just rely on psyche evaluations; they had new technology now, technology that let them go into your brain, implant dreams, watch them like they were movies. Steve had seen it done once before; they injected the subject with a drug (who knew what), sat them in a chair with dozens of electrodes over their head, and monitored everything from cortisol levels to the lucid, mental reaction of the person in the simulation. The test could simulate an almost infinite number of different scenarios. It was clever, he’d give them that, but it also meant SHIELD could see how Steve responded when he was dying, because in that machine, he would think he actually was. Steve was still getting used to microwaves; SHIELD's top-level, cutting-edge technology was frightening to him.

But any fears he had were kept at bay when he slept beside Tony. His mate.

Steve woke with a groan at a loud beeping sound. Tony was soft inside of him and when he rolled over the Alpha slipped out. Steve winced and the ringing continued. He felt around on the bed stand blindly and pressed the phone to his ear after dragging across the little green bar. "Mph, hello?" Steve ran a hand over his face and through his hair.

The other line was quiet for a few seconds. "Steve...is that you?"

Steve blinked and a terrifying realisation washed over him. It was Tony's phone he just answered and now Pepper was on the line and she knew that they were together in the same place at ten in the morning...

Tony rolled into the spot Steve had just vacated, pulling the blanket with him, burrito-ing himself in Steve's bed. He opened his eyes lazily, stared at Steve with glassy, unfocused, mumbled cryptically "The blast radius is perfectly reasonable, Obes," and then closed them again. It took Steve a moment to realize that Tony was still asleep.

"Steve, where are you? Is Tony there? I know he's not at home because Happy just went over to find him. Is he okay? ...Steve?" demanded Pepper. There was neither anger nor confusion in her tone, yet. Just pure professionalism. Being Tony's PA for a decade had left her with a perfect poker face and voice to match.

On the other line, Pepper was seated at her desk; she was on her third cup of tea and had been at work since six on the dot. Her knowledge of Tony's whereabouts had been woefully inadequate the last few days; since Monaco, she felt she'd earned a break. As far as she knew, Tony had insisted on throwing a party, half-demolished his house, estranged his best friend, possibly given
up the suit design (she had the S.I. patent lawyers on speed dial), disappeared for two days, and, if social media was to be believed, had recently been spotted in a bar in Koreatown, where he had bought everyone free drinks and nearly beaten up someone (in some versions he'd attacked him with a spoon) for no discernible reason.

Pepper was having an increasingly difficult time putting up with Tony. She cared about him, inexplicably; he was self-absorbed and immature and often downright rude, but he was also a brilliant person who cared about the company, cared about social issues (despite pretending not to), and a hell of a lot of fun. That being said, over the last year, Tony's actions had twisted from "eccentric" to "self-destructive." His usual neuroses and compulsions (and there were plenty) had spiraled out of control and at this point, Pepper felt that, unless he was dying, his behavior had passed the line from eccentric to inexcusable. She had called to try to rein him in again, since it was his name on the side of her building and he was making Stark Industries look bad; she had been ready to have a firm, possibly aggressive argument. But hearing Steve on the other line had disarmed her. She would have been able to handle the sleepy voice of some ditzy woman half Tony's age; she was used to that.

But Steve?

"I don't know," Steve said after a beat, unsure of how to answer all of her questions or in which order. "I mean-- yes, Tony is here. He's fine. I mean. Physically, yes." Although that had been a close call. "He's only had one drink in the past like...thirty-six hours." Which was seriously a good record for Tony Stark. Steve would be happy about it if he knew this wasn't all part of a much bigger issue.

Pepper was quiet. "He's been with me last few days," Steve filled in the silence, feeling like he had to say something and offer up some kind of explanation. Had Pepper seen the papers? Of course she had. She knew Captain America was alive. But the thing is a busy woman like her might not have seen the pictures themselves. Did she know Steve was a liar?

He swallowed and clutched the phone a little tighter. Steve spared a sleeping Tony one last look before tugging on a pair of boxer shorts. "Have you read--" It felt so egotistical to ask. And Steve liked to think he wasn't that. "Do you know about me?" he asked finally, apprehensive of the answer.

There was a pause on Pepper's line. "Yes," she said. "...and I owe you an apology, Captain Rogers. You barely changed your name, and you didn't change your appearance. But because you're an omega, I never even considered... I'm sorry. We all like to think we're better than that, but I suppose even the best of us hold some subconscious prejudice." She sighed. "I take it you were there to tail Tony? Get the suit designs? Which department sent you?"

"I'm from SHIELD," Steve said quietly. Technically, that was classified, but it felt like Pepper had a right to know after Steve had manipulated her like he did. "And I never sent over any designs but they did ask me to, for the record." Steve almost smiled. "I was just sent to see if Tony was right for the Avengers Initiative."

"The what?"

"A team of... uh... well... remarkable people, Fury calls us. Superheroes? Kinda. I guess. I dunno."

"Did you say Tony was with you? Is he in trouble? Can you put him on?" she asked. Still, there was no anger in her voice, nor surprise. Virtually everyone had an ulterior motive. Tony was rich and powerful, with access to cutting-edge weapons and resources. Finding out his PA had been a plant was disappointing but not unexpected. Finding out the government was trying to recruit him
for some weird team was also not unexpected.

Tony was curled into an impossibly small ball with a mountain of sheets enveloping him. "Titanium's boiling point is like three higher than samarium," he informed Steve groggily. He sounded like he might be waking up. "And that's why Rhodey can't sing Stevie's part." Or not. Even in his sleep, Tony's brain clearly jumped tracks smoothly and frequently. His eyes opened groggily again and he smiled at Steve. "My omega," he murmured lovingly, closing them again and curling up even tighter.

Steve smiled at Tony's rambling, his expression softening.

"Tony's okay. I promise," Steve murmured. "But he's asleep right now and he needs it. So I'd rather not wake him." He untangled their fingers and left the bedroom. "But I'll get him to call you after breakfast," he assured her as he sank down onto his sofa, legs tucked under himself. "And you don't owe me an apology, really. Everyone thought I was dead, after all. So did I. Beside, SHIELD put me there to be undercover, so I'll take it as a compliment that you didn't recognize--"

"SHIELD?" repeated Pepper. The name had rung a bell when Steve had said it earlier; it suddenly clicked where she'd heard that before. "Ah. One of Coulson's people. I always did like him. Wait, did you say superhero? Please! Tony can barely even feed himself. ...where are you, Steve? And how did you possibly get him to agree to one drink in thirty-six hours?" Before Steve could answer, she cut herself off. "Damn it, Hammer's on the other line again. I'll call later. Please tell Tony I need him to give a statement about the party he threw and we need to discuss how to fix his home; I have a few contractors on retainer. And because I know he'll ask, yes, I am, mad. Furious, in fact. Good-bye, Steve."

With that, she hung up. The room was quiet. Tony, Steve had already learned, bounced between periods of excessive sleep and periods of no sleep at all. Currently, with his life running smoothly, he'd crashed, his body trying to make up for the damage of stress it had accumulated over the several months. Not to mention the palladium poisoning. The rash around Tony's arc reactor was fading away; soon there would be no trace of it. It occurred to Steve that he and the other Avengers were the only ones who had ever known that Tony was dying.

As outlandish and extroverted as Tony was, he was remarkably private in his own way. To this day, virtually no one knew what, precisely, had happened in Afghanistan. Tony's SHIELD file had been woefully inadequate, the dossier half-filled and padded out with information about his father and girlfriends rather than the man himself. Tony slipped on the persona of a shallow hedonist every day and rarely acted as anything else; shutting down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries two years ago, and giving a press release on accountability, was one of the few raw moments when everyone saw the real him, and saw something he cared about. Moments like those were not at all typical, though.

Steve went and cooked them breakfast. It was pancakes, his mother's recipe. He still remembered how he used to peek over the top of the counter in his young age and listened intently as his mother explained how to make them as fluffy as possible. So he made them sweet and fluffy and dropped pieces of banana and blueberry on top before following with maple syrup. The access to all sorts of fruits, even in winter, was mind-boggling to Steve; it felt like just yesterday he was living in a world of ration cards. Breakfast smelled good; Steve was sure Tony must be awake by now.

He brought one big plate in for both of them and smiled at Tony's dozy expression as he saw Steve in just his underwear with a mountain of pancakes in hand and two forks. "Hey," he murmured and moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

Tony practically purred when Steve came in, looking like an Adonis, wearing virtually nothing and
bearing food.

He set the plate and cutlery down on the bedside for now. "You want food?" He asked softly.

Steve reached a hand across the bed. "Pepper called. She's worried. You should call her back."

Tony reached for his hand, placing his over Steve's. "Pepper's always worried. I'll call her back after breakfast."

Tony's stomach twisted uncomfortably when he looked at the food. He reached for a fork and realized his hands were shaking, hard.

"...I, uh, I'm actually not that hungry. Not all of us have metabolisms like yours. Just coffee is fine," said Tony awkwardly, withdrawing his hand. The more he woke up, the more aware he was becoming of how desperately he needed a drink. Not because he was stressed or sad. No, quite the opposite. If anything he was drinking to celebrate how well everything was going. "It looks amazing, though, really," he added graciously.

And it did. Tony would have loved to eat his way through a stack of waffles, but he doubted his ability to keep anything but whiskey or coffee down at the moment. His mind turned back to Sean-Down-The-Hall. He wondered if he should go over commandeer another bottle of wine, and ask some questions about bonding. After all, Steve had Leo, why shouldn't Tony have a random stranger to ask questions to? But Tony couldn't think of any questions to ask at the moment. Everything felt right. Everything felt fine. It was only when Tony found himself accidentally knotted in Steve that the questions arose, and that was hardly the right time to be asking them.

Tony pushed away the blankets-- he was sweating-- and sat up dizzily. "Look, Steve, I need a drink. I'm just gonna run down to the liquor store real quick and grab something, okay?" He leaned forward and kissed Steve's temple. "I'll miss you," he added. The words sounded gooey to him but he couldn't help but utter them; they were true.

Tony knew pair-bonds went through a "honeymoon" phase when they were almost inseparable (and unbearable to nearly everyone else). This must be what that felt like. Just looking at Steve flooded Tony with affection.

But he couldn't ignore the shaking of his hands. Tony took great pride in having steady hands.

"Hey-" Steve stood as Tony did. His brow was knotted tightly in concern. He reached out and took Tony's shaking hands in his own. "Tony, it's ten in the morning," he said softly, his point clear. He squeezed. "Please don't go out and get a drink. It won't make you feel better- sure, in the short term it will, but in the long term, it won't. You nearly died once. I can't watch you hurt yourself all over again." And Steve wasn't sure he literally could. It would kill him to watch Tony start drinking at ten in the morning.

"How about we go have a bath, yeah?" He asked gingerly. "Then you can call Pepper whilst I reheat the pancakes and make us coffee, and you can eat and drink as much as you think can manage. You only had one drink last night and I'm so proud you for it." The tone of Steve's voice proved he meant it. "Please don't make that all for nothing."

The back of Steve's neck throbbed.

"You just mated me, for real. You're not seriously gonna run off to go just get a drink now?" Steve asked, sounding almost timid as if he were afraid of the answer.

Tony squeezed Steve's hands back. They felt warm in his, or maybe his were just cold.
He couldn't stand to disappoint his omega. No. Not now that they had mated, he couldn't just rush off. But the agony of waiting for a drink...

"Noon?" asked Tony. "Can I drink at noon?"

Tony was realizing something. The power dynamic was not as one-sided as he'd always assumed. Yes, he was the Alpha, he was in charge. But when Steve asked something of him, the crushing desire not to disappoint, to give his omega everything... it was powerful. Tony was as much at Steve's mercy as Steve was at his.

How to explain to Steve that he'd been drinking for nearly thirty years, daily, and that alcohol was his go-to for joy, sorrow, boredom, anxiety, everything? That not drinking had become painful, a shaky, sweaty, nauseous experience that Tony would much rather avoid? He had been drunk at his party, but that had been what, three nights ago? Since then he'd only had the one drink, and now he was being hit with withdrawal, hard.

But the prospect of seeing Steve sad was so much worse.

"Okay. Okay, a bath, then breakfast. But at noon, please, Steve... please. Just a couple of drinks, okay?" said Tony, trying not to let too much desperation crawl into his voice.

No way he could call Pepper back like this. She, too, got on his case for drinking a lot.

But neither of them understood.

Tony had always been a drinker; after Afghanistan he'd crossed the threshold into "functional alcoholic." Afghanistan had changed everything.

"Okay. We can go out and get Italian. Okay." Steve whispered and pulled Tony against his chest. On instinct he was hugging him, wrapping his arms around Tony tightly. There was something in his Alpha's eyes, a pain he wanted to be able to fix. "But have one drink with lunch and one with dinner?" He asked, knowing it would lessen the damage if Tony drank with food. Steve pulled back a fraction. "If you can do that," he whispered into Tony's ear, words slow and teasing. "I'll let you do whatever you want to me in between."

Steve stepped back with a shiny look in his blue eyes. "I'm gonna go run a bath, yeah?" He said as he grabbed a pancake, rolling it up and devouring it in about two bites. He was a good cook when he wanted to be. "Maybe shoot Pepper a text now, if you want to..." he suggested tentatively.

Steve offered a small but genuine smile. "I'll just go run that bath now."

Tony hugged Steve back, nuzzling into his strong, broad chest. He shivered when Steve whispered into his ear, but couldn't quite shake the anxiety that always accompanied sobriety. Two drinks? In a whole day? Tony needed a damned bottle. But Steve seemed so happy and he couldn't stand to take that away, so he nodded slightly. They could bargain later.

"Okay. I'll meet you in the bathroom," said Tony. "...I assume you're coming with me," he added.

He dug through his discarded clothes, looking for his phone.

How to communicate to Pepper all the wonderful things that had happened? A new heart. His own omega. A second chance.

> Hey, Pepperoni, how's tricks?

The moment Tony hit "send" he had a sneaking suspicion that Pepper might not be thrilled with his
text. Oh well. Once she saw him and he had the opportunity to explain everything, he was sure it would be fine.

He padded into the bathroom to find Steve; he was perched on the edge of the tub, testing the water, making sure it wasn't too cold or too hot. Tony's heart swelled with affection. He sat delicately beside Steve and rested his chin on his shoulder, slipping his arms around the other's waist. "I can't believe I did that. ...I can't believe I did you. Dad's probably rolling in his grave," murmured Tony. He gave Steve's neck a slow, gentle kiss. Despite his words, he was too love-drunk to actually feel any real concern. No. There wasn't a single ounce of doubt in Tony's mind. He felt like he should be freaking out-- *he'd just bonded!* -- but there was none of that. Mostly, he just felt happy. Being around Steve was an all-encompassing feeling of wellness, one that overwhelmed any misgivings Tony might have had. Even with Pepper and Rhodey being mad at him, he still couldn't feel much trepidation.

The only real thing that was killing him was the withdrawal. Tony had detoxed a number of times and it was always hell. He figured he'd negotiate with Steve later for more drinks; two would do virtually nothing.

"It's kind of been a relief," Steve admitted softly and leant his head on top of Tony's. "It felt kind of pointless. Like... being alive. All my friends are dead or can't remember me properly." His heart ached when he thought of Peggy. "This was all so screwed up. Like I didn't even have a place. But this...with you." Steve sighed quietly, contently. His eyes slipped shut. "It makes sense. It means that I was supposed to be here for a reason. That I didn't end up here for nothing. It was worth it-- nearly dying was worth it."

He laughed. "Sorry." It was a happy sound. "That's a lot to lay onto someone, isn't it? I don't mean to put pressure on you or anything. I'm just grateful...that you've made me think I can find a home here."

"Yeah, no pressure," said Tony, chuckling softly. He kissed the top of Steve's head. "By all rights I should be freaking out about this, but, uh... I don't know. Ever since we mated, I can't... I can't really feel that stuff. It's weird, right? Nothing can touch me. How long do you think this high lasts? I don't know a damn thing about bonding. What, one or two weeks? ...gross. Can you imagine Clint and Natasha when they were all lovey-dovey?"

Tony lapsed into silence suddenly. He was thinking of another pair, his father and Jarvis. Jarvis had been an immortal fixture in the Stark household. He'd been around long, long before Tony; old pictures of his father often had Jarvis hovering in the background. They'd known each other since what; the forties? Tony wondered when they had bonded. He wondered if Howard had met and married his mother before or after that; if Jarvis had met and married Ana before or after that. Back in those days, it was rare for an omega to have normal relationships. If they married, it would be with their Alpha or with another omega. Jarvis and Ana had had a childless marriage, and now Tony knew why.

Only one or two generations ago, omegas had not truly been treated as people. There were a ton of establishments they were barred from, positions they couldn't hold. Education was denied to them. No one thought it was unjust; it was just that omegas were seen as being put on the earth to serve Alphas, to bear and raise children, to submit happily once they were bonded. The idea of an omega who wanted to *choose* was unheard of. Even in Tony's very limited experience, Jarvis had never offered many personal desires or opinions; he lived as an extension of Howard, aligning his belief system's with Howard's and, generally, agreeing with most of his stances.
Tony wondered if Steve would start doing that.

He didn't know what most of Steve's political stances were. Did Steve know his? Truthfully, they didn't know each other well. They both knew what they had read. But Tony's knowledge of Captain America wasn't any good; after all, the government had failed to mention that he was an omega; clearly, they had whitewashed Captain America's figure for propaganda purposes. And whatever Steve had read about Tony, well... Tony kept secrets. A lot of them. He was a method actor; he put on a mask every time he went out in public, because people expected him to be a certain way and he didn't dare show them otherwise.

Somehow, Tony suspected that, no matter how bonded they were, Steve would always maintain his positions. That he and Tony would have friendly, loving debates when they disagreed, but that Steve wouldn't ever back down. That was Steve in a nutshell, and Tony loved him for it.

How hard it must have been to be a stubborn, assertive, type-A omega back in Steve's time.

"Steve?" asked Tony, trailing his fingers through the water. "I'm glad you're in this century, even though I know it's probably real hard. Because... because omegas get treated a lot better here. I know it's not perfect- not by a long shot- but... back in the forties... hell. Now you can go to college and buy a house and vote and everything. And I know I'm not the most progressive guy in the world, but I always thought omegas got a tough break." A pause. "I mean, I know how they get treated." Another pause. "They treated me like an omega. In Afghanistan."

Steve was quiet for a while as he let those last words sink in. Let the real meaning clear into his mind. He wordlessly reached over and took Tony's hand, squeezing his fingers around the other's. A strange dull sort of rage uncoiled in his belly and made him almost squirm. It made Steve want to pepper Tony's face with kisses and punch a wall at the same time. But he was scared of saying the wrong thing, so he was quiet for a while. He was here, with Tony. That was what counted.

Eventually Steve spoke up. "I won't let anyone hurt you ever again," he whispered in a promise and pressed a kiss to Tony's temple. A few seconds of silence followed. "It nearly killed me, watching Vanko out on the racetrack. I wanted to do something. I knew I could have had him down in seconds. But I didn't want to blow my cover. If you'd gotten killed I don't think I could have ever of forgiven myself."

Maybe it was against the stereotype. Alphas were supposed to protect their mates. But Steve felt it went both ways- they were both responsible for each other. He would die for Tony in a heartbeat. Maybe that made him a little insane. But he was okay with being a little insane for Tony.

Steve straightened up as he let out a soft sigh. He tried for a smile. "Come on," he murmured. "Water's getting cold."

Tony forced a smile and looked up at Steve. "Trust me, the situation with Vanko was totally under control," he joked. "Whips McGee didn't stand a chance. Anyway, he was the only other guy in the world who knew how to build an arc reactor, and he's dead, so... everything is hunky-dory."

He looked down and cleared his throat, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "...I never told anyone about that, what happened, two years ago. It's ancient history, right? ...but, uh... if you could, you know, not tell anyone. That would be great." A pause. "The guy that did it is dead," he added. Another pause. "He didn't bite me. He used a cigarette. That's why I quit. So, really, I owe him one, I mean, you know how bad cigarettes are for you... not that I smoked a lot... well, the important thing is, they didn't get any of my weapon designs. That's what they wanted." Tony looked up at Steve suddenly with a look of fierce pride. "There was nothing they could've done for me to build those weapons for them. Nothing. And trust me, they tried damn near everything... they stopped when I finally started building something. But it wasn't for them. It was for me.
And thus..." Tony gestured dramatically. "Iron Man was born from the ashes."

Tony paused. "In retrospect, Phoenix would have been a better name than Iron Man, but Iron Man came with a ready-made theme song, so, you know, that's the name I went with." He cracked a grin. "I'm a sucker for Ozzy. ...are you getting in the bath or not? Omegas first." He kissed Steve's shoulder.

Even now, even with Steve, Tony couldn't drop his sarcastic, easily distractible sense of humor. No. He'd never been able to drop it. Just as he hadn't shed a tear when his parents died, Tony had never fully let up joking about the ninety-six days he had been held captive. He didn't know what would come out if he did. Besides, he'd never really had the time. After his escape, it had been a whirlwind of press conferences and board meetings and trying to set his life in order again, and he'd never just sat down and thought about it. Nor had he wanted to. Tony preferred to compartmentalize things, and he happened to be very good at it.

Steve had a newfound level of admiration for Tony. Something swelled in his chest. He ached for the pain his Alpha had been through but was still enamoured by how strongly he'd pushed through it and beyond. Tony didn't complain or wallow in self-pity. He got on with it. He fought back. Steve loved that about him.

Love. Such an overwhelming and ambiguous thing before now. But being with Tony made it seem so simple. He nudged their noses together with a faint smile. "I'm glad you felt you could tell me," he murmured and then slipped away to settle in the bath.

There wasn't much space so they ended up sat at either end with their legs tangled together lazily and heads tilted back. They filled the water with a mango soap. It smelt sweet, almost pungently so.

"Where are we gonna go for lunch?" Steve asked Tony curiously, head tilted. "Apparently food is much better now but I've never really experienced more than a takeaway. As much as I love spending time with Clint, he's not the most cultured of people."

"Mm... where ever you want, baby," murmured Tony, luxuriating in the warm water, trailing his fingers through the bubbles. He cracked one eye open lazily at Steve. "I promised you Italian. We can do Italian. I know some good sushi places. They say sushi is a good aphrodisiac." He closed the eyes, melting a little further into the bath, rubbing one of his legs against Steve's. "Vegan food is a thing now. Vegan is, uh, no meat. Or anything from animals, no eggs, no milk, there's a place called Real Food Daily in Hollywood that's pretty hot... mm... Indian is good... mmmm... there's a Himalayan joint on Venice that's got yak... honest-to-God yak, Steve. Best Mexican in town's El Coyote... you want traditional, we can go to Swingers... whatever, Steve, I don't care. I'm not picky."

Tony seemed to go on about food for a while; his eyes lit up as he spoke. It was cute. "The only word I understood in all of that is vegan, I think," admitted Steve. One of his doctors had been vegan when he'd just gotten out of the ice, their colleagues had given them shit for it in the lab. He'd liked their sense of humour, the way they all joshed around with each other; it had reminded him of the Howling Commandos. "But you said Italian. So I want Italian."

Tony smiled lazily. "I gotta admit, I like Barton. He's fun." Tony stretched slightly, running a knee against Steve's thigh. "You think they'll let me on the Dream Team? ...I mean, they wouldn't've had you tailing me unless they thought I would be a good asset, right?" Tony's voice softened. "I wanna stay with you. Steve, with my resources, we'd be unstoppable. And your crew is in serious need of an upgrade, I mean, look, it's you three, and as far as I can tell, you've got you and Natasha punching shit and you've got Clint shooting bows and arrows. You need a technical
guy. Me." He gestured to himself with a soft splash. "You wrote me a good review, right, and I mean, the suit is ready to rock-and-roll... I got nothing else going on in my life... I can start Monday, right? Sign me up for the field test. The suit can do anything you can do. Probably more, honestly. Yeah. You take your test, and, uh, I can take one, y'know, like right after, and we'll start together, right?"

"Natasha and Clint want you on the team because you'll be good for the team," Steve assured him quickly. "And we also have Sam, but he isn't around currently. He can fly too, actually. Though not quite as quick as you can," he breathed, letting their legs nudge together. His expression was relaxed, peaceful even. The warm water felt nice on his bones, his muscles. God, he needed to work out more now. As Tony's PA he hadn't really had the time. He'd managed a daily jog and a bi-weekly trip to the Stark gym. Sometimes he'd even met Happy in there and they'd checked each other. But now he had to start his proper routine all over again.

"My report on you was honest," Steve said. "So yes, it was good. And it was fair too. But...if you're serious about getting on the team then you have to accept you're gonna see me in danger. You gonna see me hurt. You gonna see me hurt other people. And I want you to think about if you can deal with that."

He sat up. "Lemme wash you," he said with sudden earnestness. He put a gentle hand to the back of Steve's neck and tugged him forward, brushing wet locks of blond hair off his forehead. He studied Steve's face intently, memorizing every feature. No fucking way he was going to let them send Steve alone on any "real missions." Granted, Steve was a soldier and Tony was, strictly speaking, a rich, spoiled businessman... but Tony felt like he'd already demonstrating some fantastic grace under pressure. Hell, the Vanko thing alone was surely enough for him to get in, right?

"You could pull strings. You got leverage," he murmured as he began working his fingers into Steve's scalp, shampooing him. "You and Fury had a falling out. Tell him you'll forgive him if he'll put me on the fast-track to join. You can even use me as a consultant or whatever... I just wanna be there. Y'know, in case you guys can't solve a problem by punching it." Steve's head lolled under his hands. "I know what you're thinking: blah blah blah, Fury was spying on me, but hey, look, you were spying on me, too. Forgive and forget if it'll get me on the team. ...I wanna be there with you, Steve."

He tilted Steve's head back and began trickling water over his head and down his back, his expression one of intense concentration. He'd never cared for another person before and he tackled it with the sort of intensity he usually reserved for electronic problems.

Steve purred in delight as Tony washed and rinsed through his hair, his fingers scratching over Steve's scalp delightfully. He let his eyes slip shut. "Mph. I'm not apologising. He needs me. If I say you're on the team, you're on the team. I can basically do what I want."

"Basically do what you want?" repeated Tony. "A man after my own heart. I, too, have been known to do whatever I want. You, for example." He smiled down at Steve, running his fingers through the other's hair, rinsing him off. "Do I have to call you Captain? I wanna join the team. I wanna be there, Steve. Iron Man could use a couple of sidekicks."

"You should call me Captain. On the battlefield I won't be your omega, Tony." Steve leaned into his touch and sat up in the bath, his expression softening a little. "I'll be your leader. I'm not expecting you to follow my every word. But someone has to be in control of a situation. Not following orders can sometimes have grim consequences." He eyes glazed over a little, like he was remembering something. Steve shook his head and was smiling again. "And no ass slapping out on
the field, either."

A pause. "I can handle it, Steve, I can handle anything. I'll Avenge so hard, it'll make your head spin." Tony drew back, examining Steve's hair with the sort of critical look he normally used for engines, making sure he'd gotten all the suds out. He smiled. Yes. Perfect.

Tony couldn't imagine seeing Steve in battle but he was sure it would be fine. Maybe. Probably. He didn't mind seeing Steve hurting someone else, at least. So he was halfway there. And once he saw Steve kick ass in his field test (Tony was sure Steve would kick ass), he would be reassured that Steve could handle himself.

He'd felt a small twinge of annoyance at the mention of Sam. Another Alpha. One who could fly. Flying was Tony's gimmick. Tony hadn't met Sam but he had an inkling that Sam was probably one of those incredibly dominant Alphas, like Natasha. Military men often were. Tony had never felt intimidated before by more dominant Alphas, but suddenly he felt hyper-aware of the ingrained social hierarchy and, worse, aware that he wasn't especially dominant himself. He couldn't help but envy Sam for having more in common with Steve (after all, they were both military men) and for knowing Steve before him.

This was yet another reason Tony was itching the join the team. Not just to protect Steve, but to prove to Steve he wasn't just a spoiled brat in a business suit. He could get low and dirty, he could throw and take a punch. He wanted to prove to Steve that he was more than capable of protecting them, of being a good Alpha who could assert himself and throw down when it was time for that sort of thing. Tony wasn't sure what Sam's deal was but he was confident his suits would blow Sam's gear out of the water.

"You're all done," said Tony lovingly, running a hand down Steve's jaw tenderly. "Italian now?"

He leaned forward to kiss Tony once he was clean, smiling against his lips. "Italian," he hummed in soft agreement. Steve stole another kiss, slower and deeper this time as he licked into Tony's mouth. Then they were parting for air, breathless and pink.

After the bath they dried off and dressed. After some quick consultation with Tony, Steve dressed in black pants and a white shirt with his casual navy jacket on top so he didn't look like he was making too much of an effort.

"You wanna call for a taxi or take my bike?" Steve asked as they headed into the lift of his apartment block.

"Bike," said Tony immediately. "What is that, a Triumph?" He stuck his hand out automatically for the keys, then realized Steve planned on driving.

He'd felt a little odd ever since Steve had said he wouldn't be Tony's omega on the battlefield. The fuck did that mean? Tony had mated him, fair and square. Steve was his omega at all times, wasn't he? Even though Tony hadn't initially wanted an omega, now that he found himself with one, he had a certain set of expectations. And Steve was breaking all those, and then some.

He dropped his outstretched hand, staring at Steve. He'd never ridden on the back of a motorcycle before; he owned eight bikes, currently, and took a lot of joy in riding them, although less now that he had the suits. As fun as a motorcycle was, it was really nothing compared to the speed and maneuverability and freedom he felt in the exos.

"Look, Steve... I'm a modern guy, okay, but..." But what? But he didn't want Steve to be his "leader." Tony was his own leader. He didn't like being bossed around. Especially by a omega.
Especially by his omega. He could practically already hear Natasha laughing at him. Talk about being castrated. He'd wanted to correct Steve the moment he had said it, earlier, in the bathroom, but then Steve had been kissing him and Tony's mind had gone blank. That sweet tongue, those soft lips... Steve had a remarkable ability to shut him up.

Tony heaved a sigh. "Okay. Fine. You drive. I'll ride bitch. But only because I lo-- because it's your bike." A pause. Tony looked down at his feet. "Hey, but, Steve... about earlier, what you said, about not being my omega in battle... even when you're not my omega, I mean, you're still my omega, right?"

Tony looked so forlorn something tugged in Steve's gut. He moved forward in an instant. "Hey," he whispered and moved to cup Tony's face, tilting his head up so their eyes could meet. "I'll always be yours," he whispered against his lips. "And what we have can only make us stronger." The look in his eyes proved he meant it. "But I know it goes against your nature to follow me. I know that won't be easy for you, maybe a little embarrassing...but it shouldn't be. If my status doesn't matter then no one else's does."

"And...at the end of the day." Steve ran his long fingers through Tony's hair. "We'll still come home together." He nipped at his bottom lip. "And I'll still kneel for you. Do whatever you want, for you. But in the fight we have to be professional, because lives are on the line. Including our own." He pecked his lips before pulling back.

"And...if you think about it, this is the position we were in earlier," Steve pointed out to try and cheer him up as he passed Tony a helmet before putting on his own. He got on first, Tony pressed up behind him on the seat. Steve smiled when he felt arms around his waist and revved up the engine. After his Alpha gave him the address he was headed out of the apartment block car park and onto the road.

Steve loved riding a bike. He loved the power between his thighs and the speed. He was, undeniably, an adrenaline junkie. He felt free like this, even with Tony's arms around him. He felt better. Some days Steve was often tempted to just...ride. Ride as far as he could go and never turn back. But now he had a real reason to stay.

Tony half-closed his eyes as Steve kissed and caressed him, letting the words wash over him. Steve said he would kneel for him. They'd go home together. That's all that mattered.

Steve said he would kneel for him. They'd go home together. That's all that mattered.

He wasn't embarrassed. No, of course not, logically, Steve was a captain, a veteran with years of tactical combat experience.

Against my nature? thought Tony. Psh. Tony didn't believe in nature. That was stupid. He was sure he could control himself; he was a logical person. Following Steve would be easy, no problem at all.

He got on the bike after Steve with a small laugh at Steve's comment. "Yeah, I'll try not to get us stuck like this this time around," he said, slipping his arms around Steve's waist. Steve gave it a few revs and then they roared out of the garage. Steve, Tony discovered, rode similarly to how he did. Even though the bike was a cruiser, Steve treated it like a sports bike, taking turns sharply and maneuvering traffic with superhuman reflexes. Tony had to admit, being perched on the back and not in control was its own brand of fun. He kept his arms wrapped tightly around Steve, pressing into his back, admiring the flexing of his muscles every time he swerved or shifted. Tony never...not in a million years- would have guessed he was an omega by looking at him, not now, in the jacket and the helmet, riding like he'd been born on a motorcycle. Tony felt proud of him. He was almost looking forward to the field test of Wednesday; he was curious what Steve looked like,
unleashed. Everyone talked about Captain America doing crazy stuff like flipping cars and outrunning tanks and leaping from helicopters without a parachute; Tony had trouble picturing Steve doing those things and he was interested to know how many of the legends were true.

"TURN HERE!" he hollered suddenly, realizing they were missing a turn.

Steve responded almost before Tony had finished talking; a second later, they came to a sharp stop almost perfectly in front of the restaurant, Il Cielo. It was surprisingly small; it looked more like a house than a restaurant. The front patio was all brick and there were several small tables covered in white table cloths; the steep eaves were hung with strings of fairy lights, giving it the air of a small village fete instead of a restaurant. A large window showed a cozy interior.

"Wait 'til you see the courtyard!" said Tony cheerfully as Steve cut the engine. He pulled off his helmet and ran his fingers through his messy hair.

The place was perfect. It was small enough so that they wouldn't be recognised easily and looked family run going by the lights outside. Steve took Tony's hand once their helmets and hair were off and fixed and let his alpha lead him through to the courtyard out the back.

There was a collection of tables and chairs. The courtyard was covered in a blue canopy that draped over small arches they were entwined with vine leaves. It was a gorgeous and homely place and it made something seize in Steve's chest. He squeezed Tony's hand.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, can I get you a table?" A waiter appeared before them, menus at the ready. Tony said something and they were being lead to an intimate table for the two of them. The menu looked nice but Steve knew he was already getting lasagna. And garlic bread. And more lasagna. "This is nice," Steve murmured and nudged a foot against Tony's under the table. "Really. This is... perfect, actually."

"Aaand for the record." Steve almost felt sheepish and set his menu down so he wouldn't feel tempted to hide behind it. "I've never actually been on a date before," he admitted. "So I don't quite know how this works. Aside from food and conversation...I guess it's a lot of firsts this week."

Tony nudged Steve's foot back. "This is a date?" he said with surprise, looking around. He seemed to notice the decor for the first time.

He looked back at Steve. In Steve's days, omegas and Alphas didn't "date." Their relationships tended to be more closely described as servant and master. Tony looked down at the wine menu; the light was dim; without a second thought, he tugged down the collar of his shirt and used his arc reactor to read it.

"This isn't a date?" Steve felt himself panic. Dating was normal now, for everyone, right? Natasha had told him so. Clint even explained the 'three date rule.' Ha. That was out the window.

"If this is a date, I'm getting a bottle of Malbec," he informed Steve. He set the menu aside, paused, and then reached across the table to entwine their hands. "...I've only been here once before," he said, looking up at the strings of lights over the courtyard. "Years ago. I was with a girl named Beth. Didn't work out. I always liked this place, but, ah... I'm... you know, the thing is, I'm not really known for being a charmer so much as a playboy, and this place sorta seemed... overly... you know. Romantic. And I haven't done romance in years. I sorta thought about taking Pepper here, maybe, if she'd ever agree to a date. We could be like, y'know... those guys."

Tony nodded across the courtyard. A man and a woman, both Alphas, were seated with another woman, an omega. The two Alphas were having an animated, pleasant conversation and wearing
matching wedding bands. The man's hand was on the omega's thigh; she was listening placidly, one hand over her heavily pregnant stomach.

"I mean, obviously, minus the baby bulge and the knock-off Armani jacket," added Tony. Under his breath, he muttered, "Yeah, obviously it's knock-off. You're not fooling anyone, pal."

He caught Steve's eye and seemed to remember they had been having a moment before he began rambling. "...I'm glad I'm your first," he said softly. "I'm out of practice... I haven't been romantic with anyone in, ah... shit... I don't know, years. So we're pretty evenly matched, to be honest with you. For the record, it's a lot of pressure to be told you're taking a guy out on his first date. You telling me none of the Howling Commandos ever tried to buy you a drink? ...question. Were they all Alphas? Or is that another historical lie? And, follow-up, how the hell did you convince a team of Alphas in the forties to follow you into battle? Hypnosis? Bribery? Empty political promises? Dish."

A chilled feeling had settled in Steve's stomach, and he almost felt sick. The back of his neck burned. It wasn't pleasant. "You..." he ignored the question about the Commandos. They'd been a mix of betas and Alphas and they'd been the best people Steve had ever met. He still remembered first meeting Dum Dum and grinning at the guy's mustache. He'd clapped a hand heavily on Steve's shoulder like he was an equal.

"For the record, I don't care what you are. Just how straight you shoot. And if any of the other boys give you shit, well..." His laugh had been warm. Like honeyed whiskey. "You sure as hell look like you can handle it."

"Sorry. Let me get this straight." Steve pulled his hands back. "You want to date Pepper? And secondly-" he resisted the urge to point at the triad couple in the corner. "That kind of relationship is archaic as hell and I guarantee you, nine times out of ten an omega would want someone to commit to them. As an equal. But they accept that because they think they have no other choice."

It struck a nerve with Steve, hurt shining in his eyes... almost like he'd been through this with someone before.

"Seriously...do you want to date her?"

"Uh-oh," said Tony. Steve's smell had gone from warm to ice-cold in an instant.

"Hi, can I start with you any-- Tony?"

"What?" Tony looked up, panicked. She was a thin, short brunette. She was good-looking. Tony's stomach dropped.

"It's me! ...Morgan? ...we, um, we met at that wildlife charity thing two years ago? I was at your birthday party...?"

Tony's feeling of relief evaporated completely. He let out a nervous laugh. "Wow, okay, woo. Okay. This is-- super awkward. When it rains it pours; am I right, Steve? Hi. Morgan. Right. Uh, this is Steve, and uh, Steve... well, here's Morgan, apparently..."

"How are you doing, babe?"

Tony propped his head up on a fist and his elbow on the table, looking amused. "Honestly, not so great, pretty sure I'm about to be murdered."
"Aww. What do you want, a martini?"

Tony waved a hand languidly. "Yes, shaken and stirred... throw in some fucking cyanide if you have it..."

She laughed. "You're still funny."

"Ha-ha, yeah, well... you know what they say, tragedy plus time equals comedy... Morgan, can you give me and him some alone time, please?"

"Sure thing." She winked at Tony before leaving.

Tony looked at Steve. "Okay, I already know you're deadly with a spoon, so please don't kill me. Look, lemme explain, please. First of all, there's nothing archaic about that- that's how I grew up, that's perfectly normal. There's trios all over the place, it's not a big deal. I mean, Dad was in one, apparently, (news to me,) but that's not the point. I'm just saying, it's not that weird, and I thought bonding was different than dating, I mean.... I mean, you don't have to marry the person you bond with, right? I mean, you wanna talk about archaic, Steve, isn't that kind of old-fashioned, too?"

Steve looked livid.

"...what, you want a commitment because we bonded?! I didn't sign up for that, Steve, and just because you're the new face of omega rights don't mean that you get to say what nine out of ten omegas want. I mean, there's a ton of very happy omegas out there who don't want to be equals, they just want an Alpha to take care of them and yeah, okay, maybe their Alpha happens to marry a beta or whatever but it doesn't mean you like your omega any less, right? I mean, Dad loved Jarvis to death, but he had Mom, too, and..." Tony paused. Steve looked seconds away from throwing a punch at Tony and, for the first time in his life, Tony actually felt scared of an omega. Even worse, Steve's eyes looked hurt and the smell coming off him was one of sorrow and loss and Tony hurt just breathing it, knowing that every word coming out of his mouth was affecting Steve negatively.

"You seriously look like you're going to kill me; should I just dial 911 right now? ...look, I didn't know you felt like that, I... yeah, obviously, I like Pepper, but it doesn't matter. Man, she's not even talking to me right now, and... and I mean, she has things you don't have- at least two things. I'm talking about breasts- am I supposed to give that up because-- I mean, it doesn't matter, Steve, I'm not with her, I'm not with anyone, I don't know how you feel about stuff, okay, I haven't exactly gotten to know you, yet... I mean, carnally, obviously, yes, physically, but not, like, your views. .. for the record, I do care about your views, even though you're an omega--"

Oh, God.

Tony set his forehead onto the table with a thunk and waited for the ground to open him up and swallow him. He wished there were a reset button; he hadn't realized Steve disliked the trio system and he also hadn't realized how deep his own prejudices ran. Was he trapped in a relationship with a radically progressive male omega now? One that, by the smell of him, happened to be seconds away from bursting into tears because of him?

Tony set a hand on the table, offering it to Steve. He didn't expect the omega to take it. He wouldn't have, in Steve's position. "Steve," he said. "I am so sorry."

Steve didn't accept the apology and Tony didn't expect him to.

He got up, straight-backed, jaw tight, and walked out with the incredible self-control and discipline
worthy of a super soldier. There was no yelling. No scene. Tony would have felt more comfortable with a scene, with Steve reacting with anger. But there was only cold disappointment. He strode out without looking back.

Steve wasn't going to cry, he promised himself in that moment. Not here. Now now. Not in front of him. "You're disgusting," he breathed, his voice trembling with emotion before he got up to leave. His jaw quivered a little. "I'm so sorry I'm not enough for you, Tony." And then he was walking out. Steve was hardly aware of his legs moving. Maybe Tony was following him; he didn't even know. He just knew he had to leave. He had to get out. Steve couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He just got on his bike, foregoing the helmet, and rode.

Steve flicked another peanut across the tabletop onto the floor. He was bored. Bucky was chatting up the girl he'd just been dancing with and had dragged Steve along for the whole ordeal. They were flirting. Steve was pretty sure he could see her running her foot along Bucky's leg underneath the table. She was a beta, pretty and healthy looking. They would probably have loud sex later whilst Steve sandwiched his head between two couch cushions to block out the noise. Every noise of pleasure and every thud would be a stab to Steve's gut.

He'd thought it would be different. When they'd bonded. Steve had thought Bucky would take him and love him and make Steve his own. But he wouldn't even touch him.

"C'mon Stevie, you're sick. I don't wanna hurt ya."

But he was hurting him. What was wrong with Steve? Did Bucky bond him out of pity? Was it just to try and keep other Alphas away? So why did he drag Steve along to dates and make him watch awkwardly from the sidelines? At times like this he was invisible and it made him feel like the smallest person in the world. Steve thought people bonded when they liked each other, loved each other. That's why his mother and father had done it. They'd been so in love. But Bucky wasn't in love with him - it was a one way street.

Sometimes he brought home female omegas too. The better version of himself, Steve thought bitterly. He knew Bucky looked after him, fed him and kept him warm and safe. He was so grateful for that. But... but why? Why did he bond him only to share his bed with another girl every other night? Steve wasn't good enough, was he? He wasn't enough. He wasn't even well enough to have children. What was he good for?

At least Bucky never bonded a second omega. The girls he brought home were only one-night stands, but still, every time, Steve anxiously waited to find out if he'd end up in a trio, have a new "sister" he'd be indirectly bonded to.

Sometimes, even though he loved Bucky, he regretted their bond.

And then... the serum. When he'd woken up, the bonding mark had been gone. Ever since Bucky had left for the war, their bond had grown more and more distant; Bucky trying to protect him, no doubt. Bucky distancing it so Steve wouldn't feel the fear, the pain, of war. Bond-distancing was something only Alphas could do; Steve had sulked at home, raging at Bucky silently for doing this to him, unable to stop him.

But even though the bond was already distant, it had never been severed, never permanently broken. Not until the serum. And then...

He'd been released. He couldn't feel Bucky anymore. It had been a panic-inducing moment. But an oddly freeing one. After Steve had liberated Bucky from a POW camp, he had never made any mention of remaking it. Steve had a feeling Bucky knew he would say no. After all, his Alpha felt
how he felt every time he went off with all those healthy, pretty girls. But he still did it anyway.

And Steve wasn't allowed to go on other dates. Especially not with an Alpha - he remembered someone from Bucky's work asked once. Bucky had gone livid. Steve had been so confused. Did he want him, or didn't he?

Steve hadn't always been 'uppity'. Not to Bucky. He'd tried to be good for him. He'd tried to be what the perfect omega should be - but Bucky wouldn't touch him. Not more than a grope when he was drunk.

Steve knew he wouldn't have even made it to the lab they transformed him if it wasn't for Bucky. He'd saved his life before. But still, he couldn't forgive him. He'd never known that much pain and sorrow, he'd never had such low self-esteem. His Alpha hadn't wanted him. Well, now Steve didn't need him.

And yet watching Bucky fall from that train was the hardest thing he had ever experienced.

Steve was half aware of her fingers in his hair. He'd driven all the way to SHIELD, demanded a ride to England. One of the perks of working for a place like SHIELD was how easy they made travel. It was tiring, the plane ride; planes were like luxury cruises now, smooth and quiet compared to the ones in Steve's day. But the travel itself was still exhausting.

Still, Steve couldn't think of anywhere else to go.

He wanted someone familiar. An Alpha. Someone who knew him, someone who knew him as more than simply Captain America.

He sat by her bedside and let his eyes slip shut, his head on the sheets. Peggy ran her fingers through his hair, not commenting on his neck. "Always so good at getting yourself into trouble," she sighed fondly. Her voice sounded younger than she was. Steve could almost imagine Peggy from the forties standing next to him for a brief moment. His heart ached.

"Can't help it if it follows me around," Steve mumbled and Peggy laughed. It was a sweet sound.

"And so good at making excuses too."

Steve smiled faintly but it didn't meet his eyes.

Even though he was only here for a short visit, it was much-needed. She knew about Steve's upcoming test with SHIELD and she had plenty of advice for him. Despite her age, she was still sharp and still interested in hearing about the going-ons of the agencies she'd been involved with back in her prime. Talking about work was a welcome distraction from thinking about Tony. Steve had mentioned him only in passing; she'd seemed interested but had taken the hint when Steve changed the subject every time his name came up.

"How long will you be on my side of the pond?"

Steve checked his watch. "...another twenty minutes. I'm hitching a ride back with some of the MI-13 guys."

"...you came all this way to spend an hour with me?"

"I guess so."
Both of them laughed. Neither one pointed out how precious an hour was, since they didn't know how much time Peggy had left.

They lapsed into silence again, and Steve closed his eyes once more, appreciating her touch almost as much as her lack of questions.

Tony considered running after him. Taking control by making a big, hysterical mess of things. But he didn't, because Tony wasn't an emotional person. Instead, he sat there, shell-shocked. Watching Steve leave was like watching part of his own soul leave his body.

The next thing he was aware of was someone talking to him.

"Tony!"

"Huh?"

"I've been trying to get your attention for like a minute. Did you get lost in there?" asked Morgan, pointing to his head.

"Yeah. Guess so," said Tony.

She was holding a drink and looked like the Madonna. She offered it to him, but Tony just pointed to the table. She set it down for him.

"Where's your friend? Do you need a few more minutes?"

"When's your shift end?" asked Tony, ignoring the question.

"Two and a half hours."

"I'll pay your twenty thousand dollars, right now, cash, to say fuck it to those two and a half hours and sit down with me," said Tony.

Morgan dropped into the chair opposite to Tony in an instant.

Tony didn't remember her but he didn't care. He needed company. She was company.

He hoped that Steve would make a reappearance and he could dismiss her, but Steve didn't, and after a light dessert and a few cups of coffee, Tony and Morgan left to discover Steve's motorbike was gone.

Tony had probably fucked up bigger before, though he couldn't remember it now. He felt numb. He knew of only one solution to these things.

They hailed a cab and went back to Tony's place.

"Oh my God," said Morgan as they pulled up the long drive and stopped at the circular entrance. There was still broken glass on the ground, still a shattered window and a crumbled interior wall and some overturned furniture.

"I'm going for a distressed look. Very avant-garde," said Tony immediately.

He and Morgan picked their way across the rubble, Tony holding her hand to help stabilize her, and he felt miserable because Steve wouldn't need that hand; Tony would offer it and Steve would laugh but he'd be fine on his own. Morgan was so tiny, like a little sparrow, a porcelain doll, the
opposite of Steve's heavy, broad-shouldered self.

They sat at the bar and poured each other drinks and Tony got her talking. A mediocre life. A new used car and a boyfriend that hadn't worked out and an annoying roommate and a cat named Gazpacho or something stupid. Tony "uh-huh"ed at all the right parts, putting away as many shots as he could. God, normal people were fucking boring. Even JARVIS was more interesting than this woman.

By the time Tony got her into the bedroom he'd heard most of her autobiography and was drunk enough not to care. They tore each other's clothes off with reckless abandon and he practically tossed her onto the bed; their making out was fast and furious and desperate and didn't feel like anything at all.

"You haven't changed a bit," she said, smiling up at him as they broke. "Well... except for the..." She reached for Tony's chest. He grabbed her hand a little harder than he meant to.

"Don't," he growled.

"Sorry. Geez."

Tony grabbed her hips and flipped her around, nosing her hair (smelled wrong), running his hands over her curves. She let out a breathy little moan and Tony fought the urge to tell her to shut up.

He pressed himself between her thighs, hands running over her wrists, and leaned forward to bite her neck. She was a beta; there was no reason to bite her neck but Tony went for it instinctively.

It was all wrong. Terribly wrong. Her skin was like ash in his mouth and he spat it out instantly, automatically. His body rejected it even before his brain could. This was not his omega.

He rolled off her. He wasn't hard, she tasted wrong, she smelled like nothing. "I can't," he said, flopping onto his back.

"What?"

"I can't," he repeated. His sheets were red silk, cool and light and nothing like Steve's warm heavy blankets. He stared at the ceiling, lit up with the blue glow from his chest.

"That's okay," said Morgan, reaching for him. "We can just cuddle."

"Listen, Megan--"

"Morgan."

"Morgan, I don't--" Tony couldn't bring himself to say he didn't want her. Instead, he got up, grabbed his clothes, and left.

Normally his assistant would swoop in and escort her out but he had no assistant. Pepper wasn't talking to him. Rhodey wasn't talking to him. Steve was gone.

Steve.

Fundamentally this was Steve's fault, for bonding and expecting Tony was going to make a lifelong, monogamous commitment because of that. Tony didn't do lifelong, monogamous commitments; fuck, his longest relationship had been on-and-off for less than a year. But no matter how mad Tony was at Steve consciously, his body ached for his omega; they were still in
that goddamn honeymoon phase and it was agony to be away from him. Tony wanted to find him and grovel for forgiveness. Unfortunately, he had no idea where Steve was. He couldn't call up Natasha (she'd kill him) or Clint (he'd kill him) or Fury (were he and Steve even talking?) and knew of no one else that Steve might possibly know. (...Sam? Tony's blood ran cold... what if Steve had run off to Sam?)

The only thing Tony really knew was where Steve lived.

He hopped into the Aston (who the fuck cared if he left Morgan alone in his house?), drove back to Westwood (who the fuck cared if he got another DUI?), parked illegally (who the fuck cared if he got towed?), and went up to Steve's apartment to demand forgiveness.

Steve wasn't in. Tony pounded on the door for a solid five minutes before throwing his body against it and sliding down into a puddle of misery on the floor. He curled up against the door, tucked his hands under his arms, and closed his eyes. If he had to fucking camp out here all night he would.

He checked his phone and tried to dial Pepper, but only got a voicemail. He tried to think of what to say to Steve. Hadn't he been clear about who he was? He was a playboy, a Lothario, a man who couldn't be tied down to one person. Especially not another man. Especially not a friend of his father's. Especially not some government shill who'd been spying on him for weeks. Especially not a man who was taller and stronger and by all appearances more... well, masculine than him. No. Tony slept with models and bunnies and athletes and Steve was none of those things. Steve was a soldier. Steve was like Rhodey. They hadn't really known each other; something about Steve's pheromones were simply irresistibly alluring to Tony. He shouldn't have to be stuck with him and only him forever just because their instincts insisted they were perfect for each other.

Tony tried to call Pepper two more times; then his phone died and he took it as a sign to give up. He closed his eyes and sat in the carpeted hall of the highrise, pressed against Steve's door, setting up a vigil for his omega. Waiting for him to come home to him.

Steve returned home over twenty-four hours later, at two in the morning, and found a passed out Tony by his door. Tony looked like he'd set up shop right there in the hallway; there was a brown paper bag beside him with an (empty) bottle in it.

He sighed. He reached down wordlessly and picked the Alpha up. Steve unlocked the door and put Tony in bed, tucking him in gently. He didn't know how to feel. He felt numb and humiliated. He should have known he'd just be another notch on the bedpost. Steve felt like an idiot. Sure, he wasn't expecting Tony to propose. But he also wasn't expecting him to immediately want to date other women and talk about it in front of him. He wasn't prepared to be an accessory in Tony's life, another Jarvis. It wasn't the forties. And maybe he was biased, but triad relationships always put omegas on the bottom (pun not intended). He would never be first choice. And Steve didn't want his relationship to become a competition.

If Tony didn't want to commit then he shouldn't have mated him. He shouldn't have taken his virginity...Jesus Christ. Steve's heart couldn't take that. He was so fucking foolish, wasn't he? He should have listened to Natasha sooner. That not everyone was like her and Clint...that people were dicks.

Steve swallowed and ran a hand over his face. He moved out of the bedroom before Tony could begin to wake up. He slept on the sofa. Tomorrow was his test. He needed a good night’s sleep.
Steve woke up early and showered before dressing in gym gear, stuff he could get sweaty in. Knee-length shorts and a tee, along with trainers. He cooked waffles for himself and left some on a plate for Tony before he headed out. He didn't bother waking his Alpha. He could think of nothing he wanted to hear from him.
"Hey, man, how you feeling?" Clint breathed, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder as he joined him in one of the prep rooms. The trial was supposed to be pretty grueling. Thinking about it had been the only thing on Steve's mind all morning. Steve wasn't nervous, though. He felt oddly calm.

Thinking about his field test was easier than thinking about Tony.

His omega friend was looking at him with a sad look in his eyes. Steve hated that.

"I just wanna get back out there," Steve said, expression focused. Clint squeezed before pulling away, but he took a hint. Both of them knew his initial question was about Tony, not the test.

"Just steel yourself for the psych test with the hallucinogens. Shit's fucked up." Clint warned him. The door banged open and Natasha walked in. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"You can do this," she told and Steve nodded.

"I know I can."

Natasha said nothing but she did smile.

Then Coulson knocked on the door and stuck his head in. "We're ready for you."

"Tony isn't coming, is he?" Clint whispered and Steve shook his head. "If he turns up what do I say?"

"I... don't actually care," Steve said simply and then walked on through, Natasha shooting a questioning look at Clint.

Steve was grateful to have the two of them there, even though their presence was not for support, but for a practical reason: they were both approved for field work and for the Avengers Initiative, and as such, held some degree of power over the ultimate decision whether or not Steve would be joining them.

The morning round of tests was easy. There was a simple firing range test, which Steve aced (full marks). And then he had a physical, which, he suspected, was more for the interest of the doctors than to check his actual health. He ran on a treadmill for a solid hour before someone pointed out they couldn't spend all day on monitoring his vital signs, and the doctors grudgingly let him go with full marks. He set some sort of record on reaction times and cruised through the hand-to-hand and basic combat skill section with only one faux pas. (He accidentally broke someone's arm; he apologized profusely, embarrassed, as he had genuinely not meant to.) He tried to forget the fact that people were watching and just focused on the work: dodging the next punch and landing his next kick. Maybe a normal person would have gotten tired, but Steve wasn't even breaking a sweat. He was good at this. He was built for this. He had literally been made for this. He was a perfect soldier, surpassing even the highest expectations, and as long as he kept his body in motion, his mind was blissfully blank and he could, at least for a little while, forget about Tony Stark.

Tony woke with a hangover, feeling sick and disoriented. He wasn't in a hallway anymore; he was in a bed. A very familiar bed. He was still clothed.

He sat bolt upright and tore into the living room.
"Steve!" he called.

Silence. Thick and flat. No one was home.

Tony still checked the bathroom, even though he could tell Steve wasn't there. There was no note. Nothing. Just a plate of waffles by the bed.

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Tony found his phone, but it was still dead. He cursed. Where the fuck was Steve? Doing whatever secret agents did on Wednesdays, he supposed.

Wait a second.

Wednesday.

Tony ran out of Steve's house, abandoning the dead cell phone; it wasn't until he was halfway to the lobby that he realized he should have grabbed it to charge in the car.

No time to go back for it. He nearly knocked over Kate-the-cute-nurse-from-down-the-hall in the lobby before charging outside to his car. A new problem. The sleek, dark purple Aston had two parking tickets on the windshield, and a boot.

Tony dug around in his pocket for his keys, found the fob, and popped the trunk. He dug around in it; a moment later he was wearing a mechanical glove and clicking on a metallic, cherry-red sleeve. He gave the fingers an experiment roll; they moved smoothly, whirring softly at the movement. The palm was already lit up with a small, portable arc reactor.

He walked around and crouched next to the tire, and slowly, with a shearing sound of metal on metal, began peeling the boot from the car. "Fucking parking enforcement," he muttered, trying not to damage the hubcaps as he bent the metal off. He gave it a few impatient tugs. The metal groaned. He dug his fingers under it, and with a grunt, pulled the entire mangled piece of metal off. He dropped it onto the sidewalk with an unceremonious clang, swiped the tickets off the windshield, and climbed in.

Okay. Next problem. He knew Steve had a test today, but no idea where the test would be.

Well, probably a base, right? Right. Edwards Air Force Base was due north, and Camp Pendleton was due south. As a ex-weapons designer, Tony was familiar with both. Edwards was closer; Tony knew Rhodey did a ton of work up there. But Steve wasn't Air Force. He was... what?

Army? Marine? Something else?

"Eenie... meenie... miney... moe," said Tony, turning south. He passed the 405 and took the Pacific Coast Highway instead, hoping to beat traffic; he swerved through traffic with the reckless abandon that came with having a nice car and a deadline.

The sky was overcast; it was a gloomy day. The shoreline was all scrubland painted in muted blues and greys. By the time Tony arrived at the base two hours later, he was thoroughly gloomy and also feeling sick as a dog from a combination of dehydration and stress and an empty stomach.

It was a familiar sight to him: rows of men jogging past in unison, an American flag flapping in the wind, low rows of buildings, some of them no doubt barracks. There was no unnecessary landscaping; the area surrounding the base was the same flat scrubland as the rest of the coast. Distant pops could be heard at the shooting range.

Tony managed to get past the main gate, but by the time he took the car down to the central office,
word of his arrival had hit the higher-ups. He packed between two Humvees and got out, already being approached. There were three men and two women; a glance at the uniforms revealed their ranks. One of the men and one of the women were, like Steve, captains. One of the men was a lieutenant colonel, as evidenced by the maple leaves on his uniform. The remaining man and woman were not in uniform; they were merely soldiers.

All five were Alphas, high dominance.

"Mr. Stark," greeted the female captain, extending her hand to Tony. "We weren't expecting you here."

"Yeah, no, I was just in the area and thought I'd drop by to say hello. Iron Man's being recruited by a guy- name of Fury, about yay-high, eye patch, permanent scowl...? There's a field test today?"

If it was at Edwards, he was screwed. His heart hammered as he waited for their response.

Tony was hoping his extremely limited knowledge combined with his previous relationship to the Department of Defense would be enough to get him in.

It was.

The officers gestured, leading him onto the base. Tony traileled them, cocking his head, focusing on the distant pops. "Resilients," he said after a moment, sounding satisfied. "Generation one."

The male officer laughed. "You know your weapons. The Resilient has always been a popular model. A shame you don't produce them anymore."

"A crying shame," agreed Tony sardonically. "Listen, I'd love to talk shop with you, but I've gotta get to this field test."

"Not a problem, Mr. Stark. I'll escort you," said the female captain.

The two other officers departed, leaving her, Tony, and the two soldiers. They walked through the base, the low, squat buildings on either side of them. As they passed, the female captain pointed occasionally. "Right now we're in Area 13... there's the first Marine Logistics group, the first Intelligence Battalion... there's Area 14, Combat Logistics Regiment one and seventeen, Area 22, First Medical Battalion, and the 7th Engineer Support Battalion--"

The stopped at a bank of vehicles and she gestured for Tony to climb in. He obeyed, climbing into the back of the jeep. For a man in a suit, Tony felt surprisingly comfortable sitting in the back of a bouncing, open military vehicle driving over rough terrain. She took him past the shooting range and through another gate, into an inner area with twelve-foot, corrugated walls topped with barbed wire. The level of security in this area put the rest of the base to shame.

She pulled up to a nondescript building that had clearly once been a naval shipping container. "This is the main office," she called, pointing.

"Thanks a million! Tell Talbot to ring me up some time about the Delegate missile line, will you?" shouted Tony over the rumbling of the vehicle's engine. He jumped out of the back and dusted off his clothes before running into the building. He practically threw himself over the desk at the young soldier who was sitting there.

"You! I'm here with SHIELD!" he said, panting.

The man looked up at him with interest. "And?"
"I need to see Captain Rogers!"

"Captain Rogers is currently unavailable."

Right. Because he was taking the goddamn test that Tony had said he would be there for.

"Right, fine, then, um--" Who the fuck could get him to Steve? "Agent Coulson? Agent Barton? Are either of them around? Tell them it's me; it's Stark. This is urgent."

Tony bounced the balls of his feet as the man painstakingly picked up a phone on the desk and dialed. "...Mr. Stark is here," he said.

Tony nearly melted with relief. Okay! He'd made it to the right place and he was probably only a little late. Maybe he could catch Steve between tests and give him a groveling apology. All things considered, Tony felt like he was handling this very, very well.

"Wastebasket," he demanded of the young soldier.

"Huh?"

"Give me your wastebasket, I gotta throw up."

The soldier passed Tony the wastebasket under his desk; Tony promptly began retching. The stress, the hangover... it was getting to him. He just wanted to set things right with Steve, be there for him when he said he was going to be... he couldn't believe how badly he'd fucked everything up. Why? Because of Pepper, who wasn't even talking to him?

"You're a mess," he muttered to himself.

"What?" asked the soldier, looking up.

"Nothing," said Tony quickly. He waiting impatiently. Who would be worse, Coulson or Barton? Coulson was more annoying; Barton was more mellow, from what he'd seen so far. But Barton also seemed closer to Steve and Tony wasn't sure how to explain how he owed Steve an apology, or for what. Plus, Barton was closer to Romanoff, who Tony was admittedly somewhat intimidated by.

"He's being taken into the final stage." Clint said, his voice making Tony turn around. He wore a steeply expression on his face, eyes set, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked every bit the cold-blooded assassin in that moment. He looked over Tony slowly, like he was taking in slightly haggard state and the waste-bin on the floor by his feet full of sick. He didn't comment on it as his gaze flickered back up to the Alpha's face. Clint let out a long breath. "You can watch, if you want. But it won't be pretty," he warned him and jerked his head before turning on his heel to get Tony to follow him.

Tony hurried after him, letting Clint swipe them through a series of keycard-protected doors. He took him through a maze of corridors, many with armed guards standing at attention, and down a lift that required a retinal scan to activate it. But he didn't speak to him. Clint was cool and collected and ignored all attempts at conversation. He was fuming under the surface but clearly didn't want to say anything. This was Steve's fight to have. Not his.

Finally, they stopped in front of an unmarked grey door. "You sure you want to be here?" asked Clint, tone steely.

"Yes," said Tony, firmly. He needed Steve to see he was there. And he needed to talk to him. To
get this all sorted out.

But Steve wasn't really able to talk right then. Natasha and Fury were stood behind a wall of glass, separating them from the captain. He was strapped up to a chair of sorts, a hundred different wires attached to his head and above was a screen that currently showed a murky blue colour. The tones twisted and convulsed around each other; it was almost pretty. Doctors flitted around Steve. One gave Fury a thumbs up from the other side of the glass.

"We're ready," Natasha said softly. Then she glanced sideways over at Clint and their new arrival. Her eyes narrowed. "Look, I don't know what you did. But I know you fucked up," Clint hadn't told her anything, but she could read her omega, just like he could read her.

Tony locked eyes with Natasha. "Yeah," he agreed. "I did."

Nothing more needed said. He turned toward the one-way glass and his heart leaped. Steve!

Tony reached up to tap on the glass. Fury slapped his hand like a mother swatting a child away from unauthorized candy. "Captain Rogers can't hear you. He's currently in a disassociative state. He can't see you, or hear you, and even if it could, he wouldn't recognize you."

"But I'm here," said Tony.

"So you are. From what I've picked up on, you're reconsidering joining our team," said Fury.

"Yeah, yeah," said Tony distractedly, watching Steve.

Stark Industries had been working on some subliminal VR programs for a while, but theirs were less invasive. Tony's idea for the product was a pair of glasses. SHIELD had Steve's head hooked up to about a hundred electrodes; the guy looked like a science experiment and Tony felt a sense of unease as he watched.

Steve's face was placid, peaceful. He looked asleep and Tony wanted to embrace him, but he settled for watching him, hoping that Steve knew, somehow, that Tony was present, that he hadn't missed this and that he was going to fix things

He watched the same monitors as everyone else as they resolved into murky images.

"Memories?" asked Tony curiously.


Steve was perfectly still. But the screens were anything but; they lit up and resolved themselves into an expanse of asphalt overlooking a city.

They were seeing through Steve's eyes.

This part of the test did what they couldn't recreate in real life.

*Steve woke up to the sound of gunfire. To the sound of screaming. He blinked awake to a dull ringing in his ears. He could hear Clint screaming at him. He was in his uniform. He had his shield in his hand. They were... they were on a rooftop. Steve blinked to see Natasha bleeding out on the ground and Clint on top of her. Someone was shooting at them. Steve didn't think.*

*He screamed. He roared, and his whole body trembled with adrenaline and a sudden protectiveness. He didn't question where they were, what they were doing, or why... he simply*
reacted. Steve was sprinting across the rooftop and slammed his shield into the shooter's jaw. He broke his neck in an instant, and it made a sickening sound.

More gunfire and Steve spun around. He reacted in seconds and his shield flew out of his hand on instinct. It curved beautifully and hit both of them in the head, knocking them out, perhaps killing them. Steve ran up in time to catch his shield, and duck behind it at the pinging, familiar sound of bullets. It was coming from the edge of a rooftop below them. Steve ran, jumped, and did a rolling landing.

He had been expecting more asphalt; the rock that he hit jarred his entire body.

Steve slammed into a cold, hard surface, stumbling slightly with surprise at the sudden change in scenery. The cave was dark. He couldn't see. But he felt the displacement of air and heard the movement. He ducked out of the way and backed up. "Who's there?" he called out, bristling.

There was the softest breath of air behind him; he turned, but it was too late.

Steve choked as a hand curled around his neck and lifted him up. The hand had chilly, smooth fingers. They didn't feel human. He wheezed but kicked out, catching whoever it was in the jaw and making their grip loosening. With a press to the forearm Steve was freed and catching his breath. He charged forward but nothing. His attacker had backed away and it was too fucking dark to see him.

Steve closed his eyes and calmed his breathing down. He tried to focus. He tried to listen. A soft hiss of air...

Steve snapped around and caught him in the jaw.

Onscreen, Tony watched Steve crack a man's jaw like it was an over-ripe cantaloupe and he cringed, noticeably. He'd always fucking hated cantaloupe.

Tony hadn't experienced war firsthand until two years ago. He made weapons and he blew things up and spent a lot of time on bases and watching training exercises... but until his capture, he'd never seen war for what it was. It wasn't like watching a movie. People died with looks of surprise on their faces; grown men wept and giggled and contorted their bodies in strange ways; everything was too loud and close and hot, and it was nothing Tony had wanted a part in anymore once he'd seen it up close and personal. He had had a man get shot next to him, with a gun that had his name printed on it, and gotten that man's brains on his skin. He'd never wanted to be a part of war again.

And this. This was war; pure, undistilled, perfectly vicious war. Steve wasn't an omega; hell, he wasn't even human. The serum had done what he had meant to do. It had created the perfect soldier. The perfect killing machine. A guy with a shield shouldn't have seemed so aggressive, and yet Tony watched, dumbstruck, as the man on the displays used that shield to kill with ease.

"He's good," he heard Natasha murmur appreciatively.

Yes. He was good.

"They're all Germans," observed a man in a white lab coat, making a note on his clipboard.

"I don't think that's any cause for concern," said Fury with a small shrug. "Natasha's were all Russian, Clint's were American. The brain naturally goes for what it's most familiar with."

The man cried out and they landed on the ground, tousling on the cave floor for dominance. He
grunted at the blow to his ribs and then his stomach and then his shin. Eventually the omega managed to twisted them around and gain advantage. Steve curled his hands around his throat. He could see the glint of his eyes in the dark. The man wheezed and convulsed against him.

Steve grit his teeth. He waited until the man was unconscious and then he let go. Of course, he couldn't be dead but Steve didn't know; he hoped he wasn't. But sometimes, on the battlefield, you had to make sacrifices. And you couldn't spend too much time or energy second-guessing yourself.

Steve felt a hand over his eyes and he cried out and--

Onscreen, the image had gone black.

"...Roberts?" called Fury.

"Equipment's fine!" reported one of the men, checking a panel of dials. "Whoops, there he goes!"

In his unconscious state, Steve gave a small twitch. Onscreen--

"Jesus tap-dancing Christ, who the fuck is that?" asked Tony in alarm.

Fury ignored him.

Steve woke up in a cell. The walls were orange and rusted. The rancid smell of damp hung heavy in the air and made him feel sick. His wrists were tried together and strung to a crate above his head, his arms ached with the ache of his weight. His feet just barely touched the floor. Steve realised he was just in trousers and a thin tee; his bare feet made him feel oddly vulnerable.

He swallowed when he heard German accents outside. Steve struggled against the bindings but they held tight. He hissed lowly and hoisted himself with a grunt, using pure core strength to twist himself up and curl his feet over the railing above his head. Now the weight was somewhat off of his arms he pulled again, trying to snap the cuffs. But it was still hard. He couldn't stay like this for long.

"Always so determined."

Steve stilled, a chill running down his spine. And then something hit him across his back hard. Belatedly he realised that he'd been hit with his own shield. And that he knew that voice. Steve's legs fell back down from under him and he swung, wincing as metal from the cuffs stuck into his skin. And then Steve was met face to face with Johann Schmidt. And he was tied up, and he couldn't get out and- fuck- he couldn't breathe.

"Now I finally have you where I want you," Schmidt hissed. Steve tried to kick at him but the former serum subject caught his ankle and squeezed fiercely making Steve cry out. "Good little omegas behave, don't they?"

"Fuck you--" Steve grit out and then kicked a foot up into the underside of Schmidt's jaw. He'd probably pulled a muscle managing it, but it was worth the reaction, worth seeing Schmidt stumble back with a tiny noise of surprise and frustration. Steve grinned grimly.

But then Schmidt picked up the shield again and promptly hit Steve around the face with it. The sound of metal rang in his eyes and his vision swam.

Onscreen, Steve was taking a beating; in real life, his brow had furrowed, and he was twitching slightly, caught in a nightmare.
"Get him out of there," demanded Natasha in a hiss, turning to Fury.

"You can't do this!" protested Tony, who was wincing with every thwack of the shield on Steve's face.

"I can and will do this; this is an important part of our psych evaluation, and it's not real," said Fury with practiced patience. "If you can't handle it, Romanoff, Stark, you can leave. There's the door. He agreed to this."

Tony let out a whine before he could stop himself. He was scratching at the glass. Several times, someone in a lab coat would come over and pull his hands down, but automatically, they kept coming up to claw at the glass. Real-life Steve was clearly distressed; his heart rate was up, his face was twisted in discomfort; and as for mental Steve, he was fighting but helpless, being worked over with a shield made of the strongest metal known to man, and it was only a matter of time before he would break--

"Enough's enough. You got what you wanted; now pull him out. There's no point to this," argued Natasha.

"You can't just pull--"

Tony whined again, louder, higher. He wasn't aware he was making the noise. His omega.

Steve's heat had been nothing compared to this.

His omega needed him. His omega was in trouble.

Tony had watched Steve dispatch multiple trained soldiers- Alphas, presumably- like it was nothing, just moments ago. And there wasn't even anything Tony could do, anyone he could fight against; the torture was all inside Steve's head. But logic was gone, replaced with an inhuman urge to protect. The glass was starting to get bloody streaks from Tony's fingers.

"Dude, Jesus Christ. Calm the fuck down," Clint gripped Tony's wrists, he squeezed gently and pulled his hands away from the glass. "He can't hear you. You can't do anything."

"This is pure sadism. What's even the point of watching him get beaten to a pulp?" Natasha snapped, expression furious. "You control the basic pattern of events. You put him in that room, all tied up and--"

"We didn't put Schmidt there," Fury argued smoothly. "And we can't pull him out like this. He has to end the scene."

Another hit with the shield. Steve's vision wouldn't stand still. His body was on fire. He thought maybe he might throw up. He swayed with the momentum of the hit until Schmidt caught him with a hand on his waist and stepped closer. His smile was so sinister Steve wanted to bite it off. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think--

"How the hell is he supposed to end it?" Clint agreed and Fury's head snapped around. "He's not being asked for any intel, he's just getting knocked around! The program is supposed to demonstrate how you operate under duress but there's no operation here... he's just getting creamed."

"Roberts. Status report."

Schmidt dropped the shield and it echoed dully around the room with a metallic twang. "What do
you want?" demanded Steve, spitting out blood.

Fingers squeezed around Steve's jaw. Schmidt tugged the blond's head down. "Now you listen very carefully, Steven." His breath was hot and horrible against Steve's face. "I'm going to hurt you, because I can. I'm going to ruin you, because I can. I'm going to show America why choosing a freakish little rabbit like you to lead them wasn't such a good idea. I'm going to make you weep."

Steve spat in his face. "I'd like to fucking see you try."

"That's the spirit." Schmidt laughed, like it was funny and then slammed his palm up against Steve's chin. Steve's teeth snapped together, disorientating him. He couldn't breathe again. He couldn't see.

He felt another fist on his jaw, then hands tearing at his shirt, hands undoing his pants, and he was kicking, because hell if he was going to make this easy for them, and all the while he was yelling, "No! No! Fuck you! No...!"

Tony was too far gone to speak; this was dredging up familiar memories of his own; he could smell Steve's fear; he was still making that whine; someone was holding his wrists (Raza?), he could smell his own blood; he managed a "no," and then--

Then--

There was a deafening crash, and the air was filled with cloying, choking dust, and then something - no, someone - jumped onto Schmidt with the fury of a pack of wild, rabid dogs. Steve twisted, trying to get out of his binds, trying to join the fray and feeling helpless. But the fight was over in an instant; he heard a snap and a thud. Death in its purest form.

Roberts looked pale in real life. "That's... that's not in the program."

Fury pushed an intercom button on the wall. "...did you say that's not in the program?"

"No, I have no idea what this is. This was supposed to be simulation number thirty-three. It's way off-script."

A gunshot. Steve screwed his eyes shut, twisting, still trying to break free. A second later he was falling, his cuffs gone. He rubbed at sore wrists. "Who the hell--" The man before him was dressed in black tactical gear. His face was obscured; he wore a mask and goggles that concealed it. A sniper rifle was slung over his shoulder. He reached for Steve and Steve saw a glint of metal; he automatically moved to disarm the man, but realized a second later that there was no gun. The man's left arm was coated in metal.

Everything was hazy, but through the fog, Tony saw Steve's rescue. And relief flooded him.

That had to be him, right? Metal arm... that was Iron Man, right? He was speaking another language but all words were a jumble right now, so Tony didn't think a thing of it.

He moved to pick Steve up wordlessly. When German soldiers appeared, he lifted Steve's shield, deflecting bullets as he stomped forward, Steve yelling to be put down because, darn it, he could fight and he refused to be carried out like some sort of damsel in distress.

"Oh my God," said Natasha, a hand coming up to her face.

"What?! What?!" asked Tony in alarm.
"Shut down the program!" Fury snapped and Roberts scrambled for a control panel beside Steve's chair. Oblivious to the drama occurring onscreen, Steve's body was still lying peacefully on the chair, its head adorned with a crown of electrodes.

"But I don't--"

"Now, Roberts!"

"But he's in a scene!"

"I don't care. Just do it."

Natasha shot Clint a lingering look.

"Мой," the masked man whispered.

The gunfire had ceased. Steve was still in his arms. Steve had stopped squirming, because beyond the smell of gunpowder and drywall and rust and mildew, there was something else.

Home.

"Кто ты?" Steve asked in a strained voice. It hurt even to talk.

"ст-

Steve wrenched awake with a gasp. His vision was fuzzy. His senses were being assaulted with bright lights and beeping sounds and the smell of antiseptic. Doctors were rushing around him, talking too quickly.

When Steve gasped and his bright blue eyes fluttered open, Tony nearly collapsed with relief.

"Captain Rogers." The doctor's voice was soft. Roberts put a hand on his shoulder. Steve turned to face him, blinking in confusion, feeling groggy. "You're alright. Do you know where you are?"

"...SHIELD. Did I pass?" slurred Steve, trying to get up.

"Hold on, let us get these sensors off of you. Just give us a second, and then we'll escort you into the conference room for an evaluation of your... psych test." Roberts looked sweaty, stressed. Steve swallowed, suddenly felt nervous.

"Alright. Thank you... Doctor."

The doctor put a hand on his shoulder. Tony bristled. Steve, ever the soldier, ever calm, thanked him.

Fury made the mistake of opening the door between the observation room and the simulation chamber; Tony wrenched out of Clint's grasp and made a beeline for Steve. In an instant, he was practically crawling into Steve's lap, laying his body over Steve's protectively. "I'm here, Steve, I'm sorry, please, I'm so sorry, forgive me, I'm here for you, please," Tony was babbling, softly, rapidly.

Natasha scuffed him and pulled him off. "Stark, you're gonna fail your psych test before they even give it to you. Get ahold of yourself- you're embarrassing us." She didn't need to add that "us" meant "Alphas."
Tony twisted weakly, reaching for Steve; Natasha grabbed Tony's hands and pushed them down, holding him.

"Stark. He's fine. They're going to unhook him and let him get cleaned up. He's got an evaluation to go to." She turned to fix Steve with a steel gaze. "You're okay, right?" she said in a low voice.

Tony growled at her. Around him, he heard Steve's name being said, whispered.

"--of all people, the Winter Soldier?"

"It doesn't necessarily constitute a security risk, maybe he made an association between the metal arm and Stark's armor--"

"If he's sympathetic to HYDRA--"

"I think we can comfortably say he isn't. It's more likely that was some sort of glitch in the system--"

Tony stretched toward Steve. Natasha was pulling him back and he hated her. He snapped but she avoided it with expert reflexes.

"Stop it. Stark. ...Tony. Get ahold of yourself. He's not in danger; they pulled him out."

Tony writhed and snapped again.

"Tony, if you want to be there for a eval, you need to calm down."

Tony couldn't. Who the fuck was the Winter Soldier? Was that Steve? Was that because he was frozen in ice? He had a million questions. He wanted Steve. He wanted Steve to acknowledge him, forgive him, kneel for him... he'd been a terrible Alpha...

"Clint." Natasha handed Tony off to Clint. She and Steve were close friends; she wanted to have a brief chat before the eval. All things considered, Steve's test hadn't gone great. He probably hadn't flunked, necessarily, but it certainly hadn't been what anyone had expected.

"Steve," Tony managed.

"There you go. Use your words," said Clint. "He's okay, Tony."

Tony forced himself to make eye contact with Clint. "It's my fault. It's my fault, 'cause I suggested a trio. ...do you think trios are outdated, Clint?"

Clint got a fleeting, strange look on his face. And Tony wondered if Natasha had someone else. She didn't seem like the type to really date anyone. But for a split second, Tony saw something. A secret.

Then it was gone.

"They're not for everyone," said Clint diplomatically. "You and him can talk about it later, Tony. If you want to be there for Steve's eval, you have to calm down, get control of yourself."

"I was there!" said Tony, nodding at the monitors. "That was me!"

"I don't think that was you."

"Of course it was me, the metal arm, the-- the way I picked him up-- that was me! I saved him!
...I'm okay, I'm calm. I'm calm, Barton.

Tony shoved Clint off of him. He was freaking out, but, thankfully, the doctors and scientists were swarming around Steve, pulling off electrodes and shining a penlight in his eyes and asking questions. Fury and Natasha were having an argument that was half-Russian; no one was looking at Tony. Thank God. Around Steve, he lost control far more often than he was comfortable with.

"...it gets better," said Clint suddenly, very, very softly. "It's worst just after bonding. You'll learn to control it. Just take it easy, okay? You're not doing him any favors by bursting in here like an animal." He clapped Tony on the back and Tony felt a twinge of affection for Clint. If their places were reversed, Tony doubted he would be acting as nice as Clint was.

"Thanks," he said.

Clint offered him some gum. Tony took it, chewing furiously, shoving his hands in his pockets, aware of the pain in his bleeding fingertips. He watched Steve, trying to catch his eye, look reassuring. He desperately wanted to gather Steve up and hold him, but didn't dare. It would only embarrass Steve and he knew this test was important to him.

"Steve? You okay?" Natasha checked in again.

"Just... just get me out of here."

She offered him a hand, and helped pull him to his feet. He swayed but walked out, straight-backed, still blinking a little, disoriented.

Once Steve was escorted out, his smell lingered. Tony was back in control. And he was furious. He stood inches from Fury's face. To Fury's credit, he did not back down.

"This test is designed to push people to their breaking point," said Fury coolly. "It's the closest approximation we have for field work. It's voluntary, and it's necessary. I don't recall anyone asking you to be here for it."

"I thought testing shit like this on omegas was a thing of the past but I guess I was wrong, huh?"

"Funny. Your father didn't seem to have any problem with it."

Tony swung; Fury caught his wrist; Tony tried to knee him; Fury easily swiped his foot to the side. Tony bit him.

That, Fury wasn't expecting. Unfortunately he was wearing leather gloves; Tony wasn't able to break skin.

"Did you just bite me, Mr. Stark?"

"Don't talk about my dad!"

Fury got a look on his face somewhere between irritation and admiration. "Heard you synthesized his element."

"That, Fury wasn't expecting. Unfortunately he was wearing leather gloves; Tony wasn't able to break skin."

"Did you just bite me, Mr. Stark?"

"Don't talk about my dad!"

Fury got a look on his face somewhere between irritation and admiration. "Heard you synthesized his element."

"Yeah. It was easy," spat Tony, still glaring.

"He called it edwinium."

Tony's shoulders dropped a little. "Well, I'm the one who isolated and stabilized it, so I'm calling it badassium." He jabbed a finger at Fury. "And speaking of asses, if you ever put Steve through
anything like that again, so help me Lorentz, I will kick yours so fast it'll make your head spin."

"You threatening me?" asked Fury, looking slightly amused.

"I'm promising you."

Fury nodded, once. Tony let Clint drag him away. Fury turned to Coulson. "...that's why I always wear gloves."

Steve sat in the corridor outside of Conference Room B. Tony and Clint's whereabouts were unknown and Steve didn't really care in that moment. He was sat on the floor, back against the wall with his knees up and arms curled around them. He stared down at the cold metal floor beneath them. He was quiet. Natasha looked worried.

"If I had known they were going to put Schmidt into the test I would have w--"

"Don't," Steve requested softly and Natasha fell quiet again. She sighed and moved to sit down next to him, their hips and shoulders pressed together. They sat like that for a long time.

"That guy. That guy at the end..." asked Steve in a whisper. "Who the hell was that supposed to be?"

"He looked like the Winter Soldier," Natasha said, words careful and measured. "They said he was a legend. One of the deadliest assassins to ever come out of Russia. I wouldn't have believed he existed if it weren't for this," she admitted and pulled up the edge of her top to show him an ugly bullet wound. Steve watched her curiously. "I was supposed to be protecting a guy. He destroyed our with a grenade. I was barely out of the wreckage- I covered his body with my own to try and protect him. So the Winter Soldier shot him through me. The thing is...it doesn't make sense that you saw him in your exam. It's supposed to be partly generated by your own memories and awareness of the world, Steve. Only a handful of people have ever seen the Winter Soldier. He's incredibly elusive. And as far as I know, you've never encountered him."

"No," admitted Steve.

"Well, I can tell you from personal experience that he isn't the greatest of guys... so why the hell would you see him, Steve? And why the hell would he come to your rescue? He's aligned with HYDRA. Shouldn't he have come to Schmidt's rescue?"

Steve swallowed. There was a beat of quiet. "He said I was..."

"I know," said Natasha.

"But I didn't feel scared. I felt... I felt like he was on my side."

"I don't know what it means," Natasha admitted quietly. "But I don't think it can be good."

"...I smelled Tony."

Natasha said nothing. She was quiet for a little while. "Yeah. He came to observe. So...what happened with him, anyway? Was he dick? Because he is a dick, you know."

"I know."
"Why do you do this to yourself?"

"I dunno."

"Because you're a self-destructive asshole?"

"Probably."

Natasha caught his gaze and smiled at him. She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Tony was asking Clint about trios. Is that what this is about?" Steve's silence spoke volumes. "I know me and Clint seem super stable and solid but we went through problems around that area." She didn't need to see Steve's face to know he was surprised. "Before me, all Clint had known was the standard... you know, Alpha-in-change dynamic. That was his norm for relationships. He didn't trust Alphas and he had no reason to. And then... we met. And well, you know that story. And I've never been like that-- I mean, I'd never had a relationship before Clint. He saved my life, but... he was...well, everything. It was more than just saving my life. We were scent-mates. And I know our idea of a relationship isn't normal- hell, most of our 'dates' involve someone else's murder-- but it works for us." Natasha's voice became a touch quieter. "I didn't want anything else. Just him. But he wouldn't believe me. Jesus, Steve, he was so insecure. We used to fight so much. He'd try to pair me off with people and then accuse me of cheating if I'd gone on missions with single Alphas or betas that I didn't actively hate-- because you know I hate almost everyone. It was hell. He couldn't trust me. He couldn't get his head around it. It was a pretty shitty time for us and it's embarrassing for Clint, so don't ever bring it up in front of him, okay? It took about a year... about a whole year for him to accept that I was happy with just us. And that doesn't mean you have to have that, Steve, if you don't want to. But if it is what you want, don't you dare ever settle for anything less," Natasha murmured. "You think you and Tony are bad? Me and Clint mated when we trying to kill each other. It wasn't romantic or sweet or anything like that. But I don't regret it; I never will."

Steve didn't respond.

"Sorry...kind of went off one there, didn't I?"

Steve smiled faintly. "It's alright," he replied and reached around to squeeze her shoulders. Sometimes she joked about him being her big brother. Sometimes that didn't feel so far from the truth. "I just-- the last thing I'd ever want is for him to stick around because he feels like he has to."

"Well," Natasha said. She huffed a little. "One thing is for certain. He's here today because he wants to be, Steve."

Steve didn't really know how to feel about that.

"He's still a dick," she added.

"We're ready for you," Coulson appeared through a door and beckoned them. Natasha gave Steve one last look before they followed through.

The conference room was startlingly plain. It could have been one of the lower-level board rooms in Tony's company. Formica table, fake leather chairs, fluorescent lighting that was a little too bright.

Clint and Tony were seated at a table with Fury. Tony sat between Clint and a young female doctor ("Dr. Wu," read the nametag), glaring at everyone, daring them to kick him out, even though he had no right to be there.
Steve's expression was schooled and professional. This was an evaluation, after all.

As he walked in, he was mindful of keeping his posture straight, his body language controlled and collected; he glanced at Tony and Clint but didn't make eye contact with Tony. Tony chewed the gum Clint had given him furiously.

He glanced over at Tony and Clint briefly before back at Natasha. She nodded subtly.

"So...how do you feel that went?" Coulson asked, smile tight but polite as he pulled out an office chair and sat down, lacing his fingers together on the tabletop.

"It wasn't quite what I expected," was Steve's diplomatic reply.

"This is some MK-Ultra shit! You fuckers have no idea what you're doing, do you?" blurted Tony.

Clint kicked him under the table.

Tony's muscles tightened, but he took the hint. This was Steve's evaluation. He was there for moral support. Nothing more. ...even if Steve still seemed mad. Which he had every right to be, really.

"We're pleased with your performance under stress, generally," said Coulson calmly, hands folded in front of him. "Generally, you seemed in control for both the mission portion and the capture. However, we have some questions about the final portion of the simulation. The man that came to your aid... do you know him?"

"That was me," blurted Tony.

Everyone turned and stared at him.

"...what, you know some other dude with a metal arm? That was obviously me, right?"

"That wasn't you," said Natasha.

"Who else--"

"Mr. Stark," said Coulson warningly. "Agent Romanoff. Please let Captain Rogers speak. Captain?"

"So I really don't think it was you," said Steve, finally looking Tony in the eye. "And I have no idea who it was. If I did it would be less worrying."

"Do you know why he saved you?" Coulson asked, a frown on his features.

Steve shrugged. "You designed it. Not me."

Fury's eyes narrowed. "You consented to it."

"I thought it was going to test real field situations."

"Yes, and that's part of the risk," Fury pointed out calmly.

Steve gave him an unimpressed look. "Did I pass or not?"

"You passed," Coulson assured him. "But we're still concerned about the unidentified individual..."
"We'd like to talk to you about possible reasons that particular individual might have shown up," said the psychologist to Tony's right. "Whether there was some sort of association, his voice, his smell--"

"It's entirely possible Captain Rogers saw a report on the Winter Soldier and subliminally integrated that threat into his mind," said Natasha, hands folded neatly on the desk.

"It's my personal belief," said Dr. Wu, "that the presence of the unidentified individual in your trance was likely an amalgamation of many different individuals. It's possible you pictured him, mentally, as the Winter Soldier based on descriptions of him. Perhaps a conversation with Agent Romanoff..."

"No, I never described him," she said.

"Even a glance at a picture on file would have been enough for Rogers to subconsciously insert him into the simulation."

"But no one really knows what the guy looks like... hell, there's people who don't believe he exists," said Natasha. She glared at one of the agents across the room. "You only see him crop up once or twice a decade. And Steve hasn't been around long enough to have heard all the rumors about this guy... Right, Steve?" She looked at him. "I mean, the Winter Soldier has never been a top SHIELD priority. We might as well be chasing a ghost."

"I'd never heard about the Winter Soldier. I've never read about him. Until Natasha told me I'd never even heard the name," Steve explained calmly. Doctor Wu looked particularly interested by that. "He didn't come from me."

"But he's not in system," the doctor said simply. "He's not there. He had to come from you."

Steve felt a horrible chill run down his spine.

"The captain's only interactions with HYDRA occurred back in the forties, so I doubt he would have any present knowledge of their contacts."

"The Winter Soldier has been around since, what, the fifties; the sixties?" asked one of the agents.

"The Winter Soldier doesn't exist," said someone else.

"We believe it's likely that the designation of Winter Soldier is merely a code name and there is more than one agent," said Fury. "Unless this guy hasn't been aging..."

"A mutant?" suggested Coulson.

"Possible," conceded Fury.

"I had the same theory about Steve," piped up Tony suddenly. "Thought Captain America was like... four different guys."

"Stark," said Fury suddenly, rounding on him. "You realize your presence here is unauthorized?"

"Yep," said Tony.

"You realize you're being allowed to sit in only because we've already agreed to include you on the Avengers Initiative?"

"Ye-- wait, what? Really?" Tony perked up. "Great! Do I sign something? Do I get a special
decoder ring? How's that work?"

Fury slid a plain tan folder across the table. "Your field test is next week. Don't be late. Romanoff, you and Dr. Roberts needed to review Rogers's eval together; Rogers, meet with them tomorrow to debrief on HYDRA movements and discuss the presence of the unidentified individual in Steve's simulation; Barton, Coulson, you're in charge of the New Mexico contact until I get back."

"Get back?" repeated Coulson.

"Agent Hill and I have a rendezvous with Dr. Selvig."

"Wait, next week?" Tony looked alarmed. "I have no idea what's going on. Who's Hydra? Who's the Winter Soldier? And what the hell does everyone keep talking about New Mexico for?"

Everyone was already standing up, opening files, and shaking hands.

Tony sidled around the board room, pushing past psychologists and agents, trying to get to Steve, catching snippets of conversations.

"Steve!" He shouldered Natasha out of the way, coming face-to-face with Steve. They stared at each other. "...Steve," repeated Tony, more tenderly. His face was blank but below the surface, emotions were roiling. He had so much to say and none of the lexicon required to say it. And they weren't alone. If they had been, Tony would have been prostrating himself on the floor and weeping for forgiveness. But with Natasha and Clint and Fury and a pretty little agent who name tag identified her as "Hill," Tony couldn't do anything but stare. His fingertips throbbed.

Steve sighed. "Tony-" Steve didn't even know what to say. How to be. "We're not doing this here," he told him, and then Natasha was between them.

"Are you two okay?" Natasha breathed, hands on her hips.

"Fine," Steve assured her, even though they all knew it wasn't true.

"Fine. Let's do this over lunch," said Tony, jerking his head. "My car's out front; we'll grab some food, talk about it somewhere less... military."

He glared at Natasha. Acting like she was protecting Steve. Who the fuck did she think she was? Protecting Steve was Tony's job, not hers. Tony's hair bristled a little; she bristled back.

Tony moved toward the door of the conference room, keeping a watchful eye on Steve. "...you did good," he said awkwardly. Until they were off base, Tony didn't feel comfortable getting all mushy with Steve. Actually, he had no idea how to be mushy even alone with Steve. Mushiness wasn't Tony's style. Steve was a world of firsts.

He could think of nothing to say as they wandered toward his car, not touching, hands in pockets. He had a million questions to ask. In particular, who the fuck was the guy who had come to Steve's rescue, if it wasn't Tony? Why had he said "mine?" And in Russian? Natasha was Russian and Tony couldn't help but be intimidated by her. What about that Sam guy? Tony had never met him, didn't know what he looked like. Could that man have been Sam? Or was there some other Alpha in Steve's life? Had he been replaced already?

Tony had felt confident in his claim to Steve since they'd bonded, but with Steve being furious at him, the firm ground beneath Tony's feet had crumbled, and he was learning an important lesson: the Alpha was only as strong as the omega's confidence in him.
"...you seriously didn't know Inspector Gadget?" he asked, trying to sound casual, as if mysterious men with metal arms periodically wandered through Steve's psyche and tried to claim him and it was no big deal.

"I don't want to talk about it," Steve said, finally speaking up. He felt awkward. All the grace of the battlefield was gone. Steve was a natural in a fight but like this he didn't know what to do with himself. He didn't really want to go to lunch but he definitely didn't want to stay at SHIELD either. He was angry at them. They'd just fuelled a whole month’s worth of new nightmares. For what? To prove that Steve would resist to kidnapping and attempted rape?

Hardly a groundbreaking revolution.

He hesitated outside of the car, realising he didn't want to get in it with Tony.

Steve stopped, his expression still schooled although his eyes gave away a hint of sadness. "Why the hell did you come today, Tony?" he asked quietly.

They stood on the packed dirt ground, in the dusty, chilly sea air. It was still overcast. Distantly, Tony could hear guns firing. His guns.

He stared at Steve. Steve wasn't moving to get into the Aston. His smell was...not friendly.

Tony broke eye contact. "Because I said I would," he mumbled. "...because..." He shrugged one shoulder and accidentally swallowed his gum.

He'd been bonded less than two days and he'd already ruined it. This was why Tony didn't sleep with omegas, or virgins. They took this shit too seriously and Tony couldn't be trusted. He sabotaged everything he touched, ruined it. The only thing he didn't fucked up was weapons. He himself was a weapon, a walking force of destruction. This is why Tony didn't like people to get close. No wonder Steve was replacing him, subconsciously, with hunky Russians with metal arms. Steve had finally recognized, even through their honeymoon period, that Tony was a terrible, undeserving Alpha.

The two of them stood there in silence under the flapping American flag on the post beside them, the only sounds faraway and dulled.

"I came because I love you," said Tony. Steve was staring at him. No submission. No hint of omega etiquette. His eyes were strong. Sad, yes. But unwavering.

Tony felt a deep sense of guilt. Steve deserved better. But Steve was marked. You only got to get marked once.

Tony took a deep, shaky breath. "Steve. I'm sorry. Look, I know I have my prejudices, okay? I know I... I grew up in a traditional, conservative household, and...and I know I haven't been what you wanted, but..." But what? "...but I don't have any excuses, actually. I treated you like crap; I didn't think about what you wanted, I didn't even ask. I'm not a good Alpha. I'm sorry. But I'd do anything for you, Steve. I mean it. Anything. And I'm still joining the team. I still want to fight with you. And I'll follow you." A pause. "As an equal. ...Captain," added Tony.

Equals. Nothing in Tony's entire upbringing had ever suggested to him that Alphas and omegas were equal. After all, omegas knelt for Alphas. Wasn't that evidence enough they weren't equal, and never would be?

Tony took a few steps toward Steve. Steve stiffened. Tony glanced up. They stared into each other's eyes. Steve's gaze didn't waver. There was no submission.
What the hell was Tony expecting? It occurred to him, like a punch to the gut, that even after telling Steve they were equals, he was still expecting submission. Still expecting Steve to forgive and then to kneel, even though Tony was the one who'd hurt him, who'd been selfish. That when he said he would do "anything," what he really meant was "anything as long as I'm still dominant over you."

From a logical standpoint, it made no sense.

Tony turned his instincts over in his head, examining them like the scientist he was. He was standing here apologizing, but still trying to stare down Steve. There was an expectation. An expectation that someone was supposed to kneel.

And Steve sure as hell didn't look or smell like he had any intention of doing that.

Tony took a deep breath, then dropped to his knees on the ground and pressed his cheek against Steve's leg.

"Tony, what are you--" Steve sucked in a breath. Tony was kneeling down in the dust in his really expensive suit. Steve didn't know what to do. This was against the rules, wasn't it? Tony wasn't supposed to do this- his Alpha wasn't- he was supposed to be the one kneeling. But Tony was doing this. He was making a gesture. Something strange warmed in Steve's chest. He felt oddly flattered.

Steve sighed and gingerly reached down. He threaded his fingers through Tony's hair gently. He hoped the touch was soothing. "I'm not asking you to sit there and say you're committed for life," he said quietly. "But I won't have sex with you- or anyone, for the record- if they're thinking about or want to be with other people. That's- I can't do that, Tony. I don't half ass things. If you want that, then that's fine. That's what you want. But then I can't be apart of that picture. I'm sorry, but my heart can't take that," Steve said quietly. Tony's cheek was heavy against his leg. "I don't want you to stick around because you feel like you have to. Only if you really want to."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Tony wanted Pepper, he'd always wanted her. But he wanted Steve too.

He'd never felt more confused. Steve was not a woman. But Pepper was a beta. She didn't smell like anything except her shampoo; Steve smelled like home. Steve's lure transcended everything, including Tony's sexuality, which was generally heterosexual, something he felt uncomfortable about but didn't know how to turn off.

"Okay," he said quietly.

A pause. He thought of the shimmer of Pepper's copper hair. But life without Steve... he couldn't imagine that. No. He'd be miserable. Ever since they'd mated Tony had been obsessed. Would he give up his lifestyle for this man, this buff, blond, army-straight guy who he knew virtually nothing about?

...as it turned out, yes.

"...I want to," said Tony hoarsely. "For once, Steve, this isn't about sex. I want you. I took you. You're mine." Tony looked up at Steve. "If you want to be," he added grudgingly.

God, if anyone saw him kneeling for his omega, he'd never live it down. But he didn't get up.
There was no point in trying to hold on to Pepper anymore. She'd made it clear they were incompatible in her eyes, and that she had a company to run. Tony's heart ached but it was what it was. And as much as he liked her and wanted her... his more primal instincts were insisting on Steve. No matter how good of a beta anyone was, that relationship would never fulfill the way this one did. Tony could live without women for a while. He couldn't live without Steve. He knew that; watching that other man say "mine" to Steve had wrenched a knife in Tony's gut. He'd hoped that man was him, but no one seemed to think so. Not even Steve. And the thought of Steve being with any other Alpha killed him.

Tony was surprised at the mess of emotions he was feeling. He loved Steve, and he hurt- he hurt for Steve and for Pepper, for all the mistakes he'd made and the crappy childhood he had that had led up to this moment. He was kneeling in the fucking dirt in a suit worth $12,000, next to a car worth a quarter of a million... and he felt worthless.

"Steve. Mating you was one of the only meaningful things I ever did. It was up there with shutting down Stark weapons manufacturing, and making the arc reactor. Please give me another chance. We'll talk. I'll listen. But I want to be paired with you. I wouldn't've stuck my dick in it if I didn't want that. The way you smell, it- it does something to me that- I've never felt like this. Please, Steve. I'm literally kneeling here begging you. All I have left in my life is Iron Man and you. And I really, really wanna make this work and... hell, I'm gonna mess up, Steve, but I'm a mechanic- I fix things, too, that's what I do. Let me try to fix this." He looked up at Steve pleadingly. "You're my omega." It was almost a question. "We're scent-mates. We can't throw that away."

Steve was rendered quite speechless. He hadn't been expecting that. He'd expected Tony to want to go think about it, at least. Then...Steve didn't know. Something leapt in his chest, something giddy. Was this even real? Was this happening? Tony wanted him and only him?

He ran his fingers through his Alpha's hair one last time and then knelt down. Equals in the dirt. How poetic. Then, wordlessly, Steve leaned his forehead against Tony's and closed his eyes. He could push away the thought of Schmidt like this, the feeling of metal squeezing the life out of his throat...it was just him and Tony and it was as simple as that. Their breathing fell into sync and suddenly Steve felt serene. It felt like a perfect sense of equilibrium. He felt like he could stay here forever.

But...Steve was kind of starving.

Eventually he opened his eyes. "Lunch sounds good, actually," he murmured, not breaking the intimacy of the moment but certainly the intensity of it.

Steve rose, offering Tony a hand up too.

"A second chance to take you on a date?" said Tony. "...I know a place nearby." He took Steve's hand; Steve pulled him up with surprising strength. Tony didn't let go of his hand even once they were standing.

A date. Steve's heart melted. A date...a date Tony actually wanted to take him on. "Just nowhere too fancy. I'm just in this." His gym gear was hardly classy. All greys and blues and tight fitting and a little bit sweaty. Not ideal for a restaurant. Maybe it was the forties in him but Steve liked to be dressed appropriately for the occasion.

Tony opened the passenger door with his free hand and gestured. "After you." He looked at Steve tenderly. They were syncing back up and Tony felt a deep sense of peace. He ran his thumb over
the back of Steve's hand. He still had a sense of unease about that guy in Steve's head, the one with the metal arm, but he pushed it down. Steve had said he didn't want to talk about it.

"...what's in New Mexico?" asked Tony curiously. "They keep dragging Clint off. Are they recruiting another weirdo? ...Coulson's not bonded. Is he one of those modern career omegas who doesn't want to do that? Now that I'm on the team, you can tell me all the juicy details, right?"

Steve smiled when Tony opened the door for him and looked almost bashful before he slipped into the passenger seat. He watched Tony walk around, his suit thankfully not too dusty as he moved to get into the driver's side.

"I honestly have no idea what's in Mexico. Clint isn't allowed to tell us but goes hyper whenever it's mentioned," Steve said, his voice sounding fond. "Whatever it is," he murmured, "I think it's a big deal. So..." Steve shrugged. "No juicy details I'm afraid."

"We'll have to make our own juicy details, then," said Tony offhandedly.

"I think we already did," Steve pointed out smoothly. "Everyone's going to be talking about how you acted in there."

Tony winced. "Sorry."

"It's fine. ...the beach sounds nice. I could do with some fresh air, actually. Been inside there since 8." It was almost five now. There had been so many trivial tests, like word association and inkblot images. Steve's brain was a puddle and maybe he was a little tired from running like twenty miles in an hour. Maybe. But super serum meant he could usually get away with ignoring tiredness until it went away entirely.

He looked over Steve critically. "...if you want me to take you home first to get changed, I'm okay with that. Or we can just go through a drive-through and eat it on the beach. You're the captain, Captain." Tony gave him a cocky little salute before turning on the car and peeling away from the base. He turned north on the highway and they sped off, Tony paying only half attention to the road, glancing over frequently and fondly at Steve. He reached over, took Steve's hand, and set it on the shift stick so he could drive while holding Steve's hand.

"...that German guy," said Tony. He cleared his throat. "He's the one you told me about. That tried to..." He trailed off. "...he's dead now," he added. He swallowed. "...you and Coulson and Barton... you guys... you take a lot of shit in the field, don't you?" A pause. "They're gonna do that to me next week, that crazy brain hypnosis thing. Steve. I dunno if I'll pass. ...you did great, by the way. But I'm not a soldier like you. That was hard to watch. Real hard."

"People used to underestimate me a lot. It's not all bad." Steve pointed out. "Alphas will pull punches, it's in their instinct." Said instincts often got them killed. "And yeah, that was him...I'm kind of mad at them. I don't know why they did it. It's like they're trying to screw with my brain." He sighed and looked outside, watching the passing scenery. "The thing is- when you're in that thing...you believe it's real. Everything feels real. I thought he was actually going to-"

Steve didn't finish that sentence. He didn't need to.

"To pass that test you have to be prepared to kill people, Tony. And feel pain, as well as dole it out. It won't be pretty."
Tony ground his teeth a little. "...I want to protect you." Tony didn't add the jealousy and hurt that came from seeing another man come to Steve's rescue. He suspected Steve knew. "...the guy with the arm... that wasn't... that wasn't Sam, was it?" he asked. Sam was the only other Alpha in Steve's life- to Tony's knowledge- that Steve was close to. He had to check.

Steve looked back over at Tony again curiously. "No, Sam isn't Russian. He's American and has two very normal arms and...isn't interested in me." Steve assured him. "I don't know who it could have been, Tony. My head wasn't making any sense- I don't know where it came from. I'm just glad it did. Not when he was trying to kill me, but the Schmidt thing..."

The question lingering in Steve's mind was how far would SHIELD have gone? Would they have just let it play out...? He shuddered involuntarily.

Tony felt Steve's shudder; he squeezed his hand silently, comfortably.

He knew what Steve was saying was true. Tony had killed, sure. But only Alphas. Only men. If he came face-to-face with a female omega, there was no doubt in his mind that he'd pull punches and give her the upper hand without even thinking.


Without warning, Tony cut through two lanes of traffic to take an exit. "Oceanside," he said by way of explanation. "I'll roll up my sleeves, we can do the beach... Lemme buy you something to eat; you look half-starved... We can watch the sunset. Don't expect a fucking proposal, though. I have my limits with the sappiness."

Tony took them through a drive-through (for Steve) and stopped by a liquor store (for himself) on the way.

Steve had eaten two whole burgers before they even made it to the beach and finished it up with a lot of packets of carrot sticks because he should at least try to be healthy...even if he serum meant he could often get away with not being half the time. Sam kind of hated him for it.

They parked legally, for once; there was a long parking lot just off the beach. A pier extended off into the setting sun; Tony shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes, loosening his tie without taking it off. It was too overcast to be crowded; most of the people there were dedicated surfers. There were no suntanners, no families. It was surprisingly intimate.

"Oceanside!" he announced to Steve. A young woman in a bikini skated past them. Tony forced himself not to do a double-take. The west coast was absolutely teeming with tan, barely clothed, young, sexy temptations. But he wasn't going to throw away his second chance with Steve.

"C'mon." He grabbed the bottle of scotch he'd bought in one hand, and offered Steve his other.

People ignored them. Just another Alpha and omega pair in love. There were at least two other recently bonded couples, equally sappy in their actions. Apparently, beach sunsets were a go-to spot for honeymoon pairs.

A couple of young omegas with surfboards walked past, laughing and talking. Steve caught a snippet of their conversation:

"--like a second civil rights movement, man--"
Tony caught Steve's eye and winked, linking their hands together.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been to the beach, let alone barefoot and hand-in-hand with someone. Actually, never. Tony had never had time. His own private beach was a rocky Malibu cliff and although he occasionally surfed or sunbathed, he'd never really had anyone to do it with.

He squeezed Steve's hand as they strolled under the palms and took a swig of scotch. "...maybe your next sexy photo shoot and omega rights interview oughta be on the beach," he said, eyeing Steve. "You look incredibly good in this light. I mean, you always look good, but here, you look...wow. Incredible." He squeezed Steve's hand a little harder. "Mine," he murmured fondly. He tried not to let the memory of that other man saying it to Steve bother him. But it did. Why did Steve's subconscious have some other Alpha there, saying "mine?" Only Tony could say that, only Tony had bonded Steve. Steve was his.

Tony leaned in to nuzzle his neck a little, kiss him. "Mine."

"Yours," Steve echoed and then laughed softly as Tony's beard scratched over a ticklish spot. He smiled, running his hands down Tony's arms as he let his Alpha lead the kiss for now. He snuck the bottle of his hand and propped it skillfully on a branch (which, notably, was well within Tony's reach) as he kissed him back. It was sweet and slow and he didn't even care if people were watching. Tony was all that mattered right now.

Something fluttered in Steve's chest as they pulled away. He nudged his nose against Tony's. "I feel like if I keep doing racy photo shoots I'll kind of lose the point I'm trying to make...like, I think it's a very different kind of magazine that publishes stuff like that." Steve was only teasing, a smile still on his lips, the glint in his eyes playful. "I'm still waiting for the response to...everything to die down first before I try and get back out there anyway."

Steve blinked in sudden realisation. "Hey...isn't your Expo thing kind of going on, like...now?"

Tony laughed, playing with Steve's fingers, watching the sun slowly dip below the horizon as the waves lapped at the beach. "Yeah, but Iron Man already put in an appearance. I opened it over a week ago and it's on for months, Steve. Stark Expo is like the World's Fair of technology." He smiled lazily. "I sort of thought I was dying, so you can excuse me for missing some of it. I assume Pepper's handling it... she says it's a big ego trip, but I say it's free publicity..." He frowned slightly.

Hammer had been pestering them for a spot and they'd grudgingly given him one. A Friday slot, even though he'd begged and pleaded and pushed for a Saturday spot. Friday evening was the best Tony was willing to give him. God, that guy was an annoying little twerp. Tony hadn't planned on going to see his demonstration, but...

...well. It would almost be worth it, to see the look on his face when he realized the omega he'd flirted with in Monaco was Captain America.

"You wanna go? Hot date? Hammer's gonna be there Friday. We can watch him embarrass himself- it'll be nice. I'll buy you a snow cone," said Tony, closing his eyes and spreading himself out on the warm sand. He reached up and grabbed the cloth of Steve's shirt, tugging him down, cuddling up to him.

Steve laughed as Tony promptly pulled him down with him. They were getting sandy but he didn't
think either of them cared. Steve leaned his head against Tony's chest and let his eyes slip shut blissfully, content with the sound of the waves and the rise and fall of Tony's breathing beneath him.

"Might be a good way to catch up on all the tech I know nothing about still, I suppose," he mumbled amusedly.

Then something clearly occurred to Steve and he opened his eyes, propped himself up on an elbow. "It's a public event though, right? There's press there. If we go together...I don't really care what the press think. But it's okay if you do," he said tentatively, expression clearly concerned for Tony's thoughts about it.

Tony frowned. "Oh... right." He hadn't thought of that. He ran his hand over Steve's head, feeling the fineness of his hair. "...are you ready for this? I'm Tony Stark... people are used to me sticking my dick into things. No one bats an eye when I show up with someone beautiful on my arm. You, though. You're Captain America. You're the new face of omega rights. You're the one who they'll go after, not me."

"Could you maybe stop talking about sticking your dick in stuff?" Steve asked, his tone gently teasing. Tony's fingers in his hair felt right, felt good. He practically purred and curled against him, back arching prettily.

Tony leaned down to kiss the top of Steve's head and stretched for his bottle of scotch. He lapsed into silence, sipping the alcohol, watching the sun set, dozing a little with Steve draped over his chest. Steve was warm and solid.

"...I don't care what people say about me," said Tony quietly. "People talk. They always talk. I've spent my life having people talk about me, Steve. But I'm an Alpha, too. People don't shit all over Alphas like they do omegas, you know that." He huffed slightly. "...I would love to see the look on Hammer's face, though..."

"Can't you just take me along as your plus-one without anyone batting an eyelid? I knew your father," Steve pointed out in a murmur and slowly opened his eyes. "It's not anyone's business what we are to each other. I don't want to come out yet...not until I've had chance to rebut the first tidal wave of shit the media have thrown at me." Steve sighed. "This needs to be about principles. Not who I'm mated to."

Tony tensed a little at the mention of his father. "You thought you knew him. You knew the guy he wanted people to know. The fun, smart, charming, business-savvy guy. Not the guy who drank and knocked his kid around," said Tony gruffly. A pause. Tony took another swig of alcohol, then sighed. "Yeah. It probably wouldn't be weird. Captain America, hanging out with Howard Stark's son... he was big on omega rights, everyone knew that." A pause. "Edwinium. Jesus Christ..."

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, his voice thoughtful.

Tony closed his eyes. The sun shone red through his eyelids and was warm on his face. He concentrated on the sound of the waves, trying not to think about his father, or Jarvis. Or the long history that stretched away from him and dictated all of his actions, even now. He was forty fucking years old and his father's legacy still kept turning up like a bad penny. Case in point: Steve.

Tony wondered if his father had never interfered, if he and Steve would be together now. No, definitely not. Steve would be dead by now. A scrawny little omega of no particular historical importance. It was a chilling thought.
Tony took another long drink to chase away his goosebumps.

"I shoulda made you eat something," Steve sighed, half to himself, as he let his eyes slip shut again. Steve stayed there, laid against Tony completely.

"...I was kind of freaked out," he admitted quietly. "When they told me Howard had looked for me so much. He'd barely known me...and yet he'd tried more than anyone else had." Steve swallowed. "I didn't really know him that well. I mean, not as...

"As an equal?" asked Tony. He tensed a little more. "Maybe you didn't know him, but he sure knew you. He only talked about you fucking constantly. You were like the son he never had."

Steve wasn't really sure what to say after that.

"So Friday then," Steve hummed, sealing the date. "What's the plan up until that point? Aside from a meeting with SHIELD tomorrow..."

"...I got no plans," he said, still bothered. "Maybe work on the suits for the field test next week, I don't know. Try to get Pepper to talk to me. Get some contractors out to the house and fix the wall I threw Rhodes through. ...maybe call up Rhodes and make sure he's not still pissed about that."

He shrugged a little and resumed petting Steve. "When you think you're dying, you sort of clear your calendar," he added sarcastically. "I guess I oughta start making plans again, huh?"

Steve felt a pang of sadness in his chest that he wasn't entirely was his own. He reached up a hand and drew lazily circles with his fingers on Tony's stomach. Not quite a super soldier six pack (an unfair comparison for starters) but he could feel Tony was strong.

"You do know I can fix almost all of that in another an hour, right?" Steve asked and looked up at Tony, smiling when his Alpha looked at him with a confused expression on his face. "I was goddamn good PA, remember? Or were you really paying so little attention?"

Tony laughed and hugged Steve to him. "You still wanna fetch my coffee and tie my ties, even as Captain America? Are you kidding? You were a good PA, Steve, but... well, you were fired for espionage, and I don't wanna intrude on your very busy schedule as, you know, America's favorite omega." He nuzzled Steve's hair. "But," he added softly, "if my schedule were to miraculously fill itself... I wouldn't ask too many questions." He smiled against Steve's head then pulled back.

"I still have all my contacts. It wouldn't even take me that long," Steve assured him. "And now there's publicists that handle everything, apparently. I got one. All I have to do is turn up to interviews... speaking of publicists, do I have to let her know about us?" he asked curiously. "I've never had a publicist before, but Pepper said I ought to--"

"Look," interrupted Tony, pointing to the sand. He began drawing circles and lines. "Oh-one-one-one-oh-one-one... that's an S... oh-one-one-one-oh... oh-one-one-oh-one-oh-one... oh-one-one-oh-one-oh-one... that's your name in my native language. Binary." Tony laughed. "But if we carve anything into a tree maybe we should stick with our initials instead of forty characters.

He reached over the long string of numbers and picked up a small pink shell, handing it to Steve. "...even if we don't announce to the media that you're a happily bonded omega, can we please, please rub it in Hammer's face? That guy's so fucking smug, he drives me crazy. He keeps strutting around acting like he's going to steal my show or something. ...I don't know what the hell
he's presenting at the Expo but if it's anything like the rest of his tech, it probably won't work, anyway.

Steve stared at the shell. It looked so tiny in his hands. He remembered when his fingers were bony and almost dainty. He missed it sometimes.

Tony began scribbling in the sand again, looking bored. A normal person might have drawn a smiley face; Tony was scribbling an equation over the long string of numbers that apparently spelled Steve's name: \((y - a \mid x \mid b)^2 + (c x)^2 = d\).

All Steve could do was smile. He leaned over and kissed Tony's cheek. "Sure. I'd love to see Hammer again, and let me know he was a very lucky man considering the fact that I didn't break his hand." He let his breath tickle against Tony's cheek before he pulled back to rest his head on his arms, watching Tony doodle in the sand idly. "What am I supposed to wear to an Expo?" Steve asked.

"Go naked, draped only in an American flag," said Tony gravely. "...or, you know, the yooj. Whatever you want, Steve." He glanced over at Steve, watching him examine the shell. Despite the muscles and the strong jaw and what was a probably a deadly right hook, Steve still had an artist's eyes. He handled the shell with surprising delicacy. Tony wondered if he'd handle the publicists with equal delicacy. Steve's interview had been phenomenal; Steve was careful with his words and spoke with the serious, deliberate fashion of a man born in a more formal era.

"...you can tell people, if you want. Like I said. They'll get on you harder than they'll get on me. Hell, I ought to be bragging- I mated Captain America! ...it's probably better for you to tell them than for them to find out. That way you can tell your own story. The thing is, people aren't thrilled with me lately. I had a senate hearing a couple of weeks ago, about the suits, and then there was that maniac at the Prix with the crazy octopus arms and the home-made arc reactor... and then, you know, the party- that was a disaster... People are gonna be asking: why me?" Tony shielded his face with one hand, gazing over the surface of the ocean; the sun had nearly set and the water was fiery orange in the remaining light. "...I ask that myself, sometimes." A pause. "...everyone says I look a lot like my dad."

It was an offhand statement. But also a question.

Before Steve could respond, Tony added quickly, "You can't keep wearing scarves forever, Cap."

It was clear that Tony had cut Steve off on purpose, afraid to hear the answer. There wasn't really a good answer, anyway. Tony knew he resembled Howard. He already knew Steve would deny that had anything to do with their attraction. But who knew? After all, Howard had been a powerful Alpha; it's not like Steve wouldn't have picked up on that.

"You're right. It's better to do it our way than theirs." Steve hummed and then he frowned a little. "I don't care what people think. I made my own decision and I don't regret it. If they don't see you the way I do that's their goddamn problem, not ours." He took a few seconds to breathe. He didn't want to get all captain-speechy on their first proper date. The beach was gorgeous and warm, like Tony was pressed up against him.

"So, do I? Look like him?" demanded Tony.

"Tony, seriously... no. That would be weird as hell."
"I let you mate me...." Steve leaned over to kiss the edge of a stubbled jaw line. "Because you're handsome, quick-witted, too clever for your own good and you make me laugh." They might sound like simple things but they meant the world to Steve right now. "Okay? Not because you look like Howard did."

"Handsome, yes... quick-witted; certainly... too clever; absolutely... funny; no doubt... but what else, Steve?" asked Tony, fixing Steve with a serious look. His goatee twitched with a suppressed smile and he stole a kiss from Steve.

He gave him a sideways glance. "To be fair, back then, in the forties, everyone says he was the same way, you know. And he was a stronger Alpha than me. Sometimes, around him and Stane, I felt like I was supposed to be a beta." He heaved a sigh. "But I'm glad it wasn't like that." He offered Steve a hand. "It's gonna get dark soon. You wanna go home? I left my phone there and I gotta charge it and call Pepper. It's been days. She probably thinks I'm on a bender. And for once, I'm not. ...can we not tell the press about us until I tell Pepper? She's my best friend, Steve." Tony stood and stretched a little. "...you wanna go for a walk? Before we go home?" he asked. He nodded at the horizon. "We still got a few minutes... I'm enjoying this incredibly corny little date of ours. ...don't you dare tell anyone. ...they'd never believe you, anyway."

"You tell Pepper whenever you want, Tony," Steve said softly, and he meant it. He reached up and took Tony's hand before standing, their fingers interlinking as they moved to walk along the sand. It was gorgeous weather and the breeze was just cool enough to be pleasant.

They walked along the length of the beach and kissed themselves dizzy before eventually retreating back to Tony's car. Steve felt his tiredness from the days events creeping up on him on the drive home, his eyes half slipping shut.

Tony watched Steve fall asleep in the car, and he felt a strong surge of protectiveness. He capped the bottle of liquor and actually drove the speed limit, not wanting to wake Steve up. He looked peaceful, his arms cross and his head lolling on his shoulder. Tony wanted to climb on top of him and shield him from the world, wanted to gather him up and take away every bad thing that had ever happened to him.

So this is how it feels , he thought idly as he drove. He'd always wondered how much of pair bonding was truly instinct and how much was just people acting stupid. As it turned out, instinct was a lot stronger than he'd expected; it was almost overwhelming how desperately he felt the need to take care of Steve. Steve, who was, by all accounts, bigger, stronger, and probably more emotionally stable than him.

He parked the car outside of Steve's apartment and touched his arm delicately. He grunted awake and with groggy movements got out of the car. It took Steve two attempts to unlock his door before they were stumbling into his apartment. Steve was practically sleep-walking. Tony took his hand and stayed close to him as they went inside.

"I think...think I'm gonna shower. Your phone is charging on the sofa," Steve told him. He squeezed Tony's hand before letting go and pulling away to the bathroom. He wasn't desperate to clean up, but he also didn't want to listen in on the imminent phone call that was coming. Pepper had been cold and professional before, which meant she probably wasn't impressed. With either of them, for that matter.

"You want me to join you for that shower?" asked Tony. He glanced at his phone on the couch. He knew he should talk to her sooner rather than later, but he didn't even know where to start. Hey, sorry I've been such a mess. It's 'cause I was dying, but now I'm not dying; and also, I went ahead and bonded to Captain America, you know, the guy who just came out as an omega . It
sounded ridiculous to him. The stuff of tabloids and internet conspiracies. But the longer he waited, the worse it would probably be.

"I wouldn't say no," Steve told him and moved over to press a kiss to Tony's temple. He hesitated. "But you should talk to her. The longer you leave it the worse it will be. I already spoke to her the other day and I don't want to...I know we're hiding this from the press. But the minute Nat and Clint found out I was... relieved," he admitted. "It felt good for them to know."

"I think you'll feel better for it. So call her," Steve told him and pulled away, not sounding bossy but rather, encouraging. He offered Tony a small smile and then slipped away into the bathroom.

The hot water felt good as it eased over sore muscles. Steve had pushed himself, both mentally and physically. It was exhausting. He tried not to think about the day and the tests they'd put him through. He tried not to think about the metal armed man. Steve tried to just think about Tony...kneeling for him, their foreheads pressed together.

Before he realised what he was doing he was just stood in the shower, letting the water stream over him as his mind was left blissfully blank.

Tony watched Steve go. He knew he was right.

He shifted his feet a few times, then finally dropped onto the sofa and picked up his phone. He dialed. She picked up halfway through the second ring.

"...Tony."

Tony cringed. Her voice was like an arctic wind. There was no mistaking her tone for anything other than furious.

"Pepper. I know I've been really out of control lately--"

"Oh, really, I hadn't noticed."

"--lemme finish. Pepper, life is short, life is... is fragile, and my whole life, the thing is, I realized, the way I've been living, the things I do... I had a revelation, Pepper--"

"So, as usual, this is about you."

"What? No! No, no, no, this is about-- well, yes, it's about me, but the thing is, Pepper, what I'm trying to say is--"

"People are relying on you to be Iron Man and you've disappeared, and all I'm doing is putting out your fires and taking the heat of it. I am trying to do your job. You handed me the company and the company is a mess, and you're throwing parties and systematically destroying whatever credibility you had left--"

"I thought I was dying."

"Well, I've certainly considered killing you."

"No, no, I mean literally, I was literally dying. But I'm okay now. I invented-- discovered-- re discovered a new element, Edwinium-- I mean, Badassium-- it's in my chest--"

"Tony, are you drunk?"

"No! ...a little, maybe, but not a lot. Pepper, please, lemme talk. The palladium was poisoning me
and that's why I gave you the company--"

"--you told me it was because I was capable."

"--no, yes, you're very capable. Sorry, no--

"You told me there was no one better qualified."

"Yes, and I meant that, Pepper, please. Just listen to me. I thought I was dying and obviously that
does not excuse my actions but I fixed it--"

"Fixed it. Really."

"Yes, really, and please don't be mad but also I bonded to an omega."

"What."

"Specifically Stan Rogers, my assistant, who was actually Captain Steve Rogers, and also I joined,

um, I joined the Strategic Homeland--"

"You pair-bonded?"

"With Captain America, yes."

The other line was silent for a while. Tony looked around the dim apartment. He felt more at
home here than he ever had in his mansion. Weird. It definitely wasn't the decor; Tony preferred a
post-modern look, neo minimalist. Steve's decor was more... normal. Tony wondered if Steve
would mind if he started rearranging things.

"...Hello?" asked Tony, wondering if Pepper had dropped dead.

"Where are you right now, Tony?"

"At Steve's. But, hey, we're coming to the Expo on Friday to wipe that stupid smirk off Hammer's
smug little face... will you be there?"

"You're not joking, are you?"

"No. No, I... it was sort of an accident but I mated with him and we're a pair now, yeah. ...he's
okay. Gives a lot of speeches. Likes democracy."

"...Tony."

"See you Friday!" Tony hung up. All things considered, that hadn't gone too bad. He'd gotten her
up to speed.

His phone buzzed; she was calling him back. Tony ignored it and walked into Steve's bathroom.
Steve was standing in the shower, water streaming down his body, eyes closed. Tony leaned
against the doorknob, crossing his arms, admiring Steve's arms and shoulders and chest, the way
the water coursed down the curves of his muscles. My omega, his brain buzzed warmly. Tony
realized he was smiling.

Steve smelled Tony before he saw him. His eyes fluttered open, eyelashes clumped together with
warm water as he saw Tony smiling at him. He felt giddy all of a sudden, some feeling that was
inherently good washing over. Before he knew it he was smiling back.
He moved to twist off the shower and slowly stepped out of it, watching Tony admire him. The way the engineer's eyes drifted over his form felt him shiver. Steve often felt too big and bulky, almost clumsy at times. But when Tony looked at him like that he didn't feel anything of the sort—he felt like he looked just right. Like Tony wouldn't want him any other way. Steve sincerely hoped he wouldn't.

"Pass me a towel?" Steve asked, voice soft as he raised a brow at his alpha in an almost teasing manner.

Tony gave Steve a slow grin. "I kinda like you without the towel. All wet and glistening, looking like a calendar model. You'd be July, I think. You know, Independence Day and everything. Or maybe December. You know, they always put the hottest model in December." His eyes roamed south. "Did the serum... did it affect you there, too? Out of curiosity. ...I don't spend a lot of time looking at guy's dicks, to be honest. Unless you include mine. I definitely spend a lot of time with my own, obviously." His eyes snapped back up. Steve was blushing.

"The serum made everything bigger, Tony," Steve replied. He couldn't help but turn a little pink under Tony's scrutiny. Sure, his expression made it clear he liked what he was seeing but Steve still felt shy about it. Before the serum had been in proportion and now everything was still. His body was nothing like a typical omega's anymore.

Tony loved how he blushed; it was so cute, Steve's shyness, his old-fashioned sense of dignity. "I talked to Pepper," he added. "We'll be seeing her Friday. Which gives us, ah, all day tomorrow to hang out. Just me and you..."

"I'm glad you talked to her," Steve murmured.

Tony took a few steps toward Steve, then grabbed a towel for him. "Allow me." Slowly, he reached up and began drying his hair. Steve's head rolled with him; the poor guy was obviously exhausted; his eyelids were drooping. "Here... let's get you dry and put you to bed..." he murmured. He personally wasn't tired; he was planning on wandering onto the Deep Web while Steve slept and seeing what he could find on the Winter Soldier. From the sound of it, Steve was as ignorant as he was... so why would the guy show up in a mental stimulation at all? Steve had never met him, had maybe only heard a story from Natasha, but that didn't add up. What Tony had seen was strangely, deeply personal. He wondered why he hadn't shown up at all. It hurt, a little, not to thought of. But the subconscious was a funny thing. And they'd only been bonded for days. And Steve had been furious at him when he went in for the test. So maybe it was excusable.

Steve hummed in agreement and was half aware of Tony's hand on his arm. He trusted him to guide him and was soon sinking down onto the edge of the mattress. He felt Tony drying his arms and torso before nudging him gently and easing him into bed. The day had been draining in every way and Steve's body and mind ached for a rest.

He managed to crack open an eye and look up at his Alpha watching him. "Thank you, Tony," Steve whispered, his damp blonde hair tufting a little against the pillow. "Don't...don't let me sleep in too late, will ya?" He asked, Brooklyn accent creeping in with his tiredness, but his eyes were already slipping shut.

"I won't," promised Tony, kissing Steve's forehead and pulling the blankets up over him. He felt a smile tugging at his mouth at Steve's accent; he ran a hand over Steve's hair before drawing away. "I'll be in bed soon. Just wanna check my e-mail," he said, slipping out and shutting the door softly behind him.
He picked up Steve's laptop and settled onto the couch with his bottle of scotch from earlier. Time to do some research. He cracked his knuckles; the laptop was password protected. Cute. It took him less than two minutes to get in and start downloading a Deep Web browser.

"Alrighty, not-JARVIS," said Tony to the laptop. It didn't respond but that was okay. Tony just needed to think out loud sometimes. "Winter Soldier. Let's see what we've got here."

...not much, as it turned out. There was little to no information on the Winter Soldier except for a number of maybe-sightings and conspiracy theories. According to various questionable sources, the Winter Soldier was a mythological assassin (or assassins) who may or may not have a metal arm and/or be a robot, who worked for the CIA and/or the KGB and/or HYDRA, but who was responsible for dozens of deaths over the last century, including JFK, Elvis, and Tupac. Tony found himself rolling his eyes at what little information he found. He might as well have been researching the Loch Ness Monster. The sightings of the Winter Soldier were far and few between; what's more, people rarely got a good look at him. Those that lived didn't get to tell about it. Tony would have assumed the whole thing was made up, just another crackpot theory, if not for Natasha showing them the bullet wound and confirming that he existed.

"You know," said Tony to not-JARVIS, "maybe it was just a crazy glitch in the program. Maybe it was *meant* to be me and they just got some wires crossed. I mean, brunet Alpha with a biomechanical prosthesis... that *really* sounds like me." That would also explain the "mine."

But why would it be in Russian? Tony didn't speak Russian.

He closed Steve's laptop and went to get ready for bed, borrowing Steve's toothbrush again and tossing his clothes on the floor. He set an alarm for six am, even though he hated getting up early, because that's what Steve would have wanted. He slipped under the covers beside his omega, slipping his arms around Steve's broad chest; his breaths were slow and regular.

"Steve," whispered Tony, giving him a tiny shake, not wanting to wake him up fully, but also wanting to ask him about the man in the stimulation. "...did he smell like... like anyone you know? ...the guy in your head, the one with the metal arm?" He was hoping Steve would say, yes, of course it was Tony's smell on that Alpha. Tony was the only Alpha who could claim Steve so of course anyone saying "mine" in a dream would smell like him. Because wouldn't that be the best possible explanation? That it was *supposed* to be Tony all along?

No one had asked Steve what he smelled like and Tony realized that the doctors had mostly been betas; they wouldn't have understood. Fury was a beta, too; everyone had been so busy asking Steve if he recognized the man's voice or face that no one had even bothered to find out if the smell was familiar.

Steve was only halfawake...half conscious. Maybe he'd been dreaming but he wasn't sure. No nightmares, at least, after the Schmidt reprisal in his mind. He responded to Tony's touch automatically, his hair in his eyes as he lifted his face from under the safety of the duvet itself. His Alpha's presence and heat was magnetic and Steve pressed into him. He grunted, his brain slowly processing the question.

If Steve had been fully awake and with it he probably would have lied. But Steve was half asleep, his eyes not even open. So, on automatic, he told the truth. "Yeah," he murmured, voice thick and heavy with sleep. "But...mph. He's dead. Don't matter." And then Steve was tucking his face into the warmth of the sheets again, question answered. Sleep was a more pressing issue.

Steve snuggled up to Tony as Tony wrapped his arms around him and mumbled a response. It was largely nonsensical.
Tony frowned. "Steve!" He gave Steve another small shake. "What do mean, he's dead? Who's dead? Do you mean Schmidt, or the guy with the arm? Steve, I'm talking about the other guy. ...the guy with the arm; he smelled like me, right? ...Steve?" A tinge of panic was rising in Tony. He'd expected Steve to either agree that it was Tony's smell on that Alpha, or that no, it hadn't smelled like him. But Steve saying it was familiar and not Tony...

Tony felt even more confused. No other Alpha in the world could say "mine." Steve was his, Tony's... only Tony had that right now.

Tony was also starting to feel worried about his own upcoming test. The details of what had happened in Afghanistan- those details had been shared with no one. Most of the original records had been destroyed; Tony had begged Rhodes to gloss over the report. He hadn't wanted that information to someday get leaked to the public. It was something he wanted buried and never, ever re-examined. And for the last two years, actually, it had been. The only place it was left was in Tony's mind. But if they did to him what they'd did to Steve... would he have to go through all that again? Would he think it was real, as Steve had?

"Steve, I'm scared about the test," he admitted softly to Steve's sleeping form. "Who'd he smell like, Steve? ...me... right?"

"Urgh..." Steve frowned as he was basically woken up, rubbing a hand over his face. He groaned. "Argh, Tony..." He complained. "I know- I know who you're talking 'bout." He blinked blearily and pushed himself up onto his elbows. He could sense Tony's unease, he could feel it deep in his bones. It was making Steve feel uncomfortable and anxious himself. "I don't know who he was Tony, okay?" he said, sounding and looking tired. "Please stop worrying about it.,,He smelled like someone from the forties, alright? But that person is dead and I saw him die." I let him die. I wasn't fast enough. "But he sure as hell didn't speak Russian or have a metal arm and couldn't bash through walls either. It didn't make sense, Tony. It's not supposed to make sense. So stop feeling so threatened by it," Steve sighed and slumped back down, his cheek against Tony's shoulder.

Tony sighed, putting an arm around Steve's shoulder as Steve settled against him. "You're right. Subconscious stuff never makes sense. I'm sorry, Steve, I know I'm your Alpha... you're right. Never mind. Go back to sleep, lover." He kissed the top of Steve's head and closed his eyes, feeling reassured. They were bonded, they had mated; that was that. No other Alpha could claim him. Tony felt his jealousy was a little embarrassing; then again, he was only jealous because he loved Steve so much, and hearing an unfamiliar voice say "mine" to him was... deeply disturbing, to say the least. Post-bonding, that should never happen, not even in dreams. But who knew what SHIELD's simulations were capable of.

He drifted off holding Steve to him, the warmth and weight of his omega comforting. He didn't dream at all; his subconscious left him alone.

"Yours," Steve whispered, letting his eyes slip shut too. He snuggled against him, his hand on Tony's hip as they drifted off together.
Steve blinked awake with a yawn and stretched out against Tony like a cat. Seconds later an alarm went off. He quickly reached over and hit it off, smiling as Tony groaned beneath him in protest.

Steve smirked a little when he realised he'd ended up on top of his Alpha in the process of turning off the alarm. Heucked his head down and trailed kisses up and down Tony's jaw and across his cheeks. "Morning," he hummed with a lazy lilt to his voice. "Sleep well?"

Tony cracked one eye open. "I am not a morning person," he growled. He looked over Steve's bright, sweet face. There was some peach fuzz on his jawline and upper lip. Steve looked damned good in the morning, in a rugged sort of way. "What's the point of having a day off if you wake up at six, anyway?"

"Well I am," Steve said with a triumphant grin and a nip to Tony's jaw. "And six isn't even that early..." he protested and proceeded to kiss down into the dip of Tony's neck. He let his tongue dart out to taste. He hummed happily.

Tony realized Steve was lying on top of him, his body warm. Typically, waking up with a much larger man on top of him would be cause for concern. But Steve's smell gave Tony nothing but comfort. Amazing how quickly pheromones had hijacked Tony's brain. He'd always thought the "honeymoon phase" was just a metaphor or something, not an actual physiological reaction to bonding. It felt wonderful.

His goatee twitched as he tried to suppress a smile. "I get up for two things and two things only, Steve. Coffee and blowjobs." He closed his eye. "Feel free to summon me with either one." He reached up, carding Steve's hair through his fingers, then gave his head a small, suggestive shove.

Steve shivered as Tony oh so subtly directed his head down. "You'll have to talk me through it," he whispered against his neck, pressing a kiss to Tony's chin before he ducked his head down. Steve's deft fingers pushed the edge of his tee up so he could explore his stomach with his mouth, feeling the rise and bumps of muscle beneath his lips. Blue eyes flickered up to watch Tony's face and glinted with mischief. "Well..." Steve murmured, tone playful. "You gonna tell me what to do or what?"

Tony laughed, squirming as Steve kissed his stomach. "What, like I know how the hell to give a blowjob?" He looked down at Steve's face on his stomach and stroked his cheek gently, smiling back at him. A pause. "I've given a couple," he admitted. Another pause. "In Afghanistan." Another pause. Tony's smiled faltered. "I'm pretty sure having a gun held to your head isn't how you're supposed to do it, though." He forced himself to crack a grin.

Steve's expression had changed a little; Tony could smell unease, and anger, and sadness. "...it's fine, Steve. I'm kidding. That was two years ago, it's not a big deal," said Tony uncomfortably.
The only way he was able to think about this stuff at all was through a lens of humor. Sarcasm was his best defense; Steve's expression was serious and that worried Tony; the last thing in the world he wanted to do was get serious and forsake getting a blowjob.

He stroked Steve's hair. "...but, if you really want to make me feel better..." he added, still joking, trying to recapture the mood. He gave Steve's head another little push. "My research tells me you probably have to be a little lower than that to do it right." He put his hands behind his head, watching Steve, still smiling encouragingly.

Steve heart ached for him. At least they were all dead, he reminded himself, which was a strangely comforting thought. Tony, in his suit, blowing them to smithereens. It was a strange and beautiful kind of justice. "It matters to me," he told him quietly, voice almost terrifyingly sincere before he took the hint and moved further down. That was a conversation for a time...not like this.

Tony's morning wood was making a small tent in the sheets. Steve had had this thing inside of him; it really shouldn't have intimidated him. But he still found himself blushing a little, his cheeks turning pink. He looked up at Tony. His Alpha definitely wanted him to do this. Right. Okay...

Gently, he reached up and dragged the sheets down. He ducked in a breath as his Alpha was exposed to him, the musky smell almost overwhelming. Steve leaned forward and gave the head a kiss, watching Tony's reactions carefully as he slipped his mouth over the head and sucked lightly. It tasted strange, Steve had to admit, but it was definitely worth it for Tony's facial expression.

Tony's body shuddered with delight when Steve placed a warm, wet kiss on his member and then slowly began sucking on it. "Oh... yeah..." he murmured, eyes closing and back arcing. "That's it... that's great, Steve. More tongue... yes...that's amazing. You're doing great." He reached down and tangled his hand into Steve's hair, not pushing his head down, just resting his hand there. He glanced down and shivered again at the picture of Steve between his legs. "God, I love you... my omega..." he murmured, arching again in ecstasy.

Steve shivered as Tony's fingers threaded into his hair, nails scratching lightly at the surface. He dipped his head then, taking more of Tony in until the head bumped against the back of his mouth. Almost curiously, Steve traced around the curve of Tony's member with his tongue, feeling a vein on the underside and tracing it. His Alpha shuddered in response and he would have smiled if he could.

Tony let out a strangled sound of pleasure as Steve's tongue roaming over the sensitive under flesh of his cock. He squirmed, his head brushing over the ridges of the top of Steve's mouth, Steve's lips exploring his shaft.

"Oh... oh... omega..." murmured Tony blissfully, stroking Steve's head. "Yes... oh, yes... you're sure you've never done this before... oh, fuck, yes... Steve... Steve, will you swallow for me?" He clenched his teeth as he felt Steve's tongue roam over a vein and trace the head briefly. "F-f- aaaaack," he whimpered, a fist tightening around a clump of Steve's hair.

Steve whined in approval as Tony tugged on his hair sharply, his eyes glazing over with a new kind of lust that he hadn't quite felt before. He hummed around Tony in approval at the notion of him swallowing, sucking at him with earnest.

Steve drew back so only the head rested in his mouth and then began to slowly move back and forth, doing what felt natural as his cheeks hollowed out every time he drew off. He followed Tony's cues. What made him moan and squirm, what made him tug at Steve's hair. It was almost thrilling to feel in charge for once instead of him being the one begging and panting.
Tony groaned, caressing Steve's hair, feeling his balls tighten as he got close. "Steve... gonna cum... gonna cum for you..." he murmured, nearly purring, arching his back. Steve was bobbing on his length and Tony would have been happy to lay there and be serviced for longer, but the sex was secondary to the intimacy for once in his life; the arousing part of having Steve suck him off was knowing this was knowing that Steve was a submissive omega, at least in the bedroom, wanting to please his Alpha. Here, at least, he wasn't the Captain; he was someone else that only Tony got to see, and Tony loved that.

He shuddered as he came, ejaculating into Steve's mouth, murmuring his omega's name lovingly as his hips bucked. "Omega... Steve... omega..." he purred, squirming, arching, enjoying the inviting warm wetness of Steve's mouth.

It was a surprise. But Steve managed it—just barely. He swallowed it down, only a little spent escaping from the corners of his mouth. He licked and sucked Tony clean diligently before pulling off and pressing a kiss to the head and licking his own lips. Steve had honestly expected it taste gross but it was simply new, strange perhaps. Maybe because Tony was his mate the psychical details weren't so important. It was all just about how he was making his Alpha feeling.

Steve crawled back up to Tony's body and pressed a kiss to his cheek. He smiled, blue eyes sparkling. "Are you sufficiently awake now, hm?"

Tony pulled his omega against him, smiling. "Pretty awake, yeah," he purred, kissing the top of Steve's head. "I would still appreciate a cup of coffee, though." He propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at Steve. The soldier was curled up against him sweetly. There was something strangely dichotomous, almost perverse, about seeing an omega in such incredible shape, with a body so hard and toned. The serum had made him look every bit an Alpha. Not that you could always tell just by looking at someone, but the truth is, no one would look at a picture of Steve and possibly think he could be an omega.

Tony snorted softly, remembering the poster he'd had of Captain America, how he'd longed to be a tough, dominant Alpha like the man in the poster. Oh, irony. The look of bliss on Steve's face was nothing like the stern, patriotic expression of Poster-Steve. Tony wondered if his father had ever considered telling him.

Tony brushed a lock of Steve's hair from his forehead. "Well... I'm up now. C'mon. We gotta eat," said Tony, grudgingly getting out of bed and pulling on his boxer-briefs. Maybe he'd nap later. But he was awake at the moment and wanted to spend a lazy morning with his mate.

Steve laughed softly. "Well, you know where the coffee is..." He pointed out and leaned down to nip at Tony's bottom lip softly. As his Alpha pulled on his boxers he rolled over and pulled on his shirt from off the floor, it hung just low enough to be decent but revealed a peek of ass with every step he took.

Steve kissed him properly in the doorway his bedroom, his mouth still tasting a little strange. He nudged their noses together before pulling back. He should be training, out running or something, but all he wanted to do was spend time with Tony.

He moved on automatic to make them waffles like he had the night before. This time he did them with bacon and scrambled eggs, glancing over and guiding Tony to the mugs as he made them both hot drinks. For Steve, it was green tea; he ignored Tony's look of disapproval. He needed to get back into his routine.

"How did your talk with Pepper go?" Steve asked off-handedly as he flipped over pieces of bacon.
Tony leaned his elbows on the counter, watching Steve move around the kitchen. Again, the dichotomy. Steve was huge, muscular, powerful... But barefoot in the kitchen, wearing only a loose t-shirt, making Tony breakfast, he seemed like such a normal, archetypal omega. Tony sipped his coffee, black, studying Steve's movements admiringly.

"Well... she's mad about how I've been... acting like a dick lately," said Tony. "Seemed surprised I pair-bonded. ...frankly, I'm surprised, too. Commitment isn't really my style." He shrugged one shoulder. "We didn't talk for long. I just kind of filled her in and then hung up. She probably needs time to process it, anyway." Tony looked down at his mug. "Her and I... we're real different. But she's been... I dunno. More than an assistant or a friend, Steve. She's... she's kind of been my anchor. I need someone to rein me in. You might have noticed but I'm not the most stable of individuals." He looked up. "We'll see her tomorrow... at the Expo. ...for what it's worth, she's all about omega rights. Always has been. Surprisingly socially progressive, that one."

"I noticed. I worked for her too, remember?" Steve said. "She made me fill in weekly reports about how comfortable I felt in the workplace to try and make improvements. It was sweet, really." He was almost missing working with her. She was one of the most determined women Steve had ever met. Steve smiled a little. "And she apologised for you a lot..."

"Stark Industries always had a pretty open attitude, historically," said Tony with a small shrug. "It's not that Dad was a raging liberal or anything. He just believed in hiring the best candidate for a job, regardless of what they were. You know, he went into business with Stane in the forties, and Stane was Jewish... Everyone thought that was weird, at the time. But Dad didn't care. He said Stane was one of the smartest businessmen he'd ever met and he would have been a fool not to partner up with him."

Tony lapsed into silence. Obadiah had died two years ago and the circumstances had not been pleasant. Tony often found himself wondering about it, late at night, when he'd been drinking. Obadiah had attended his graduation, had taught him piano, had picked him up at the police station when he'd gotten his first DUI. Obadiah had been a man with remarkable control of his emotions and how he expressed them; Tony never knew at what point Obadiah had stopped caring about him and begun loathing him. Tony knew he was difficult, and couldn't help but feel he'd earned Obadiah's wrath; or maybe Obadiah had always secretly hated the boy that took over the company he'd worked so hard to build up, the boy who inherited it unwillingly and never bothered to take it especially seriously.

"...anyway," muttered Tony.

Steve moved to plate up their food as Tony sulked over his steaming cup. Steve fetched cutlery and then they sat down to eat. He crossed one leg over the other neatly and picked up his tea, sipping it with an approving hum. Steve smiled again at Tony over his mug when their eyes met.

"...being an Avenger might help you burn off all that excess energy you don't know what to do with," Steve pointed out as he set his cup down and picked up a fork. "Help you settle down a little. SHIELD certainly got people like Nat on the right path. And it helped Sam with his grieving."

Tony doubted SHIELD would help him clean up his act. Better organizations, notably AA, had tried. "...Assuming I even pass the test. That psyche test, that was insane, Steve. And... my psyche, it's not exactly healthy, probably."

Steve sighed down at his plate. "They shouldn't have stuff from...Afghanistan in the test Tony," he assured him quietly. "It's seen as a field risk for omegas, not so much Alphas. But there will probably be some form of torture," he warned him quietly. "We could always sneak in today and..."
give a test run, let you have a small taste of it to see how you feel about the real thing. Then that still gives you a week to prepare," Steve suggested tentatively. "Speaking of that," he looked over at the clock hung up on his wall. "We have about half an hour before we have to leave."

Tony blinked in surprise. "A half-hour? What? I thought we had the day off? Are you serious?"

He threw back the coffee, wincing, and tore into the bathroom to shave, cursing SHIELD quietly under his breath for making him do things in the mornings.

While he carefully sculpted his goatee, he thought about what Steve had said. A test run might be a good idea. Maybe SHIELD didn't know everything he'd been through, but his own mind did, and Tony had only just wrestled his panic attacks under control in the last year. The first few months that he'd come back had been brutal; the only people in the world who had witnessed him in a flashback were Pepper and Happy, and both of them were sworn to secrecy. Tony wanted a heads-up if any of that was going to rear its ugly head during a psych eval. After all, no one had put the guy with the metal arm in Steve's brain, but there he was. The subconscious was a murky and unpredictable thing.

"So aside from the drug trip, the rest of it is just standard psych stuff, right?" called Tony, trying to sound casual. "Ink blots, word association? Do they ask about your dreams? Did you say, The only reoccurring dream I have is the American dream, because seriously, if you didn't, you missed a incredible opportunity, Cap..."

"Incredible. Sure," Steve hummed, amusedly as he leaned in the doorway. Tony was efficient and well practised as he sorted out his facial hair into the perfect Stark look. Steve was sort of grateful he was an omega; the growth of facial hair, for him, was glacial. He didn't have the patience for it anyway. He only had to shave once a month. Steve liked the way Tony's beard scratched gently against his cheek when he kissed him though. "There's some general cardio stuff. But nothing you can't handle."

"...this is gonna take a while," said Tony, angling his chin this way and that as he shaved.

"We can be a little late. It's fine," Steve assured him softly and then pulled out from the doorway. "I'll just go get dressed," he said and moved into his bedroom, although it smelled just as much of Tony as it did him now, and pulled off the shirt he'd been wearing.

Tony finished grooming and followed Steve into the bedroom. "Steve... are we gonna stay here? Your place? Because I have, you know... I have a place of my own worth, like, twenty-four million dollars that's currently sitting completely empty on the beachside. I miss my shop. My place also has a pool. And a home gym. And JARVIS. I'm just saying."

"Home gym sounds useful," Steve hummed absent-mindedly as he buttoned up his dark blue shirt. It was soft cotton and wore over dark jeans. Casual but presentable.

Tony slipped his arms around Steve's waist and nuzzled into his shoulder. "But where ever my omega goes, I go," he added softly. "Wanna take the bike?"

He leaned back into Tony's touch on instinct and smiled.

"The bike sounds good," Steve said and perked up noticeably at that. "You wanna ride?" he offered tentatively, knowing Tony had expected to last time.

Tony smiled at Steve's offer. "Hey, it's your bike, Steve. I'm a pretty progressive Alpha, apparently; I don't mind riding bitch." Tony was half-joking, but he didn't want to admit that he
enjoyed wrapping his arms around Steve's broad, strong body. And, truthfully, motorcycles hadn't held much sway for him since he'd started flying around in the suits. "Go on," said Tony, giving Steve's ass a slap. "Let's hustle, soldier." He eyed Steve, looking at the omega and his relaxed, casual stance in jeans and a button-down shirt. Steve was so clean-cut, so confident. Definitely more of a twenty-first century omega.

Steve rolled his eyes fondly and took Tony's hand, pulling him out the door and towards the lift.

Steve stopped as they reached the garage and sighed in realisation.

"So...my bike is at the base, because you drove me home yesterday," Steve turned to face Tony and squeezed his hand. "Plan B?"

"Oh. Right," said Tony. "...you see what I mean, Steve? It's too early to think straight." He pulled the soldier toward him. "...Maybe we should just go back to bed..." he murmured suggestively, pressing their bodies together, nipping at Steve's jaw.

It was very tempting to do just that with the low lit of Tony's voice in his ear and that stubble grazing softly against his jaw. Steve shivered involuntarily.

There was a sudden, loud honk behind them that echoed through the concrete parking garage; Tony jumped and whipped around to see a young blonde women. It took Tony a moment to recognize Kate-from-down-the-hall. She was holding a key fob in one hand and had a gym bag slung over her shoulder; she smiled at them.

"Hi, Steve. Congratulations," she said breezily, as if it weren't especially surprising that her neighbor was Captain America and that he was being flirted with in a garage by a rather disheveled-looking weapons designer.

"Hey, Kate," Steve replied a little awkwardly, eyeing the blonde Alpha with some degree of suspicion. She was overly cheery and comfortable and apparently knew who he was. Something didn't quite... click. "You alright?" he asked her, and Kate smiled prettily, but it didn't meet her eyes.

"Awesome. You guys alright? Is this your better half, Steve?"

He hesitated. That question almost felt like a test for some reason.

"Yes," Steve replied carefully. "This is Tony..."

"Oh, c'mon, you know who I am," said Tony with a roll of his eyes. "How many guys have a lamp stuck in their chest?"

She chuckled. "Well, I didn't want to make any assumptions. You two want to come over for dinner sometime, after your honeymoon? I figure you could use a quiet, homemade meal after the media circus dies down."

Tony cast a look at Steve. Tony had a strict policy against getting chummy with locals. Also, he was starting to notice that Steve's life was packed full with other Alphas that Steve seemed pretty friendly with. There was Natasha and Sam (who Tony still hadn't met but imagined like a male version of Natasha, complete with sexy Russian accent) and now Kate-the-nurse-from-down-the-hall. It made sense, of course; there were lots of Alphas in Steve's line of work. Nonetheless, it put Tony on guard. Or maybe he just still felt self-conscious because they had only bonded so recently, and also only recently gotten over their first fight.
"We'll talk about it later. We're sort of running behind," said Tony.

"Well, then, making out in the parking garage probably isn't the best use of your time, is it?" said Kate teasingly.

Tony bristled. "We weren't making out, we were.... discussing.... matters. C'mon, Steve, time waits for no man. Let's go..." He grabbed Steve's hand and dragged him away. They'd take the car. Tony wanted to get on with the day. For some reason, Kate unnerved him, and not just because she was a rather dominant Alpha. What the hell kind of self-respecting Alpha would be a nurse, anyway? Weird.

"See you around, Steve!" Kate chimed with a wave and a smile, her eyes practically glittering. There was still something about her- something deadly under the surface. She reminded him of Natasha a little- an Alpha who was seemingly not dominating in any way. She was subtle, yet strong and Steve had no doubt that he never wanted to mess with her.

Tony tried to shake her out of his head, changing the topic as he held out his key fob, unlocking the Aston Martin with a chirp. "So. Steve. What's on the agenda for today? What's a typical SHIELD agent get up to? X-Files-type stuff, right, aliens, killer robots..." Steve looked confused. "...The X-Files was a show with two agents named Mulder and Scully who debated over the existence of aliens despite investigating paranormal stuff every week, most of which turned out to be aliens," explained Tony. "That's probably another thing you should Google when you have the time..."

"There's a lot of things I should Google," Steve pointed out as he got into passenger seat as Tony did the driver's. He would have to drive the bike back separately after this to make sure it got home. For some reason he didn't like the thought of it out in a SHIELD base. "They just wanted me to come in about the Winter Soldier, remember? I don't know why they asked for you, too, but they did." Steve hoped it wouldn't be with Fury. He had an awful feeling the director might use this to try and undermine their relationship. Or something. He didn't know.

Or maybe they'd finally cough up about New Mexico. Whatever that was, it was big.

The drive was mostly peaceful. Steve made it clear he didn't want to talk about the Winter Soldier in his vision before, and that he didn't know why he was there. He was honestly frustrated with SHIELD that they wouldn't just drop the matter. He didn't see what could come of this.

It was a clear day and Tony put on the radio as they drove. He found Steve's hand and placed it on the stick shift, placing his own hand over Steve's so that he could drive and remain in contact with his omega. It was, in Tony's opinion, bad form for SHIELD to insist on dragging Steve in to talk some more about the Winter Soldier, especially considering how awful the psych eval had been, especially considering this was supposed to be their honeymoon period and they were supposed to be off on their own, exploring their new bond.

But Tony knew that the government waited for no man and so he tried to consider himself lucky to be allowed to tag along in the first place.

Phil met them by the main door of the building where Steve's psych eval had been. "Good morning, Cap, Mr Stark." He offered them a warm smile, both of them. Steve felt oddly grateful for his hospitality. "Thank you for coming in so early, the doctors have been consulting...

Tony gave Coulson a nod, hovering over Steve's shoulder. The team seemed to have accepted that Tony was going to be there whether they liked it or not; his bond with Steve had all but guaranteed it. Tony noticed that Clint was absent again. He wondered if he was off torturing
Coulson led them down a corridor of doors, all of them unmarked and locked with what appeared to be a retina scanner. Tony was disappointed he didn't get to see a scanner in action; the door to the boardroom that Coulson led them into was not protected.

Tony sat next to Steve. The seats were fake leather, he noted with amusement. Why they hadn't sprung for real leather was beyond him.

Steve recognised the main doctor (Richards was his name?) as they stepped into the room. There were only two other doctors; they almost looked nervous. But there was no Fury in sight— not yet, anyway.

"We're grateful you came back so soon, Captain Rogers," Richards said, glancing between Steve and Tony quickly. "We've been consulting about yesterday's events and we've drawn up a blank."

"It's simply not possible," a female doctor filled in.

"I thought we already established that?" Steve said, hiding his impatience poorly.

"Yes, well... we want to send you back in for a second try of it."

Tony's amusement at the fake leather chairs evaporated the moment the doctors suggested a second trial.

"No. Absolutely not," said Tony immediately, before anyone else could speak.

"Mr. Stark, with all due respect, it's not your call," said Coulson. Tony wanted to smack the smug little omega right out of his chair.

"I don't care. You can't give him another test, you're going to fuck him up in the head. What, once wasn't good enough? The guy's been through enough. He passed, didn't he? Who cares if some super-assassin showed up? I mean, hell, it's not like there's not a ton of people with weird prosthetics in Steve's life— there's me, there was that guy who attacked us in Monaco... Bam, that's two Alphas with weird metal appendages in the last week alone. What're you gonna possibly find out by putting him under again, huh, that your stupid program is broken and it's dumping crazy assassins into people's subconscious minds without meaning to? No way. Forget it. It's not happening."

"That's Steve's decision. Not yours," said one of the doctors pleasantly. A beta, Tony noted. One who had no idea what it was like to be an Alpha, the drive to protect omegas, the desperation to shield Steve.

"I think Steve probably agrees with me," said Tony, trying to keep calm. An unintentional snarl or bristle would, he knew, make him look unstable, and everyone was already looking at him with a gaze that indicated they thought he was out of line.

"I'm assuming you're not going into this blind, right?" Steve spoke after a few beats of silence. "I mean...Tony's right. This isn't good for anyone's mind. So I don't think you'd put me through this unless you had an end goal in sight. You're supposed to be the country's brightest and best. Come on, you must have some idea what caused it. And that's why you wanna put me back in there, right? To confirm it. You don't take unnecessary risks with your captain's brain." Steve leaned forward. "So. Tell me. What do you think is causing it? A program glitch or something? And then,
Richards blinked in surprise. "I, er..." He glanced over at Coulson almost nervously. The omega agent shuffled in his seat.

"Captain, it's really just speculation... they don't really know..."

"Then why the hell would I put myself back in there?" Steve asked, sounding impatient again as he raised a brow.

The beta doctor piped up. "We've seen this kind of thing before, once or twice--" She promptly ignored the look Richards and Coulson gave her. "When an Alpha turns up without any context, and unexpectedly-- there's a few explanations we can offer."

"Go on," Steve said when she hesitated, drawing her gaze back to him instead of the disapproving officials around her.

"We've seen Alphas appear in omega simulations before. Ah... typically, those Alphas are... well... you'd have to be related to him, by blood. Or bonded."

"Neither of those are possible," Steve said without hesitation, without blinking. "I don't have any living relatives, Alpha or otherwise. And obviously, I'm bonded to Tony, not to--"

Richards smiled tightly. "Which is why we want you to go for 'round two,' Captain, so we can try and work this out..."

"...it doesn't sound to me like there's anything to work out," said Tony after a moment. "Look, Steve's not related to anyone with a metal arm, and he's bonded to me. Obviously his brain just got confused and mixed up me with someone else. Case closed. ...Steve, you don't have a brother or something who's an Alpha, right? ...No, obviously, it was just a mix-up. Case. Closed."

"I think it's in our best interest to explore this further," said Coulson coolly. "One omega to another, Captain, you understand you're at an increased risk in the field. The simulation is not just to test your mental fortitude, but to dredge up any potential problems so that they can be addressed. In our opinion, this does represent a problem."

Tony reached under the table and groped for Steve's hand. His heart was pounding; he was surprised at how anxious he felt. He looked at Steve, then back at the doctors. "...is it safe? To fuck with someone's head like that twice in forty-eight hours?"

"SHIELD has some of the most elite military doctors on staff," replied Richards.

"Said the military doctor," said Tony with a roll of his eyes. "I don't think this is a problem, unless you think, realistically, Steve's gonna get attacked by the Winter Soldier. Who, let's be real, only shows up, what, once every decade or something and probably isn't even--"

"Fury was fairly clear that he'd like a second simulation run," said Richards.

".. .No ," repeated Tony, squeezing Steve's hand under the table.

He felt Tony's fingers under the table and turned his hand up, winding their fingers together. Steve squeezed gently. Tony felt tense under his touch. Steve swallowed.

"In part, we'd like to evaluate your response," added Coulson. "Having a bonded pair on a team together can be a liability if they have a meltdown every time they feel their partner is in danger."
"Natasha and Clint--"

"--can separate our their pair-bond from their work," finished Coulson. "Can you?"

"...of course I can," lied Tony. "...and isn't it unfair to put that on me now? We just bonded, you can't--"

"Do you want to join the Avengers Initiative or not?"

Tony cast a helpless look at Steve.

"Tony won't have a meltdown if I'm in danger. In fact, it will probably make him more efficient. It certainly did on the race track in Monaco," Steve pointed out coolly. "We are not the liability here. And until this first period, the honeymoon thing, is over for us, you really have no right to wind him up over it."

"We wouldn't be running the same simulation as before, which was battle orientated." Richards tried to explain, his hand gestures everywhere. "This would be a case of letting your subconscious doing the exploring for us. We re-run the memory of the Winter Soldier and we see what comes up. If there's nothing, or the same as before, then the cause for concern is greatly reduced."

"What cause for concern?" demanded Tony.

"That your bond is exploitable," said Coulson with forced patience. "The Winter Soldier is an Alpha. You're an omega. We'd expect you to see Stark and for Stark to be possessive. But for the Winter Soldier to show up, unprompted, and call you his..."

"And if the cause for concern is made worse by what you see?" Steve asked, eyes narrowing.

Tony frowned slightly at Steve's question about their concern being made worse. Why would it be made worse? He was convinced this was a misunderstanding and everyone was overreacting.

Another doctor, a beta woman, was about to respond when Phil smoothly butt in. "Then we'll have to pursue some form of investigation. This is all in your best interests, Captain."

"What, like bugging my apartment was?" Steve asked with such a sweet smile it was almost unnerving. Phil bit back a sigh. He didn't seem phased. Just tired.

"Will you do it, or not?"

Steve bit his bottom lip. "Fine." He said. "But Tony has the right to turn it off whenever he deems necessary."

"So... so just to be clear- no battles, no... no tests? This is just purely exploratory?" asked Tony.

The beta doctor nodded.

Tony nodded back. Okay. That didn't seem so bad. And besides, Tony should be familiarizing himself with the simulation, what to expect for his own evaluation next week.

"Let's get it over with so me and Steve can get out of here," said Tony. He gave Steve's hand a small, encouraging squeeze. As long as Schmidt wasn't here... as long as they weren't trying to torture his omega... as long as he had veto power... well, that all seemed agreeable to him.

They led Steve into the same room as before, Tony in tow. He watched as they checked his temperature, his blood pressure, his pulse (all were perfect, as usual). He noted that they let the
omega doctor be the one to push up Steve's shirt and place electrodes on his chest, and to run his hands through Steve's hair, applying gel and wires to him, hooking him up to a monitor.

"If I see any hint of Schmidt, I'll make sure they shut it down," murmured Tony softly, touching Steve's arm comfortably as the doctors hovered over a computer, calibrating a program.

"Ready, Captain Rogers?" asked the female, holding up a syringe. Tony cringed. He hated doctors and he hated needles. A bead of liquid appeared at the tip and slid down, glinting ominously in the light. It contrasted weirdly with the blonde doctor, who was humming a little and reached out to wipe Steve's arm off with an iodine swab, looking like this was a normal day at the beach. For her, it probably was.

Steve offered Tony a small smile of reassurance as he laid down against the chair. The gel felt cold in his hair, he didn't like it all that much. The wires, too...it reminded him of the serum transformation. While, arguably lifesaving, it had also been painful.

"See you on the other side," he said.

"See you," said Tony, letting Coulson lead him out of the room and into the observation suite.

He pressed himself against the glass; Steve had settled back against the chair and closed his eyes.

Steve felt small waves of vibrations through the wires, and then-

Steve woke up. It was freezing. The air was biting and the temperature was so low even with gloves on his fingers trembled. It was so cold. So, so cold.

"Steve!"

His attention was quickly grasped. Steve's head snapped up to see Bucky- Bucky! - gripping onto the train door for dear life as the train itself was chugging on determinedly. He moved automatically, rushing to Bucky's rescue. Steve had played this game before. He'd played this scene out a thousand times in his sleep- and every time Bucky fell. But it felt real all over again. The real fear in Bucky's eyes, the quake in Steve's legs as he sprinted over and reached out...

"Buck. Buck, just take my hand- Bucky, hang on. Just hang on, Buck-"

And then he was gone. Bucky was falling and Steve was watching uselessly. Bucky was dying all over again. And before he knew it...

Steve was jumping out after him.

But then something caught him midair- no, someone . Steve blinked in surprise as he felt metal arms enclose around him. The cold air whipped around him one last time and then was gone in an instant.

Tony pressed himself against the one-way glass, watching Steve lying there in the chair, eyes closed. Since the last time he'd been here, someone had wiped away the blood from the glass.

The monitors were plain blue-grey, swirling, showing nothing in particular. Then, slowly, an image resolved. Mountains. Winter. Show. A rushing train. And Steve was stretching for someone, someone Tony thought looked vaguely familiar but couldn't quite place him.

And then he was gone, and so was Steve.
And then there was Tony.

"Ha! Told you!" said Tony triumphantly, tapping the glass. "Metal arms, see?" One of the doctors looked up with irritation from her clipboard and mouthed, *Don't tap the glass.*

Tony stuffed his hands in his pockets, feeling pleased with himself. In the new simulation, Steve had fallen and Tony, his Alpha, had caught him. Which was precisely how Steve's subconscious should see it. Tony was his Alpha, his protector, and when threatened, Tony had appeared to save the day.

"I feel like I should say something cheesy now," Tony joked, *his voice tinny through the mask of the suit.* Steve felt himself smile. He traced the curve of one lit up eye with his fingertips and realised it was warm now. But his fingers still felt cold. It took him a moment but eventually he dragged his eyes away to see a city far beneath them, sparkling with lights. Why had Steve been falling again? Why had Tony caught him? He didn't know anymore. All that mattered was that his Alpha had caught him and they were both okay.

Right?

"Steve?" *It was Natasha's voice.* Where was it coming from? *Did Steve have his comms set in?*

The monitors were scrambling, resolving into a new scene, a familiar one, Steve's apartment... Natasha...

"Steve? Are you sure that's how bonds work?"

"How bonds work?" repeated Tony. He turned and looked at Phil. "What's she mean, how bonds work?"

"A memory," said Phil, standing at the window casually, hands clasped behind his back. "His brain is referring back to a conversation."

"A conversation about bonding," said Tony. "...about me! ...what's she saying?"

"If you'd shut up, we could probably hear it better," said Phil, with his usual friendly passive-aggressive tone. Tony frowned but shut up. He didn't want to miss anything.

"Nat, come on-" *Steve rolled out of Tony's arms comfortably and landed in a chair.* It was his sofa, in his living room. Natasha was sat at the other end of it, legs tucked underneath herself with a cup of a tea in her hands. *Natasha's hair was tied up messily; they'd just been sparring, hadn't they? She looked domestic. It was...sweet, almost. But where had Tony gone? Tony had been around, right?*

"Steve. I'm just worried," Natasha sighed and Steve turned back to face her.

"Was Tony here a second ago?" *He asked.* Natasha frowned.

"Tony? No, he's not..."

Steve saw a glint of metal in the window and moved towards it on automatic. It was almost night so it was dark outside. Natasha usually came around late, when Clint liked to do archery practise. *He liked to be 'in the zone.'*

"Steve. Come back here." Natasha said but her voice sounded distant. "Get away from the window."
"I see him," Steve insisted and moved to unlock the latch.

"That's not Tony," Natasha said, her voice sounding grave but barely a whisper now. Steve turned back to see his living room empty. And dark. The lights off. He frowned.

"Nat...?"

Steve cried out as there was a loud smash and then a metal arm had wrapped around his throat and pulled him out of the window. And then he was falling, falling towards concrete, towards death-

He was submerged in water. It was icy cold and his uniform clung to him desperately and awkwardly. Steve sucked in a watery mouthful into his lungs on instinct. His eyes widened in panic and he tried to swim to the surface but his limbs felt too heavy, too chilled. It was like he was moving in slow motion but drowning in hyperspeed.

The monitors were blinking as Steve's brain jumped tracks again. He was in the cockpit of a plane; the only illumination was a series of blinking emergency lights on a panel, and the water that was filling the enclosed space was reflecting it into lovely swirls against the metal ceiling, and Steve was gasping in the chair--

"Shut it down," said Tony immediately.

"Don't," said Phil.

"What?! No! He's drowning, shut it down!" barked Tony. He rapped on the glass.

Don't tap on the glass, mouthed one of the doctors again.

"HEY!" shouted Tony, panic rising in him. But the monitors had already gone dark and Steve was no longer panicking. He was just... sitting there. "What's wrong? Is he okay? What's going on?" demanded Tony frantically. He remembered how Steve had told him that it had taken hours for the plane to go under, how his drowning had been slow and cold and painful. Tony's heart was throbbing; he wanted to go to his omega; he was panicking because he knew the last memory in the world Steve would want to relive was that one--

"He's fine. Look," said Phil, putting a hand on Tony's shoulder. The monitors showed... a beach.

Steve's vision was black. There was a nothingness. It was peaceful.

Then he gasped, awake and choking. Steve wheezed and rolled over, sand sticking to his wet skin as he coughed out salty sea water onto the dirt below him. He shuddered and convulsed, his eyes burning as he blinked to try to see. His lungs burned. Slowly, but surely, Steve got his breath back. He ran a sandy hand over his face and sat up with a soft grunt and a shudder.

"We went to the beach yesterday," explained Tony, calming a little, expecting to see himself at any moment.

Except he didn't.

This time there was no mistaking the Winter Soldier as anyone else. His hair was long, shadowing his eyes; the rest of his face was obscured by a mask; he was definitely, absolutely not Tony.

And they were speaking in Russian.
"Goddammit, what's he's saying?" demanded Tony.

"He's asking for help," began Phil.

_The Winter Soldier stood ominously not too far away. He was stood stock still, watching him from the shoreline, his mask leaving him expressionless. Now Steve had seen actual pictures, it was easier to see him._

"Пожалуйста. Спаси меня," he said, voice low and rough like the waves. "Спаси меня от этой боли."

_Steve frowned. "Как?"

_Wordlessly, the Winter Soldier raised a gun from his side. Steve tried to stand up in hope of running, but before he could even rise to his feet...the soldier promptly shot him in the head._

Every monitor hooked up to Steve went haywire, beeps and trills and alarms sounding; Steve's body spasmed and, half-asleep, Steve reached up and began ripping wires off himself. Tony slammed against the window (Don't tap on the glass now, motherfuckers! his brain thought with a twisted sense of humor) and slithered to the floor with a half-growl, half-whine.

"Stark!" barked Phil. He grabbed Tony's arm and half-pulled, half-dragged him over to the door. "Go," he commanded.

Oh, right. Doors were a thing. Tony made a mental note to be nicer to Coulson in the future.

Steve woke up hyperventilating with hands on him, hands goddamn everywhere. Before he knew what he was doing he'd ripped the wires away and had fallen off of the chair onto the floor, the doctors stumbling back.

Tony darted into the procedure room and crouched on the ground, gathering Steve into his arms; Steve had a wide-eyed, wild look. He as disoriented, and his strength made his dangerous, but Tony wasn't thinking of that. "Hey. Hey. You're okay. Steve. I've got you," he murmured. "It wasn't real. You're fine, you're alive. Steve. I got you, you're good. Look at me, Steve..."

Steve's blue eyes darted around wildly. He was vaguely aware of Tony's presence. _Alpha_. It was grounding, calming; Steve slumped against hat he figured was a leg, eyes tracking the lines of Tony's face. Familiar and strong, the sharpness of his eyes piercing into Steve in that moment. Steve let out a ragged breath, his chest shuddering with every rise and fall.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't dead. He was here with Tony. It was okay.

Steve's breathing was ragged; he grabbed Tony's hand and Tony cringed at how hard Steve's grip was. Absolutely fucking crushing. But he didn't shake him off; he'd rather have his hand broken than shake off his omega; after a few moments, Steve's grip loosened, anyway.

"There you go... match my breaths..." murmur Tony. This was what Pepper had done when he'd gotten back from Afghanistan. He'd slept weird hours, and fallen asleep in weird places. His bed had been too soft and he'd tended to curl up into small areas, closets or under the cars in the garage. He'd wake with a scream lingering in his throat, Pepper's sea-green eyes peering at him, and this is how she'd extracted him and brought him back. "Listen to my breathing, Steve... breathe with me... one... and two... in... and out..."

Steve was gripping Tony's hand too tightly, he realised. He winced and loosened his grip. Had he hurt him? Oh god, had he?
"F-fuck..." He whispered, screwing his eyes shut as his breathing finally began to calm down. Richards was muttering to Coulson who was already on the line to Fury. Whatever the hell that just was, it wasn't good.

Natasha appeared in the doorway looking stoic, hands clasped in front of her. She walked up to Tony and Steve but kept to a safe distance, knowing Tony could easily get defensive right now. She looked over at Tony, meeting his gaze.

"We should get him somewhere more comfortable," Natasha murmured. "They'll have a lot of questions." She hesitated a few seconds. "It might be easier if I ask them instead of..." Her eyes flitted sideways pointedly as Hill and Fury were flitting about on the other side of the glass, clearly in a somewhat heated discussion.

Steve, in the meantime, still had his head in Tony's lap. He opened his eyes slowly, looking up at Tony with a glassy expression. He looked pale. "I t-think he's going to kill me," he whispered, soft enough so only Tony and Natasha could hear. And for the first time since Steve had met Tony, he actually sounded afraid.

"What? Who? Who's going to kill you? No one's going to kill you," snapped Tony, Steve's fear making Tony irritable and anxious. "You're safe, Steve, come on, you're with SHIELD, and none of that was your fault, by the way, they're the one who wanted to do a second run, you're fine... Everything is fine, right? You're fine. Come on, let's get you water. Let's go somewhere quiet."

Steve was settling; Tony looked up and his eyes locked with Natasha. "Where the fuck have you been?" He felt his lip twitch but fought the urge to bare his teeth. No one was touching them; they were letting Steve and Tony huddle, and Steve was calming down. They were safe.

He didn't know if he trusted Natasha. But his only other option at the moment was Fury. So he didn't really have a choice. "...take us to a conference room or something," he demanded. He fought the urge to ask her when she and Steve had talked about bonding, what they had said. There would be time for that later. He wanted to sit Steve down and help him regain control before the inevitable interrogation started. Tony was reminded, vaguely, of Monaco, how many people had attacked him with a barrage of questions when he'd been fighting for his life only minutes earlier.

Steve took Tony's offered hand instinctively and rose with a slight wobble. His vision span for a view moments and he rubbed at his eyes, Tony's hand and voice soothing as he gained his bearings back. Ugh, he felt sick too. Wonderful.

They followed Natasha through the observation room and into the hallway; Fury was walking toward them. Tony bristled, the hair on the back of his neck spiking; Natasha gave Fury a lingering look as they passed by him. He didn't speak to them. Steve didn't know what that meant.

The room she led them to was oddly cozy. It had a sofa and a rug; it looked almost homely. Tony and Steve took the sofa. Natasha grabbed a chair and sat opposite them.

"Do you want Tony here?" Natasha asked Steve bluntly. The blonde frowned.

"Why wouldn't-"

"Because I'm going to ask why the first thing you saw was Bucky Barnes." Natasha's words were flat and matter-of-fact, but there was a strange sort of sadness in her eyes. She didn't want to do this.

Tony looked from Steve to Natasha, lost.
"Who, the guy on the train?" asked Tony, perched on the end of the couch. Natasha had led them to a nice room, cozy, quaint... Tony made a mental note that he should treat her and Coulson nicer. Clearly, they cared about Steve. Anyone who cared about Steve was all right in Tony's books.

Steve sat next to him, their hands entwined, Tony rubbing his thumb against the back of Steve's hand soothingly. Steve was avoiding looking at Tony.

Tony only knew the guy's name was Bucky because Steve had been begging him, by name, to take his hands. And now, thanks to Natasha, he had a last name: Bucky Barnes. Kind of a dumb name, really. Tony had the same nagging feeling that he'd seen that guy on the train before.


Then, suddenly, it hit him like a ton of bricks. The picture on Steve's fridge, the man leaning out of a window, smoking. The man with his shirt unbuttoned, the dog tags dangling from his neck.

"Bucky Barnes," repeated Tony, testing the words out. Still kind of a dumb name. "...It's obvious, right? He's still guilty about the guy's death. Which isn't fair, at all, because... because you tried to save him, right?" said Tony, holding Steve's hands in his. "War sucks, right? Not your fault. Whadda they call it, uh... survivor's guilt- yeah! Kind of obvious that he'd think back to that.... That's why you didn't want to talk about him, right?"

It was all coming together. Tony's heart ached for his omega. He was aware that he was repeating "right?" a lot, but he couldn't help it, because Steve and Natasha were ignoring him and Tony felt like he was still missing something important. It was making him feel stupid, a sensation Tony virtually never, ever experienced.

"This is why you didn't want to talk about him; he was the guy on your fridge, right?"

Steve looked miserable; Natasha looked... sympathetic? Sad? Actually, both of them had weird expressions and Tony couldn't really interpret them. He wasn't sure why they were behaving like this, because it all made sense to Tony. Steve felt guilt that a guy had died under his command, a guy he was close to, a guy named Bucky who fell to his death, who looked Steve in the eye right as he fell. A guy whose photo Steve kept on his fridge, a constant reminder. God, it was so tragic. Tony untangled their hands and placed a hand on the back of Steve's neck to draw the omega to him, wanting to soothe him.

"Not your fault, Steve," Tony murmured, stroking the mating mark on the back of Steve's neck. It was still healing. "You can't save everyone. You tried..."

Steve leaned into Tony's touch automatically, his eyes slowly slipping shut. He sighed softly and hummed, turning to look at Tony. He looked stressed, concerned. Maybe Steve should tell him, but he didn't know how without freaking him the hell out.

"The sequence was triggered by a memory of the Winter Soldier from last time," Natasha explained calmly. "This shouldn't really have anything to do with survivor’s guilt." She was speaking to both of them, but she didn't take her eyes off of Steve.

Steve swallowed thickly and stared down at the floor. "He... he smelt like him. I already told Tony that."

"The metal arm Duke Nukem guy smelt like Bucky?" said Tony, tilting his head. "Weird."

Natasha was staring pointedly at Steve. Steve's body was tense; Tony stroked his arm, trying to
"Kind of a major security issue, if a HYDRA agent is smelling like Barnes," said Natasha. "And you realise that makes no sense if Bucky is dead right? Now you have Tony. It makes no sense."

"I don't understand," said Tony. "It pains me to say that, you have no idea. But I don't--"

"The issue is, Steve is associating the smell of an Alpha with a HYDRA agent."

Steve didn't say anything. He just gripped the edge of the sofa tightly.

"Are you sure the serum definitely got rid of-" began Natasha

"Yes," Steve snapped, blue eyes suddenly flying up. "I know it did. Natasha, it was gone."

"...Still have what? ...What are you guys talking about?" asked Tony, looking back and forth between them. The way Natasha and Steve were talking, like there was some secret code, things they didn't want Tony to know... it was bothering him. A lot. "...Steve? ...Steve?"

Tony's phone went off.

Tony checked it. Restricted.

He answered it with irritation. "Listen, Pepper, if this is about the Expo, then I told you, tomorrow--"

"Tony. How you doing? I double cycle." The voice was thick with a Russian accent, rough from years of smoking.

Vanko.

Tony's blood ran cold.

"Excuse me a moment," he said to Natasha, giving Steve's hand a loving pat. He slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Steve-" Natasha placed a hand on his knee as the door slipped shut behind Tony. "You have to tell him."

"But what if he hates me?" Stupid words. Stupid thoughts. Steve's mind was in pieces. Natasha frowned and sighed quietly before pulling her hand back, a slight crease in her brow.

"He won't."

"But it was gone- it was gone, Nat. I swear. The serum got rid of it. I didn't feel it anymore-"

"Have you ever considered..." Natasha cut in smoothly, voice terribly soft. "That it wasn't the serum? Maybe the bond was severed in some other way. Maybe, whatever Zola did to him..."

Steve felt a chill run down him, like he was being plunged back into icy cold water. It was like he was drowning. No...it couldn't be... It couldn't be that Bucky was suffering all that time and Steve did nothing just because he'd assumed Bucky didn't want him. Steve felt that emptiness- that was because the bond was gone surely? Not because that was how Bucky was feeling.

"But...I'm bonded to Tony now." Steve managed to get out.
"Well, your subconscious is bringing up your other Alpha. Which means he might not be dead."

Steve shook his head. "That's impossible. He fell. They never even found the body. He'd-- he'd be, like, ninety-three years old. That's impossible."

"Steve...you know there's cases of this-"

Outside, in the hall, Tony was pacing frantically. The hallway was lit up, too brightly, with industrial fluorescents, and it was ominously empty.

"...you what?" said Tony. "Did you say you doubled the cycle?"

"You told me to double cycle. Makes more power. Good advice."

Tony was gripping the phone so hard it hurt. "...Ivan? Ivan, is that you?" He knew it was, but he was having trouble believing it. "I thought you were dead. You died. You sound... remarkably... not dead, actually. Healthy, perky, sprightly..."

"You too."

Tony's heart was pounding with panic.

"Soon, everyone will know the truth. That Stark men are not made of iron. That the Stark legacy is built with fog, and mirrors. It take your father forty years to ruin me. It take me... forty minutes."

"I'm sorry, I don't think I follow," said Tony, struggling to maintain his calm, sarcastic tone, even though his hands were shaking. "Maybe you could, um, tell me all about that, we could do brunch, meet up, you know, work out the deets..."

The chuckle on the other line was low and breathy. "I hope you are ready, Stark. I am. Have been ready for many, many years."

The line went dead.


And Steve, poor, sweet, sad Steve, sitting in that conference room with the too-long, worn out burgundy couch...

Tony took a few seconds to breathe heavily and collect himself before he went back in. He couldn't be anxious. No. No signs of weakness; not in front of Steve. Steve needed him to be strong. Steve needed him to be a pillar of strength. And Tony loved him, loved his omega deeply, primally. He had to; he couldn't lose, couldn't disappoint, not again.

He walked back into the room with as much cheery confidence as he could muster. "I told them I am perfectly happy with my long-distance surface," he informed Natasha calmly, dropping onto the sofa next to Steve and reaching for his hands again.

If Steve hadn't been so stuck in his own head he might have noticed something was a little off with Tony. But right now his thoughts were racing at a lightning speed and he felt sick. Steve's hands shook but calmed a little at Tony's touch again.
"I think we should do a scan," Natasha suggested quietly. "To search for...scar tissues that might have survived the whole serum process. Scar tissues that might be below the surface, that we can't see. If they're there, then we'll need to start looking for him. Because the only way for him to have shown up like that would be if he was alive."

Steve had gone as white as a sheet. "But- he can't-- we looked for him. No one could've survived that fall."

"I think we need to do a scan, and find out whether your body kept the bond, in any capacity, after the injected you with the serum," repeated Natasha.

Tony looked from Natasha to Steve, not really following. His thoughts were racing, distracted. There hadn't been time to trace the call but it was clearly a threat... there was no mistaking that for anything else... should he mention this to someone? But what would he even say? He had no evidence that Ivan was alive; everyone said he'd been killed in a prison riot. They had found a body. Even if they did believe Tony, then what? Ivan's threat had been vague. He'd given no details. Simply promised to attack Tony again. Except that, unlike in Monaco, Tony now had Steve. The thought of Steve getting hurt after Tony fucking told the guy how to make a better arc reactor... a better weapon... God, he'd been so stupid...

"Yeah, yeah, a scan," agreed Tony distantly. "Makes sense, find out if- wait, what?" Natasha's words hit him. "Scar tissue? What scar tissue? ...in his brain or something? ...is that what's wrong, does Steve have a head injury?"

Oh, God, no. Scars meant hurt; scars meant injury. Tony couldn't stand the thought of his omega being injured, not right now. But the way Natasha was saying scar tissue was pretty unambiguous. Was that why the program had glitched out, dumped the assassin into Steve's head? Because Steve had some old wart trauma they were just now finding out about?

Steve's body didn't show any scars. Not a single one. The serum had bumped up Steve's healing factors to a ridiculous degree. But just because they couldn't see anything externally didn't mean there might not be something lingering below the surface...

Tony pulled Steve against him, folding him into an embrace. Steve's smell was almost terrified and Tony felt awful for him. He couldn't tell Steve about Ivan, not now; he couldn't tell anyone else, either, because it was probably bounce right back to Steve.

"Hey. Cap. It's okay," he said, putting on a brave face for the omega.

His words had zero effect and were given no time to have one; the door burst open and five people walked in. One of them was Fury. The other was Coulson.

"Rogers," said Fury with a small, tight nod. "Unless I knew better, I would say that your brain seems to have a bit of an obsession with James Buchanan Barnes." He held up a manila folder: Steve's records. SHIELD knew Steve's past to a disturbing degree. They knew Steve's previous relationship with Barnes. It was on file, inaccessible to anyone other than those with top security clearance and permission to access it. But still on record.

"Well, it makes sense that his brain would, wouldn't it?" snapped Tony, bristling a little. "I thought the point of that exercise was to figure out why Steve's been mentally hunted by the Winter Soldier, not to remind him of all of his World War II survivor's guilt."

A beat passed.
"Why do you think that is, Captain?" asked Fury, tossing Steve's file onto a low table in front of them and fixing Steve with a stern, one-eyed glare. Tony clung to Steve, not especially caring if anyone saw and judged them. He had expected his feelings toward Steve to stabilize, but instead, they were stronger than ever. The honeymoon period, Tony was discovering, wasn't about emotions going away. No, it was just about learning to handle them. Since mating properly, Tony's body, mind, and soul had begun fine-tuning themselves to Steve. Tony felt like he could practically read the other's mind. It was thrilling and terrifying how close Tony felt to him, and how close Steve probably felt to him. Tony tried to console himself by thinking of Steve as an organic JARVIS. It wasn't weird that JARVIS knew every little thought and attitude and emotion, so why should he care if Steve did? Perhaps because Tony had never cared about anyone like this, except, perhaps, Pepper. But Pepper was a beta and no matter how much Tony liked her (and he liked her a hell of a lot), they couldn't even physically achieve this kind of bond. The sensitivity to Steve's emotions, his smells, his body language... this was deeply rooted in instinct, evolution, hundreds of thousands of years of Alphas and omegas adapting to each other.

Tony was aware, though, that Coulson was eyeing their hands, twisting together in Steve's lap. And Tony couldn't help but feel a tinge of embarrassment at how hard he'd fallen after spending decades avoiding this very thing.

Steve met Fury's gaze with the upmost contempt possible, blue eyes fiery. Steve might have been scared and confused, but he would never back down from a fight and God help him if he was going to let Fury feel like he was winning here. Steve thought about the things he'd seen, things he'd felt and smelled. Bucky smelled like the ashes of fire, an inviting type of heat. It was home. It was comfort. Tony smelled of engine grease and creation, every moment and thought a bright spark that ignited something in Steve's very own chest. Tony was a constant excitement. Something that made his breath hitch. The thought of Bucky made him want to sleep, to curl up in the covers of his bed and tug his duvet over his head to block out the bright early morning sun of Brooklyn as he mumbled, "five more minutes ..."

There was an awkward pause. A silence in the room that dragged out whilst neither Steve nor Fury looked away from each other.

"Are you suggesting that he's still alive?" Steve asked finally, raising a brow. "Because I watched him die."

"I assure you," Coulson said coolly, "no one is making this suggestion lightly. However, we didn't insert the Winter Soldier into your subconscious."

"So who did?" demanded Steve.

Coulson ignored him. "We also didn't insert Barnes into the program. Both of those must have come from you. If HYDRA has found some way to exploit your bond, then what we have on our hands is a major security breach. And if the Winter Soldier is interested in you, for whatever reason, you are in terrible danger, Captain. And I think what you just saw proves that fact."

"It proves that I associate the thought of an assassin with violence."

"But also Bucky Barnes," Fury countered in quickly. "A fact which cannot be ignored."

"So what are you trying to say?" Steve demanded, hair on the back of his neck prickling up.

"He asked your for help, Steve," Natasha pointed out softly, her words so gentle in comparison to everyone else's that all heads turned her way. She stood calmly, her back soldier-straight and expression pensive. "And he did it while smelling like... well. I don't need to explain to you what
"How in the hell would HYDRA magically get into my brain and mix up one of their assassins with my ma-- with Bucky?" demanded Steve. "And why would Bucky even be-- he's dead, I'm tellin' you!"

"We need to do the scan, Steve," said Natasha in the same soft, gently tone as before.

Tony listened to the agents banter, keeping his face arranged in a blank mask. A memory floated to his mind, an old memory of Obadiah admonishing him for his expressiveness, telling him to grow a damn beard if he couldn't keep a straight face. That had been a long time ago. Tony had gotten very good at controlling his expressions. And also, he'd grown a beard.

Steve let out a long, slow breath.

"I would like a minute alone with Tony, please," he said in a poorly disguised command.

"Take all the time you need," said Fury, a hint of maliciousness in his voice. If Steve weren't his omega, Tony would have liked Fury's attitude. The guy was a bad ass and Tony admired that. But when directed at Steve, it was different. Tony fought the urge to bare his teeth; he watched as Fury, Coulson, Natasha, and the others left, closing the door behind him. They left behind the manila folder on the table in front of the sofa. Tony eyed it curiously.

He knew he was missing a lot of context here. There were at least two important players in this narrative: Bucky Barnes (deceased) (maybe), and the Winter Soldier (whose existence toed the line between questionable and mythological). Why was Steve's brain getting the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes confused?

Tony was sure he'd be able to sort it all out later. Currently, his brain was panicking quietly about Ivan Vanko. He made a note to talk to Pepper about it on Friday, when he saw her at the Expo.

He turned to Steve. "So, a scan, like, what, a CT scan? Or an MRI or whatever? That doesn't sound so bad." He brought Steve's hand up and kissed it. Steve's skin smelled warm and rich and familiar; it brought up a tangle of happy memories. Tony resisted the urge to lick him. Steve was still clearly uncomfortable; Tony wondered if he was self-conscious about the possibility that he had brain damage. "Hey. Look. Everyone's got scars. It's not a big deal. No one expects you to walk away from a world war without a couple of dents," said Tony, holding Steve's hand. "And what happened to Barnes... That wasn't your fault. You tried to save him, Steve, I saw. I know what it's like, to feel like you didn't do enough. But you did everything you could."

He studied Steve's face. Steve was avoiding his gaze but it wasn't a submissive posture. It was... something else. Tony's words of comfort didn't seem to be having any effect at all and Tony couldn't understand what the problem was.

He changed tactics. "Steve, what's wrong? Lay it on me. I'll listen." Tony tried to look attentive, and not like he'd just been threatened by a guy with the power to reverse-engineer one of his suits. Whatever Steve's fears about the Barnes-Soldier situation was, Tony was confident that it couldn't possibly be as big as problem as Vanko. Tony's life had radically re-prioritized itself in the last week, and now revolved madly around his omega. As long as Steve was his, as long as Steve was safe, everything else would fall into place. It was incredible how fulfilling this bond thing was; Tony had to admit, he'd been missing out. But he was glad he'd waited for Steve, that the two of them were able to find each other after all this time, that they'd approached this from the same place of inexperience and cautious delicacy.
The Winter Soldier had nothing on Tony; no matter how good of an assassin he was, the suit could take him. As far as Tony was concerned, Steve was safe from that, so he was having a hard time understanding the smell of anxiety rolling off of Steve.

"I'm going to tell you something." Steve said quietly, still not quite meeting Tony's gaze. "And I need you to just listen, okay? You can have your say when I'm done but I need you to just listen for a while, Tony...I'm not good at talking about this," he murmured, clearly uncomfortable. But it wasn't Tony that Steve was uncomfortable with; it was himself. He let out a quiet sigh and screwed his eyes shut briefly before he spoke again.

"Bucky was everything, especially after my mom died. He was my best friend. He kept me safe- he is, hands down, the only reason I'm alive today. I don't want to think about where I would have ended up without him. And I'm grateful to him, for everything that he did, but since waking up in the twenty first century I realised something...he treated me like shit. Like, I was a commodity to him. Or something. I was an omega and that was always going to factor into our relationship. I don't blame Bucky, really. It was the times- it the way things were. He cared about me, but he didn't respect me."

Tony held Steve's hands in his, listening to Steve describe how Bucky didn't respect him, and he nodded along. Yes, a familiar story. Steve, an omega, unable to get respect even from his best friend. Tony gathered that Bucky had been an Alpha. What a sad, strange relationship that must have been in the twenties and thirties. Tony ached for his omega, and felt a sort of begrudging acknowledgement, almost admiration toward the man who had kept him safe, even though that man had treated him poorly. But that had been a generation or two ago, when people didn't think of omegas as people, when omegas settled because they had to. It was the oldest story in the book, an omega degrading himself for protection. Poor Steve. Tony started to reassure him, but closed his mouth, letting Steve keep talking, letting him get things off his chest. Tony was waiting for his opportunity to jump in and reassure Steve.

But that moment never came.

"When I was about seventeen my mom died and I moved in with him. I was too sick to work and he looked after me. And then... one day, when I was about twenty... he bit me and... we bonded. I thought maybe he loved me, or something. But he didn't. I don't know what it was. I felt his confusion every day; I felt how much he worried about me- I was in love with him, I think. But whatever I felt...he didn't return it. Not the same way. He brought girls home and he'd never touch me. And I mean never. I was convinced there was something wrong with me- hell, I was already sick; I was sick our whole honeymoon; it wasn't hard to work it out, why he thought he couldn't touch me. But I don't know why he bonded with me if... God, it was so confusing. He'd even drag me along to dates. I hated it. I was always inadequate. Always secondary to whoever he was seeing, and then I had to listen to them do it through paper-thin walls the night after. Bucky looked after me, he... he kept me, but he was also rejecting me every day."

The moment Steve said Bucky had bit him, Tony's whole body tightened. The very air in the room changed. He froze. Steve was still talking, mouth moving, but Tony couldn't make sense of any of the words.

Steve had been bonded?

But bonds didn't break. Pairs almost never separated unless a partner died and, even then, they rarely rebonded; just look at how Jarvis had withered away after Howard's death. That was the whole point of a pair-bond. It was a lifelong commitment, almost sacred in its seriousness. Omegas could never distance or sever bonds; once bitten, they were linked forever to their Alphas.
(Alphas could distance or sever bonds, but doing so was rare and frowned upon except in extreme circumstances.)

Steve was putting his head on the heels of his hands, staring at the floor, still talking. His words buzzed in Tony's brain. The narrative wasn't clicking, only phrases.

Phrases like he bit me. We bonded. The bond never went away.

"And then...then when I got the serum the bond mark disappeared and I couldn't feel anything. I just assumed that it was because the serum had gotten rid of it, but maybe it just made it look like it did...that's why they want to scan for scar tissue."

Steve sighed and leaned his head in his hands.

"Nat maybe thinks that the bond didn't go away. But that perhaps Zola screwing with Bucky affected our bond or his ability to feel and that's why I thought it was gone when it wasn't... but I swear, I never lied about being a virgin, Tony, or-- or not experiencing love. Our bond was basically just a-- an arrangement, I guess. He didn't want me, or if he did, he didn't understand how. I thought I wasn't bonded anymore. And that's why...that's why I can't do triads and shit. I won't be anyone's commodity ever again."

Steve peeked up at Tony almost meekly. "We never found Bucky's body," he added, distantly, "in the snow."

Tony was still, somehow, alive. Still breathing. He felt betrayed by his own body for somehow being able to maintain its aliveness even though his world was crashing down around his shoulders. His heart was aching, aching like it was going to claw out of his chest. He looked down, wondering if it was the arc reactor, but no, the device looked stable. Tony's eyes wandered down to his hands and he observed with mild interest that he was shaking violently. Every breath hurt; icy needles... was this a panic attack? If so, it was like nothing Tony had ever felt before.

His omega wasn't his omega.

There was another Alpha.

Tony opened his mouth but nothing came out; the lump in his throat was too big. He closed it after a moment. What was there to be said, anyway? He'd mated Steve because there hadn't been a mark there. Except there was, maybe, a mark covered up by the serum. A claim laid by another Alpha who death was now no longer a certainty.

Besides, what good were words? His smell was probably communicating what words couldn't, anyway. Hurt. Betrayal. A disloyal omega was easily the most insulting, emasculating, derogatory, embarrassing thing that could happen to an Alpha. Tony felt like he had in Afghanistan. Suddenly, he was back in that cave, with Raza holding his wrists, pinning him down; Steve's smell, once familiar and pleasant and safe and warm, was suddenly threatening. It reminded Tony of the smell of gunpowder and cigars and a damp cave and sex and fear and burning flesh.

Without thinking, he was reaching up, rubbing the scar on the back of his own neck.

We match, he thought sardonically.

No wonder Steve needed another Alpha. Tony had been stripped of his power, of his pride, years ago. He felt like a fool for thinking any omega would want him after what had been done to him.
Tony was of fairly low dominance; why would an omega like Steve want him, anyway?

He cleared his throat, trying to get rid of the lump there.

"Well," said Tony. He rose on shaky legs. He was impressed he could stand at all. His whole body felt weird and weak and liquidy. He doubted his ability to drive safely, but he had to get out of here.

Oh, God. SHIELD.

They'd all known. Natasha, dominant, powerful Natasha: she'd fucking known. All of them had watched Tony, a weak Alpha, try to lay claim to a strong omega who was already bonded. But they hadn't been laughing at him, no. Clearly, they pitied him, and that was far, far worse.

Tony smoothed down his shirt. He wanted to find something to say to Steve, but couldn't think of anything.

Instead, he turned and walked over to the door, turning the knob delicately and walking out into the hall with its impersonal, too-bright florescent lighting.

The group was standing around. Heads turned. They looked at him. Tony kept his head held high; he nodded to them curtly, politely, like he was exiting just another board meeting. He'd done this once before, hadn't he? Walked out of Kunar with a mark on him, after having Yinsen die in his arms, and acted like he was untouchable?

Untouchable. Yes, that summed it up nicely. He was untouchable.

Steve tried to follow Tony out but Natasha pushed him back into the room, saying things like "he needs time" and "he needs to process." But all Steve knew was that Tony was hurting. He could feel it- like a knife in his gut. It was a piercing kind of agony; Steve was trembling and he couldn't breathe. Even now, flung sixty-five years into the future, Bucky had followed him and was ruining everything.

He slid to the floor and Natasha followed suit. She wrapped her arms around him.

"I thought I wasn't- I didn't know. I don't know. I wouldn't have let Tony if I thought-"

"I know," Natasha whispered, easing his need to defend himself.

It was like a rollercoaster. One minute they were happy and okay and it felt like Tony was the only person in the world he could truly trust, and then this- now Tony didn't want him. Steve could feel it. It was like Bucky again. The familiar heavy pit of rejection and dejection swelled in his chest and Steve thought he was going to be sick. He wasn't right- before he'd been sick, weak. Now he was strong but he was broken- there was a sickness in his mind. A sickness that might be HYDRA's doing, somehow. Who was the Winter Soldier? What did he want from Steve? How the hell had HYDRA managed to entangle the Winter Soldier with Bucky? Did they have an ancient Bucky locked away somewhere?

How dare Bucky take his happiness away?

But Bucky must think he was dead, if Bucky was alive. Assuming Bucky, at his age, was even still mentally fit. Who knew?

"He- he doesn't want me. Not anymore. Now he knows. Now he knows someone else-"
"Don't talk like that," Natasha said firmly and squeezed Steve's shoulder. "Tony wants you. Your old bond doesn't matter; that was over half a century ago. He'll come around, Steve in time. He just needs time."

"But Nat-"

"No. No, Steve, no buts. He needs time. Let him work this out."

Before Steve could respond with more protests, Fury and Coulson were stepping into the room.

Steve looked up angrily. "What the hell do you want?" He felt inexplicably angry at Fury for being a beta, for not having to deal with these sorts of complicated problems.

Fury looked down at him coolly. "Well, for one thing, I'd like to get you into an MRI. And for another, I'd like you to talk to Dr. Brazinski about your association between the Winter Soldier, who is a known HYDRA operative, and Bucky Barnes, who is your Alpha. There's an obvious conflict of interest there."

"The last thing Steve needs right now is a shrink picking his brain apart," snapped Natasha.

"Let's get something straight. We're an integrated special operations team. We're not here to help you hug things out when you get into a fight with your honey bun. You told us you could go undercover and that you could do so without getting in too deep. We didn't say anything when you bonded, because we understand these things happen. But we can't ignore that your bond has compromised our organization and what we stand for and what we're here to protect. You're on thin ice, Rogers. You want to be the face of omega rights? Then get up off that floor and start acting like it. We hire omegas because we believe anyone can be strong, but what you're doing right now? It's not the behavior we expect from Captain America. This isn't a damn dating service. This is an elite team that I've fought for years to keep integrated, and shit like this from omegas makes us all look bad."

Coulson let out a small huff and looked up at the ceiling, hands behind his back.

Slowly, Natasha rose and offered Steve her hand. She and Clint's relationship had always been something they'd had to tread lightly around, especially since she was a female Alpha and he was a male omega. They'd always maintained a level of professionalism but, nonetheless, had occasionally experienced derision and prejudice from high ups who felt their bond could compromise missions. Fury's words weren't pleasant. But they were ruthlessly true.

"Now, if you have to phone it in, and leave early, I don't really care," said Fury. "But I've worked too hard to make the Avengers Initiative a reality. I'm not going to let Howard Stark's son waltz in here, stick his dick into my team, and tear it to pieces. So at least do me the favor, Steve, of pretending to have your head in the game."

He turned and left without another word. Natasha and Coulson watched him go, then exchanged a look. The unfortunate truth is that the Avengers Initiative had been under a lot of scrutiny ever since Clint had gone to assassinate Natasha and come back with her. It had looked bad for them. People questioned how effective an integrated team would be, when push came to shove. Having two pair-bonds within the team looked even worse. There was no denying that.

"This is probably the wrong time to inform you I already started processing his paperwork," said Coulson suddenly.

Natasha gave him an incredulous look. Coulson shrugged slightly.
"I don't feel bonded to Bucky," said Steve miserably. "I feel bonded to Tony. Bucky-- Bucky died. We had a funeral for him. This doesn't make any goddamn sense! How can I be bonded to two Alphas?"

"There's been cases before where omegas have bonded with more than one Alpha," Phil piped up. "But..."

"But what?"

"It usually ends in a fight to death, unsurprisingly." Coulson grimaced. "Shall we get this scan over and done with?"

Steve was feeling humiliated and small. The last thing he wanted was doctors prodding at him after Fury's goddamn character assassination. Yes, Steve was an idiot. Yes, he couldn't do undercover--he was never cut out to be a spy. But he was still a captain and Fury wasn't taking that away from him. He nodded and gestured for Phil to lead on. Natasha moved to step in line next to him.

"I'm going to try and talk to him," Natasha said quietly. "Alpha to Alpha, see if I can talk some sense into him."

"He wanted Pepper anyway, Nat, this is ticket out. Let him have it." Steve's voice was flat. He was retracting into himself, becoming a hardened soldier instead, because it was easier to deal like this. It was easier to be Captain America than Steve Rogers.

Natasha fell quiet. "The scan will take a while; you should go do something useful," Coulson told her softly.

Natasha's frown deepened. "Steve--"

Steve pushed past the double doors after Phil, ignoring her.

Natasha ran her hands over her face and through her hair with a loud sigh. "Черт," she whispered softly.

Tony's actions were controlled, precise. They had to be. The moment he let go, he knew he wasn't going to be able to recapture control. He wanted to go home to his beachside mansion, the one that was missing walls, and call Pepper and beg her forgiveness for how stupid he'd been, how stupid he'd been over an omega he barely knew, grovel at her feet and admit that he'd only done that because he had thought they were bonded, but they weren't, because Tony was broken, a broken shell of a man and the omega in question already had an Alpha, and he needed her calm, firm, patient presence. Needed someone to just sit next to him while he processed this, someone to stabilize his world, which was spinning out of control, which no longer made sense. He needed someone or something to ground him. He needed someone he could trust to be there for him before he faced what had just happened and then melted down. Because he felt like if he didn't have some sort of anchor, he'd start screaming and screaming and never, ever be able to stop. He was teetering on the edge of a precipice, on the brink of ferality. He'd heard of Alphas going crazy; now he understood. For a brief and beautiful moment, a singular glistening moment of time, Tony had been happy. Then it had been ripped away from him and he was left empty and broken.

He found his way out of the compound; if anyone followed him, he wasn't aware of it; if anyone tried to talk to him, he didn't respond. His consciousness had buried itself deep into a mental vault and he didn't dare let it out- not yet. Not while he was still here and vulnerable. No, he had to leave first. He had to get away. He got to his car, feeling dreamlike, and slipped into the leather seat of
the Aston, listening to his own steady breathing like it was someone else's, his body moving like it was a puppet on strings. He felt far away, like he was watching himself from a distance.

The last time he had felt like this, he had been coming home from Afghanistan. He remembered sitting in the plane, staring blankly ahead, still in shock from the days he'd spent recovering in a military hospital camp, still in shock that his half-baked escape plan had worked and that he had not died in the desert.

He didn't trust himself to speak (the scream lodging in his throat was threatening to come out at any moment) so he texted Pepper, his hands still shaking violently; he went slowly, very slowly, pressing in every letter deliberate.

>> I need you. Please. Now.

Her response came after only a few seconds.

>> What's wrong?

Tony stared at those two words on the screen, unable to even begin to process an answer.

Everything. Everything was wrong.

>> Please.

A pause.

>> Okay. Where are you?

>> I'm at home.

Home. Home was a big, empty, sterile, house on the edge of a cliff. Home wasn't Steve. Home wasn't an omega. Home was what Tony had always suspected it was. Cold metal and copper circuits and math equations that always had something on the other side of the equal sign. Home was a place where nothing could hurt you, where emotions were rendered obsolete by the mechanics of engineering. Where everything had a objective, finite solution, without other Alphas, without ghosts of the past rearing their ugly head.

Tony drove north, eyes blank. The radio was still on but he couldn't hear it. He was on autopilot. He barely registered anything the entire drive, parking in the circular driveway, locking the car automatically, walking into his home with a steady stride.

She was already there; she looked up and her face changed. Tony had that thousand-yard stare she'd only seen once before.

"Tony?" she said in alarm.

Tony opened his mouth, expecting a scream or a volley of profanities. Instead, he heard himself say "Hi, Pepper." Then he burst into tears and laughter all at once, and slithered to the floor, the betrayal hitting him full force, reducing him to a puddle of hysterical, sobbing human misery.

There was nothing on the other side of the equal sign, after all.

"They found something. Under the surface. They think it's still there, or at least, part of it is," Phil said. Steve was sitting on the edge of an MRI bench, vision spinning a little after having been in the scanner for almost an hour.
MRIs, he'd learned, were loud.

Something chilled him to bone. Traces of Bucky still remained on him even after all this time. It was almost sinister. Steve had no idea- he'd felt free all this time. He'd felt alone, but had he really been? He swallowed.

"Is he... alive?"

"We can't tell, by looking at a bonding mark, if your mate is alive or not. But since he showed up in your simulation... yes, it's possible he is."

The idea of Bucky as an old man was terrifying. Almost as terrifying as the idea of Bucky being HYDRA's prisoner, of them experimenting on him, trying to use him to... to get into Steve's brain, to exploit his bond.

"Doctor Branzinski is free to see you now, if you can stomach it."

Steve nodded numbly. "Sure. Lead the way."

Dr. Brazinski was the head psychologist for SHIELD. She was a beta with mousy brown hair and a pair of stylish green glasses. Her office was cozy, with comfortable chairs and a small potted bonsai tree on her desk. There were no pictures to hint at any sort of personal life. The calendar behind the desk had a picture of a lighthouse.

"Hi, Captain Rogers," she said, extending a hand to Steve. She shut the door to her office and gestured for Steve to have a seat. They had spoken before, part of routine evaluations, but nothing quite this personal. As far as Steve's omega status and his relationship with Bucky, their previous conversation on the topic had taken mere seconds; she'd given her condolences regarding Bucky's death and moved on.

"Before we begin, let me just address the elephant in the room. I'm not an omega. If you'd feel more comfortable talking to an omega, please don't hesitate to ask. No hard feelings," she said. She leaned back in her chair, playing with a pencil in one hand, but didn't seem like she intended to write anything down; she had nothing to write on, anyway. "So. Steve. Here's the one million dollar question. ...how are you doing?"
Pepper had seen a lot of highs and a lot of lows, but nothing quite like this, not in ten years. Pepper was at a loss as to what to do. She'd seen him drunk, high, hallucinating, feverish, in the midst of a panic attack... but through all of it, Tony had never actually cried. In one decade, she'd seen him cry only once, three months after his return from Afghanistan. It was unnerving, to say the least. She tried to talk to him, to find out what the hell was going on; their last phone call had been baffling, with Tony saying he had a new arc reactor and was pair-bonded to Steve, but no matter what questions she asked, Tony just sobbed his eyes out like the world was ending.

Eventually she gave up. She led him to his bedroom and he followed her, still weeping, as docile as a lamb. Her old efficiency came back to her and she peeled off his clothes, stuffed him into a pair of MIT sweatpants and one of his ratty old t-shirts before putting him to bed. He cried himself to sleep and she used the opportunity to call Steve, but his phone was either dead or off, and she received no answer.

She tried Rhodes. Same story. She felt frustrated; she had no idea what could trigger this sort of reaction. Tony had reacted with less hysteria to Obadiah's betrayal and death, to his own heart problems, and to his ninety-three day capture in Afghanistan.

She waited by Tony's bed, hoping he'd awake with a goofy, embarrassed grin and crack a joke.

But when he woke, she didn't even notice. At some point she realized he was lying there, eyes open (albeit extremely puffy), staring off into the middle distance. He hadn't moved at all.

"You're awake. Hey. How are you doing?" asked Pepper gently. Tony stared right through her without answering. "Tony?" Pepper reached out tentatively and tried to get him to look at her. "...Tony?"

Nothing.

She tried every trick in the book, including bribing him with alcohol, but Tony was gone. She got him out of bed and made him drink a glass of water and choke down a grilled cheese sandwich, but it was like pulling teeth. She hadn't seen anything this unsettling in a long, long time.

She set him down on a couch in his shop and went upstairs to consult JARVIS. "Why isn't Tony speaking?" she demanded.

"Perhaps he has nothing to say."

"JARVIS, you know that's never stopped him before. He's practically comatose. What's going on?"

"His vitals are normal."

"But he's... he's completely gone. He was so happy yesterday. Can you run some searches on selective mutism after pair-bonding, see if you find anything?"

"Of course, Miss Potts."

Pepper went back down to the basement. Tony had finally moved; he had picked up one of his guitars and was plucking a few chords half-heartedly. It wasn't his usual spirited performance of "Black Betty" or "War Pigs." Pepper wasn't sure what it was.
"Tony?" she asked.

He ignored her.

"Did something happen to Steve?" she asked.

An emotion ghosted over Tony's face and for a moment he looked like he was going to start sobbing again. But he didn't. He went back to his guitar. Pepper felt a hint of panic. She pulled out her phone, trying to think if Steve had friends she could call, someone who would know if he was okay, what had happened. She was drawing a blank. Across the room, Tony plucked at the guitar forlornly; it was electric but not plugged in, and the sounds sounded weird and hollow, the tune unrecognizable but distinctively sad. Much like Tony himself, actually.

Before Pepper could try another number the phone in her hand was ringing itself. After a moment’s hesitation and surprise, she answered.

"Hello, Miss Potts, my name is Natasha. I work with Steve. And I'd like you to sit down."

Natasha's voice was polite, almost sweet, but also matter-of-fact and to the point. It left no room for argument. "Are you with Tony?"

Pepper swept a bunch of papers and an old take-out container off one of Tony's desk chairs and sat. "Yes," she said, once she was seated.

"I'm going to give a very shortened version of events but Steve assured me you're clever so I know you can keep up. Steve just told Tony he used to be bonded in the forties and Tony hasn't taken the news well. As Steve's friend I'd like to defend him by saying that he thought his old mate was dead and that the super serum got rid of his bond altogether, and that, to him, his bond with Tony feels completely legitimate. But, for obvious reasons, Tony isn't dealing well. He's a low-dominance Alpha and it's understandably difficult for him to not feel threatened. Also, there's also a small chance Steve's old mate is still alive and possibly being held prisoner by a dangerous paramilitary organization bent on world domination."

Pepper hummed, not sure what the appropriate response was to that.

"Again, not Steve's fault. While I'm sure this all might seem crazy-"

"No crazier than usual," said Pepper. "I mean, Captain America, back from the dead, and an omega, and bonded by Tony... it's already crazy." Tony paused in his guitar plucking to listen in.

"I'm guessing Tony isn't happy. Well, neither is Steve- and they both need each other right now. So Tony walking out wasn't the best idea, you know? Though I can't really blame him. But considering he wanted a triad with you, it's kinda interesting that now he suddenly isn't liking the idea of sharing-" Natasha cleared her throat. "Anyway. Let's not go there."

"Let's not," agreed Pepper. "Why are you calling?"

"I need you to pull Tony together. Tell him to call Steve, because Steve..." Natasha sighed. "Look, I won't pretend to know Tony all that well but I know Steve, Miss Potts. Steve is my friend. And he's not a happy person. I know people think Captain America is this... fun, amazing confident guy, yeah? But he's also lonely and out of his depth and in the wrong century. Tony makes him happy- his old mate didn't, and if he still wants Steve then he should fight for him. And fight for himself. I imagine there's a lot of self-esteem issues going on here. But come on, he's mated Captain freaking America! Just remind him of that, will you? I was going to come knock some sense into him myself, but I'm stuck on the base at the moment trying to find out more intel on
Barnes, and- shit- I gotta go." She hung up.

Pepper had tried to interject several times, but Natasha steamrolled her way through the explanation and the line went dead before she could ask any questions. Pepper stared at the Blackberry in her hand in shock, then looked up at Tony. She was still trying to wrap her head around some of the finer details, like Steve having a living mate (wouldn't he be like a hundred years old?) and Tony wanting to be in a ménage à trois with her (fat chance).

"Tony?" she ventured. "...that was Natasha." A pause. "A friend of Steve's?"

Tony ignored her.

"...Tony. I know you can hear me. This isn't the Tony Stark I know. The Tony Stark I know never gives up and never sits around pitying himself like this. Tony, Natasha told me what happened. I don't know all the details, but I know this. You mated Steve, and you two are scent-mates, and you love him, and you were the happiest I've ever heard you when you called and told me about it."

Nothing. Tony sat on the end of the couch, strumming his instrument, staring off into his shop.

Pepper switched tactics. "Tony. You can't just bail on your omega. That's not how a good Alpha operates."

"I'm not a good Alpha." Tony's voice was quiet and hoarse.

Ah-ha! Pepper leaped on his words.

"What makes you say that? Steve must have thought so, he wanted to bond with you." Tony shook his head. "Tony. Steve's previous mate didn't make him happy. Natasha told me that."

Tony ignored her. She was a beta. She didn't understand what it was like. She couldn't understand the level of betrayal. Steve had conveniently glossed over his prior bond. Bonds were a big goddamn deal. Just because there was no visible mark on his neck didn't give him the right to pretend like it had never happened. Like it was nothing. Maybe someday, Steve would let another mate take him, and conveniently forget all about Tony, too. Pepper's voice was still distantly chattering. "Anthony Edward Stark. Come on. That was another life ago. Steve needs you now. Steve probably feels awful about all this too. Don't you owe it to him to talk it over? Natasha said if you want him, you should fight for him. You do want your omega, don't you?"

Of course he did. Except that Steve wasn't "his" omega. Some other Alpha had claimed him and Steve hadn't thought it was important to mention. Sure, maybe Tony could track the guy down, fight over Steve. But what was the point? If the guy was still alive he was ancient; what would he prove by beating up an old man? And Tony wasn't a dominant Alpha- he never had been. Winning a fight against a disabled opponent wouldn't count for much if the other guy's dominance ranking was higher than his. Kicking the ass of an elderly man would not raise his dominance; it was an inherent part of him, as much as his eye color or height was.

He didn't feel like he had any right to try to win Steve when he'd come second. Steve still had feelings for his other Alpha. Ha. Didn't do trios... what a fucking asshole.

"Tony. Please talk to me. I know you're in there. Are you going to sit down here playing guitar and not talking for the rest of your life? Huh? Is that your plan? You're not even going to try to go out there? You're Tony fucking Stark, isn't what you always say? You're invincible. You're just giving up on your pair-bond? ...Tony?"
Tony looked at Pepper. She was in a sharp, pale grey suit that made her green eyes pop. A constellation of freckles danced over her nose; her hair shimmered.

Yet another person he'd never have and didn't deserve.

Tony bent back over the guitar, feeling out "Suicide is Painless."

"Tony! You asked me to be here! What do you want?" Pepper's voice was getting a note of desperation. Tony ignored her. Having cried himself out, he felt... strangely empty. It was sort of nice. A hollow hunger. A Steve-shaped hole that, like a socket that was missing a tooth, Tony couldn't help but prod at, over and over. It hurt, mostly in his chest, around his heart, but it was growing into something that wasn't pain. Something that wasn't anything. Tony was okay with that. Maybe this was Takottsubo Syndrome... If so, it wasn't actually so awful. Was this what Jarvis experienced during those last two years after his father had died? Hey, it beat palladium poisoning, anyway. It was better this way. Better not to feel anything.

The office was a little impersonal, Steve thought. Every feature felt calculated and thought out, like there was some kind of underlying tactics involved. Maybe Steve was just naturally wary of head shrinks; he'd had to talk to a lot, after SHIELD had unfrozen him. In fact, he already knew Dr. Brazinski somethat. Her office decor was inoffensively precise; Steve didn't mistrust her for it, but he didn't like her for it, either. Carefully, he took a seat in the chair she suggested. He folded his hands in his lap neatly, falling back into army postures and training. It was like a comfort. Steve sighed quietly.

He was pleasantly surprised when she asked him if he'd rather talk to an omega.

"I don't care about your status if you don't care about mine," he offered with a weak smile.

"I'm not doing great..." he began. "I've basically lost all trust in SHIELD. Not that I had much to begin with. My mate just walked out of here without a word and I just saw the Winter Soldier shoot me and also Bucky is apparently somehow involved and maybe not even dead? And apparently we were always bonded and I just stopped feeling it because he stopped feeling? So yeah...not my best day, I have to admit."

"So you didn't feel anything regarding James." Dr. Brazinski held up a familiar report. "Obviously you felt some affection for Tony, even before you bonded. You expressed wanting to be his friend in some of your oral reports to Director Fury. Did the thought of bonding ever cross your mind, or was this affection purely platonic? Because, typically, smells and desires change once a person had bonded. I'm curious how you, as a bonded omega, got to this point with him in the first place. No judgement, of course. I'm just trying to explore how deep this bond with James goes. If James, hypothetically, weren't dead... let's say he was in a coma and was woken up... do you think you'd once again feel the bond with him? And if that were the case, where would Tony fit in? There's no wrong answer here, Steve. I'm just interested in your perception, how you think you would feel."

Steve huffed thoughtfully. Hearing himself called "a bonded omega" felt weird. He had thought he was unbonded. Discovering his bond to Bucky was still there after all these years was like discovering he'd never lost his baby teeth, or something equally strange.

And it was strange. It was extremely unusual, though not completely unheard of, for people to have more than one bond. And those people were almost always Alphas, not omegas. The problem was that Alphas would, more often than not, get possessive and end up fighting. There was a reason most trios had only one Alpha and one omega. Even mild, submissive Alphas could
get wildly defensive of their omegas. There were risk factors, naturally. Every few years a news
story of two Alpha going feral and killing each other over an omega in heat cropped up; more
rarely, two rival omegas would get violent with each other for an Alpha's affection. But again, this
occurrence wasn't usual, because as Dr. Brazinski noted, after bonding, smells changed. Most
Alphas stopped finding omegas other than their own desirable at all, even in heat, and the reverse
was true as well. Double pair-bonds were frowned on by society; they were unnatural and almost
always led to trouble. With the exception of getting a new mate after the death of an old one,
omegas mated once and only once, the scars on the back of their necks marking them as taken in a
way that couldn't be easily ignored by other Alphas.

"I didn't feel the bond before when Bucky was alive; I don't know why I would again in this
century. But if it's because he doesn't have the ability to properly feel right now, or use his bond,
that's..." Heartbreaking? Unbearable?

Words could not express the disturbing possibility of a person being so broken that their bond no
longer worked.

Steve changed gears. "I should have been there for him before, and I won't make that same
mistake again," Steve said resolutely. "And if Tony really cared about me, he'd know I had a duty
to protect my ma- my friend."

Steve considered this.

"But then...I guess Bucky wasn't really my friend." Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face. "I
don't know what we were; he definitely didn't. I mean, my mom died, and I was sick, and... it was
practical... and then we didn't really get a chance to talk much about it, after the serum, because
there was a war going on. We had bigger priorities. What I have with Tony now- that's what I
wanted out of Bucky but never had. Bucky didn't treat me like a person. Tony does. But now he
doesn't want me..." Steve looked down at his hands in his lap. How in the hell had he managed to
lose two Alphas in a row? "I'm damaged goods, aren't I?" He shrugged with a weak smile.

Dr. Brazinski "hmmed" at Steve's reference to himself a "damaged goods."

"Well, Captain... you know better than anyone that omegas weren't treated as equals in the forties.
Your friend's attitudes were, in a very large part, shaped by the culture around him. I doubt his
actions were a reflection on your competence as a mate. But going back to your bonds." As a beta,
she said "bonds" fairly casually. To any Alpha or omegas, hearing the word in plural was as
strange as referring to someone's wives or someone's fathers; it was not a word for which there was
typically more than one. "I have a hypothesis. You and Mr. Stark only recently bonded, correct?
In fact, you're still in your honeymoon phase. It seems to me that your body is trying to tune itself
to him, but because it already has a bond, it's also struggling to reforge the bond with your friend,
Bucky. Does that make sense?"

Dr. Brazinski swiveled very slightly in her chair. "The question, Steve, as well as the problem, is
this. First of all, you recommended recruiting Mr. Stark to the Avengers Initiative, and that motion
is already in process. But SHIELD, understandably, is concerned that your current relationship is
going to undermine your efficiency at work. Thus far, we haven't had any problems with an
integrated team; case in point, Agent Romanoff follows your orders. But asking an Alpha to
follow his omega, well... that's trickier. And from what I've gathered, Mr. Stark's attitudes are a bit
more old-fashioned. The second problem is that the Winter Soldier- and yes, Steve, he is real- the
Winter Soldier is an assassin who intelligence believes works closely with HYDRA. If there's an
association between that assassin, and your pair-bonded mate, are you going to be able to make a
judgement call? If things get down to it? I suppose that's the basis of both problems, in a nutshell.
Could you make a judgement call in battle regarding Tony?"

She held up a hand as Steve began to speak.

"I don't expect you to know the answer immediately. I would like you to think it over."

Steve sighed and stared down at his hands in his lap. He pushed his palms together. They were sweaty, making him grimace. Steve was quiet for a while, thinking through what she'd said. His mind drifted back to the war of the forties, of all the terrible judgement calls he'd had to make. Steve swallowed thickly.

"The Avengers Initiative is about strong people with strong personal relationships making up a stronger team. Any bond comes with strengths and weaknesses- I've seen that in Nat and Clint," Steve said slowly, speaking his thoughts aloud. "My bond with Tony is no different. I can't promise I won't sometimes be biased towards him but I can promise I'll try my best not to be. And on the battlefield, doctor, I'm not an omega. I'm just their captain. Plenty of Alphas followed me in the forties; I think with an adjustment period, Tony could manage it now. Not that that's relevant now- he hasn't even been approved for the field yet.

"And-" Steve sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "With regards to the Winter Soldier: if he really is such a powerful threat, and if he does try to shoot me, I won't have a problem defending myself." He remembered the piercing sound of a shot ringing out in his ears as the man killed him without hesitation. Whoever he was, he was not Steve's friend. "Sure, he smells of Bucky. But Bucky died. The Winter Soldier isn't him; he works for the enemy. I don't want to reforge anything with him. He wants me dead. I know there's an association...but I can tell the difference between Bucky and a guy who's trying to kill me."

"Interesting choice of words... reforge," said Dr. Brazinski thoughtfully. "Bonds don't typically break except under extreme circumstances. And as you well know, bonding is not always a conscious decision. I think that's the primary concern here, Steve. That, as reasonable as you are, when you're put in a position between choosing the team and choosing your Alpha, you'll default to your instincts. And, off the record, between you and I? If you were an Alpha, no one would be questioning you like this." She sighed and shrugged one shoulder. "From what I see, you have a pretty clear head about all this. I don't think we need to belabor the importance of you separating your personal life from your professional one. Historically, you've been excellent at compartmentalization. So I'm going to go ahead and let Fury know that, in my professional opinion, you're cleared to continue operations." Dr. Brazinski reached for the computer's mouse and gave it a shake it wake up the machine. She peered at the screen over the top of her glasses, clicking around, glancing at Steve occasionally. "By the way, be advised that the nature of Howard Stark's death is highly classified. And that precludes you from informing anyone. Even an Alpha you're pair-bonded to. ... Especially the Alpha you're pair-bonded to."

Howard Stark's death was an assassination made to look like an accident, but that was known only to a select few. The local police had closed it long ago; only in the deepest depths of SHIELD's archives was there any documentation on it. Steve doubted even Natasha knew. The investigation had remained untouched but had never been closed because no assassin had ever claimed credit for it. Could it have been the Winter Soldier? A Winter Soldier? No one was sure of who the Winter Soldier (or, for that matter, soldiers, plural) really was.

"I'm going to recommend a brief leave of absence. Just a week," said Dr. Brazinski, beginning to type on the computer. "I want you to understand this isn't because I doubt your competency. Quite the opposite. However, undergoing traumatic psychological tests during your honeymoon phase is probably complicating the bonding situation. I'm going to put off Tony's evaluation as well. The
two of you should be spending time together, solidifying your relationship... is one week okay? It's a bit short, but considering the situation in New Mexico, Fury probably will fight even seven days..."

"A week is more than enough. Thank you, Doctor." Steve stood as the meeting seemed to be coming to a close. A part of him wanted to rush home to bed, to curl up under the sheets and sleep the day's trauma away. Another part of him knew he had to go to Tony, talk some goddamn sense into him. What did he think? That Steve wasn't his? Steve had barely even been Bucky's and Steve hadn't even realised they'd remained bonded after the serum in the forties! Didn't say something?

Steve shook hands with her and then left. He needed to get off this goddamn SHIELD base.

"You gonna go see him?" Natasha asked, waiting for Steve by his bike in the garage. She knew it was his only way home. She was leaning against it casually, arms crossed over her chest but her expression exposed her worry. "Be careful, Steve. He's in a bad way."

"Being apart from each other isn't going to make it any better. I'm sick of fighting this, Nat. I gotta fix the bond. Especially since it's my fault it's screwy. Is this all my fault? It feels like it is."

"It's not your fault he's insecure about your bond," Natasha said calmly. "That's perfectly normal. But maybe you should have mentioned the Bucky stuff."

"I thought we weren't bonded! It frankly wasn't anyone's business." Steve moved to get on his bike. Natasha sighed; it had taken him ages to open up about it in the first place. She knew he hated talking about it. For Steve it was embarrassing, even though it shouldn't be. "Sorry," said Steve grumpily as he threw a leg over the seat of the motorcycle. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

Natasha put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Let me know how it goes, yeah?" Steve nodded with a small smile and waited for her to step back before he revved up the engine and set off.

"So this is the new thing, huh?" asked Rhodes, hands in his pockets. Pepper had finally gotten ahold of him. He'd dropped everything and come; the last few weeks he'd spent putting out fires, going to meetings with the Secretary of Defense, the Senate, trying to keep Tony from being arrested. Having someone as unstable as him in possession of multiple armored suits was difficult to argue for. One of the suits was sitting in a hangar at Edwards, having already shot several people who tried to pick it apart. It had been two years since Tony stopped Stark Industries from manufacturing weapons, but he was still a weapons designer himself. There was no masking the suit for anything other than a weapon, and a deadly one, too. No matter what Tony said.

Rhodes had been surprised to discover it was quiet when he arrived. No loud music or giggling women; no dancing, no champagne.

Pepper had escorted him to the shop, filling in what little she knew. Downstairs, Tony was lying on his back on one of his couches in the corner, staring at the ceiling, eyes vacant. None of the monitors were on; the suits stood empty along one wall. Rhodes had never appreciated that Tony's shop was normally buzzing with activity. Quiet like this, it was eerie.

"Please tell me this is a normal Alpha thing."

"No. It's definitely not normal," said Rhodes. He strode across the lab and hovered over Tony. The contrast between them-- Rhodes in a crisp blue uniform, Tony in sweatpants-- was striking.
"Hey, buddy. It's me."

Tony didn't response.

"...what do you expect me to do?" asked Rhodes.

"You're an Alpha, you should know what to do!" protested Pepper.

"I'm not bonded, I don't know anything about bonds," shot back Rhodes. He looked down at Tony. He'd been one of the first people to see Tony after he'd escaped capture in Afghanistan. And Tony had been laughing then, laughing through chipped teeth and a dislocated shoulder, full of energy. This was different. "...hey, Tony. You know that suit I took? It shot a couple of people," said Rhodey. A pause. "Hell of an alarm system." He offered Tony a small smile. Tony didn't even look at him.

Rhodes rubbed a finger against his lips thoughtfully. "...so where's you-know-who?"

Pepper shrugged expansively.

"...you tried to call him?"

"I did."

"...hm."

"I talked to a friend of his."

"...hm," repeated Rhodes. "Virginia, hand me that glass of water," he said, gesturing to a glass of clear liquid on Tony's desk.

Pepper handed it to him; he dumped it unceremoniously over Tony.

Tony gasped in surprise and jumped up indignantly, glaring at Rhodes.

Rhodey sniffed the glass. "Jesus Christ, this isn't water, this is vodka. ...well, whatever gets him up, I guess. If we pour some orange juice on him, he'll be a screwdriver."

"Fuck you," snarled Tony.

"What, you gonna throw me through another wall? Talk to me, man. What's been eating at your lately? This whole lone gunslinger, every-man-for-himself situation- it's not working for you. I'm here as your friend. Not as a liaison or a government puppet. I'm here 'cause I still care about you, even though, lately, you've been a real pain in my ass. I want to help, Tony."

"Yeah? Maybe you can mate my omega for me. Everyone else has," snapped Tony, trying to wring the liquid out of his shirt. Pepper cringed.

"Tony, the guy's a century old. Rebonding isn't shameful. C'mon, his old mate's dead."

"Yeah, except he's not. He still has the mating mark."

Rhodes looked at Pepper in alarm; he hadn't realized that. Pepper shrugged helplessly. "...you sure?"

"Yeah. It's below the surface. You couldn't see it from the outside but apparently he's still bonded to some guy from the roarin' twenties."
"But he smelled-

"Unbonded, yeah. But he is bonded. To someone else."

"Miss Potts," said JARVIS suddenly. "There's a guest upstairs."

"Who?" demanded Pepper.

"Captain Rogers."

A mixture of emotions flashed across Tony's face. For a moment, his expression crumbled and it seemed inevitable he was going to start sobbing. But then his face went blank again and he flopped back down onto the couch, even though it was soaked in liquor, staring at the ceiling.

"Speak of the devil..." murmured Rhodes.

"Oh no, no no no, don't go back--" protested Pepper, trying to rouse Tony. "James, is there any more vodka on his desk?"

Tony swatted her away. She looked to Rhodey, silently asking, with her eyes, whether they should get Steve or not. Whether it would make things better, or worse.

"I'll go upstairs to speak with him," Pepper decided quietly and slipped away towards the steps. Her heels clicked quietly across the metal as she went.

Pepper found a stressed-looking Steve in the living quarters. He was dressed smartly, perhaps a little windblown from his bike ride over, his hair slightly puffed up. His usual perfect appearance was showing cracks. He was pacing with his hands running over his face, clearly trying to calm himself down.

"Hey there," Pepper said softly and Steve's head snapped up almost alarmingly quick.

"I spoke to your friend earlier. Natasha?" Pepper offered. "She tried to explain...everything." She gestured with her hands, smiling awkwardly. How was she supposed to be normal in front of Captain America? She'd been bossing him about for two weeks and now suddenly...now his presence was almost intimidating. A man so significant in history was now pacing around in a trashed living room and looking to Pepper for answers. For reassurance. "...Tony isn't in a good place right now."

"I know," Steve said in a murmur. "I can feel it."

"Do you think you can help?" Pepper asked and Steve just shrugged. He tried for a smile and it was broken, his eyes glossing over with a sadness that wasn't entirely his. His voice was small when he spoke up again.

"I...I don't know."

Downstairs, Rhodey was trying to get Tony up. "You wanna come up and see him?" asked Rhodey, giving Tony's shoulders a shake. Tony was nearly limp. He shook his head the tiniest amount. "Well, at least come face him, man to man, and tell him to get out, then." Tony shook his head again.

The idea of facing the omega who had humiliated him, emasculated him, was unbearable. Tony wondered, vaguely, if maybe this was part of Steve's big omega rights campaign. Acting like bonding was no big deal.
Well. It had been a big deal to Tony. Considering how angry Steve had gotten him for wanting a side beta, Tony felt like it was unfair that Steve wouldn't mention that Tony hadn't been his first. Tony felt lied to. He bet this didn't happen to other Alphas. He bet Alphas like Rhodey never had to worry their omegas were keeping other Alphas.

"Come on, Tony, you're a big man, you've been through hell and back. You can't just... wallow in pity like this because you found out about something you don't like."

"You don't get it," said Tony hollowly, curling up tightly. "I thought... I thought he was my omega."

"He still is, Tony."

"Not unless I fight Barnes to the death. What, I'm gonna go beat up an old man?"

Rhodes snorted. "That's your instinct talking. You don't have to fight anyone, Tony."

"Oh, what, I can just be his silver medal, huh? Be his side Alpha?" said Tony. He snarled at Rhodey weakly, unable to believe his old friend was insulting him like this.

"Don't put words in my mouth, Tony," said Rhodes, not letting Tony rile him up. "You're not thinking clearly right now because your bond was threatened. But Steve came back to you, didn't he? He's upstairs now, waiting for you. He wants you. You put a claim on him. Go up there and deal with this."

Tony let out a small whine and curled up tighter.

Rhodes gave a grow of frustration and tipped the couch over, depositing Tony on the floor. Tony sat up indignantly. "Get out!" he snapped.

"Fine!" snapped Rhodey back. He smoothed down his uniform. He marched over to the door of the shop, wrenched it open, and stomped upstairs. Pepper and Steve were consulting each other.

Rhodes was an Alpha and a lieutenant colonel; he walked up to Steve, exuding dominance, and barked, "Captain. Get your ass downstairs this instant and don't come up until you've sorted things out with your Alpha. Now."

Pepper looked alarmed, but Rhodey felt that hard love was probably the only thing that would work at this point. Steve looked lost, anxious. Not as bad as Tony, but certainly not well.

Steve didn't like following orders (outside of Tony, he realised) but Rhodey... he wouldn't dare say no to him right now. "Yes, sir," Steve clipped in short reply, almost feeling like a boy responding to his father before he promptly walked past them and headed downstairs.

Pepper gave Rhodey a lingering look. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Steve scurried down the stairs into the shop, but paused when he came to the landing, keeping his gaze on the floor out of respect. He could feel how much Tony was hurting— he didn't need to see it, too. He walked over silently, almost shaky with nerves in front of his Alpha. Because Tony was his in a way Bucky had never been, at least in a bonding sense. Bucky felt worlds away from Tony in every aspect; it almost seemed wrong to compare them.

Tony's heart sang at the sight of his omega. But the emotion was fleeting. It disappeared in an instant. Tony glared as Steve as he pulled himself back onto the couch, making a mental note to chew Rhodey out the next time he saw him.
Steve moved carefully into the room, each movement oddly graceful and thought out as he knelt down in front of Tony. And then he moved to practically bow, his forehead pressed to the floor and his back arched over in an utter gesture of submission. He let his eyes slip shut. Steve exhaled. He didn't feel Bucky's bond, but he felt Tony's. He felt it burning hot inside of him like a furnace. It felt like passion and confusion and fury. Steve wanted to make it clear he was his, Tony's and only Tony's, and he was offering himself, submitting. There was nothing he could say right now to fix everything. But maybe if Tony realised Steve was his then, at least, he would calm down enough to talk.

Tony stared as Steve crossed the room and prostrated himself. He wanted to lie down over the omega's body, lick his scent onto Steve's neck. But he didn't. He didn't do anything, because the things he wanted to do were things bonded Alphas did. And Tony wasn't Steve's Alpha. He was barely an Alpha at all. He wasn't really anything. Just some asshole who had been cuckolded in the worst possible way by someone he'd loved.

"...twice," said Tony, softly. His voice was easily heard in the large, cavernous quiet of his workshop. "You lied to me twice. You lied to me about who you were. And then you told me you were a virgin. That you'd never been with another Alpha. That you weren't taken."

Did Tony believe that Steve was a virgin? Honestly, he wasn't sure. And he didn't care. Steve saying he was a virgin implied he had never bonded, either; bonding without mating was a bizarre concept to Tony. A bizarre concept to any Alpha. And that's what he was mad about. The bond that had come before him. The bond that still existed.

He couldn't trust Steve.

"You told Natasha." Another accusation. Tony didn't need to add that Natasha was herself an Alpha. And a more dominant Alpha than Tony.

Tony tried to think of anything else to say, but couldn't. So he didn't. He remained lying on the couch, arms crossed. He didn't really care if Steve wanted to lie prostrate like that on the rug for the rest of the day. He couldn't accept another apology. Not again. Not after what Steve had done to him. Because there were probably more lies and Tony just couldn't handle having an unfaithful, untrustworthy omega. Tony felt a lump for in his throat, a prickling in the eyes. Damn it.

"Get out of here," he said quietly. "Go kneel for someone else. There's another Alpha upstairs. Why stop at two when you could have three? Hell, might as well treat us like Pokémon - try to catch us all."

A pause. Tony realized abruptly that Steve had no idea what Pokémon were. He was too tired to explain the reference, though.

Steve felt shame run through him. He thought the feeling belonged to him but he wasn't entirely sure. He was almost shaking. Didn't Tony want him? Had Steve fucked this up forever? He wasn't right a second time around? That was the problem with Steve, wasn't it? He was the kind of omega every one admired...but no Alpha wanted.

"I was a virgin before you," Steve insisted in a whisper, words muffled against the floor. "He never touched me, he never -"

"He never touched you? He bit you didn't he?" snarled Tony. "Why did you let him bite you if your bond with him was so terrible? I thought Bucky was the greatest. How do I know you won't feel trapped by me in a few years and move on to the next Alpha?"
Jesus Christ, it was so fucked up, wasn't it?

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Tony. I told Natasha because she's my friend. And she knew anyway because it was in my files. And I didn't tell you because I was embarrassed, because I- I was scared you wouldn't want me. I thought he was dead. I thought it was gone. I can't feel it anymore; I didn't know. I swear to God, I swear...I would have told you if I thought it was still around. I don't want another Alpha. I want you," Steve whispered. "My bond before was painful. It was agony. It was a prison and I was trapped in it. That was before I was Captain America, Tony. I was sick and it was 1935 and I was supposed to be bonded, but this is nothing like that. This isn't an obligation or a... a practical thing. We're scent-mates, Tony. I feel you in everything I do and I love it. I love you and if you really want me to leave then I will. But I can feel what you're feeling, Tony, and I know that isn't what you want." He let out a shuddering breath. "I know the biology of this isn't perfect. But if you really have feelings for me then it doesn't matter. Fuck biology; if you want something, you should take it."

Tony listened to Steve talk, still hurting, and felt his eyes tear up. He blinked rapidly. He would not let them fall.

Steve's words coursed through his head. *Fuck biology. If you want something, you should take it.* Like multiple Alphas? Steve's words reminded Tony of Raza. How he'd made Tony kneel, treated him like an omega, burned a mark onto the back of his neck. *Fuck biology, indeed.* Tony had been forced to live an an omega for three months and he'd felt like that, more than the torture, had fucked him up. Honestly, he preferred waterboarding to kneeling.

For a guy who hated biology so much, Steve sure did look awfully omega-y, prostrated on the floor.

"His picture's on your fridge," hissed Tony. "The night after we mated, you made me breakfast and you were looking at him. If he was such a crappy Alpha, Steve, why did you let him mate you?!"

Steve blinked in surprise and looked up at the question, genuinely considering the answer. But he didn't get up onto his knees. He realised, belatedly, that no one had ever asked him that before. "It never occurred to me that I had a choice," he said simply. "It- it was 1935."

"I am so sick of hearing about how your century was different," grumbled Tony.

"Look someone can hurt you and still mean a lot to you. Someone can hurt you and still try and their best," pointed out Steve. *I'm trying my best, can't you see that? I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.*

Tony's body shuddered with repressed rage. How dare Steve stand up for Bucky! He wanted to fight the other Alpha, challenge him, prove he was good enough for Steve, strong enough, aggressive, dominant.

But he wasn't.

That was the worst part. The knowledge that, in all likelihood, Bucky was the more dominant Alpha, and he had gotten to Steve first.

The desire to fight gave way to shame and embarrassment again. Tony huffed and rolled over, turning his back on Steve, facing the back of the couch. It wasn't that he was rejecting Steve to hurt him. It was just that he felt so entirely powerless. He couldn't accept the apology; he was nobody. One of the top ten smartest, top ten richest men in the world and he felt like the most submissive omega in the world. He'd mated an already-bonded omega. And he'd only gotten the
mating ritual down on the second try. *Loser*, he admonished himself mentally.

If this were a *mechanical* problem, it would be a piece of cake to fix it. But as an emotional one... Tony knew when to quit, when to fold, when enough was enough. He had mated Steve because Steve's smell had called to him in a way no other scent had. But he hadn't done it right and he'd been too late and it was his fault everything was a mess.

"Steve," said Tony hoarsely to the back of the couch. "Can you leave your sweatshirt, though? Please?" Tony wanted that smell now. That smell that was supposed to mean comfort and home. He just wanted to lie on the couch and smell Steve's sweatshirt and try not to think too hard about what it was that he had almost had and then lost.

Tony turning his back on him was like a knife to his gut. Steve screwed his eyes shut again as his whole body trembled.

"Don't you get it?" Steve muttered into the floor and he almost sounded...angry. His eyes fluttered open. "Don't you get it, Tony? I don't give a shit. I don't give a shit how dominant you are!" Before Steve knew what he was doing he was standing up. "I slept with you because I *wanted* to. Because I like that stupid twitch your left eye makes when you're annoyed, the crease in your brow when you're thinking. I like the way you build things and take them apart and your creativity, and how goddamn amazing the things are that you create with your bare hands. I like the good friends you keep company with. I like the cute names for your robots that try and fail to bring you coffee. I like the way your hair looks like Wolverine's in the morning and how you need a shower to calm it back down. I like the way your biceps look in those stupid tanks you wear in the workshop. I like the way you smile. I like the way you're happy even when you're down. I like the way you smell. I like how you make me happy."

Steve stared at the back of his head and the tense line of Tony's shoulders.

"Statuses, dominance hierarchies, whatever. Who cares? *I like you* and I'm here. I kneel for you because I *want* to, not because my stupid biology makes me do it. Who cares if you're a good Alpha? You're a good person, and personally I think that makes you a good Alpha by default."

Tony stared at the fabric on the back of the couch. If he stared hard enough, then he could find the individuals threads, see the weave of them.

"You don't get it," he muttered darkly. "You don't know what it's like to be a weak Alpha. You don't know how it feels to-" He stopped suddenly, realizing he was talking to someone who grew up in the twenties and thirties as an omega. In America, in the those times, omegas couldn't attend college or join the army or vote. Omegas were expected to be seen, not heard. Omegas were expected to settle down with an Alpha who protected them and could mate them and sire children, and frankly, what the omega wanted wasn't really a factor.

Steve knew, perhaps better than anyone in the developed world, *exactly* what it felt like to be objectified and degraded.

Tony rolled back over and looked at Steve. Steve *wanted* him. Something that a lot of bonded omegas couldn't actually say about their Alphas.

"Yeah, well, I like how you don't get emojis or Garfield or James Bond. And I like how you've got a little ring of gold and green around your pupils. I like when you get excited and start *talkin' like a kid from Brooklyn*. I like when you cross your arms and spread your legs and stand like a soldier when you're trying to get a point across. I like how you make a huge breakfast every morning even though I've actually never had anything other than coffee around you before noon." Tony paused
and huffed a little. "You told me you don't do triads. And I said okay. And now there's another Alpha in the picture. And even if you want to say fuck biology, the truth is... bonding... it changes how you are. I know that now. This other guy... whether you want him to or not, he has an effect on you. He's in here." Tony tapped his head. "We saw that in your simulation. ...he came first. He came before me. And even if he treated you like crap, you love him. I know. I can feel it. Like you said, someone can hurt you and still mean a lot to you. I mean, look at the number of times DUMM-E has hurt me, and I still keep him around. ...useless piece of junk."

Across the room, one of the robots whirred and clicked a few times with excitement at the recognition of its name.

Tony sat up, his body still hunched, tensed, curled into itself. "It's bad enough you have all these dominant Alpha friends like Natasha and Sam. You have no idea how badly I wanna just... slam you to the floor and sit on top of you like Smaug guarding his hoard. (That's a reference you ought to get, by the way. Tolkien's gotta be at least a century old, right?) I wanna be supportive of your whole... omega rights thing. I really do. But I can't hover over your shoulder getting emotionally castrated over and over. I mean, Jesus Christ, I was gonna go to the Expo tomorrow and rub you in Justin Hammer's stupid face, and now... can you imagine if people found out I was your second bond? I mean, you'd look great, you'd look like a total badass omega, handling two Alphas. But it's embarrassing, Steve. It's so fucking embarrassing. You might as well slap a collar on me and lead me around like a little dog." A pause. "I mean, it's sexy in the bedroom, but I'm talking about, you know... in public, at SHIELD, shit like that." Another pause. "Can I please have your shirt now?" Tony's voice cracked a little. He stuck his hand out impatiently.

"Why would anyone find out?" Steve asked, keeping calm. "It's literally under my skin and only partial scarring which means it isn't all there Tony. Just a remnant of it. I can't feel him right now- I can only feel you." Steve ran a hand over his face. "The strongest thing you can do right now is say that you don't care. You don't care if someone else is gonna try and try your omega away from you...because you simply won't let him," Steve breathed quietly. "I told you I'm not going anywhere. Not unless you kick me out."

Tony did not take the opportunity to tell him to get out, so Steve, feeling a little bit emboldened, continued. "I know it's hard, because you're an Alpha-"

"A weak Alpha," interjected Tony.

"I don't care," snapped Steve. "I know it's hard because you're an Alpha and you grew up with a more traditional upbringing and a lot of really strong Alphas in your life, and I don't expect you to just push away all those anxieties Tony. I'm not expecting it to happen in an instant. I'm just asking you to think about this logically instead of with your instincts." Steve sighed. "And you can have the shirt, but I'm not taking it off."

"You won't take it off," he repeated. "...brat. Fine. C'mere, then." He jerked his head to the couch and finally sat up, patting the seat behind him.

When Tony called him a brat, Steve couldn't help but smile ruefully in a strange sense of victory.

"For the record," he added, looking over at one of his gantries, at his desk, anywhere but Steve, "I feel like lately I've been very progressive. I knelt for you. And last week I ate a vegan club sandwich. That doesn't actually have anything to do with statuses, I just felt like it was a very progressive thing to do."
He patted the seat next to him again, impatiently. "I don't like when you're scared. Seems weird. Captain America, being scared." Tony reached up and rubbed his neck thoughtfully. "I can feel it, sort of. Not thoughts. Just feelings. But it's hard for me to tell which are which. I'm not good at feelings. I once said I love you to a Hot Pocket after choking down a vegan club sandwich, but that was sort of my limit, you know?"

"Hey, I'm here," Steve murmured to calm him down as he felt Tony tense beside him. He moved to sit down, giving Tony better access to his neck and him in general. Steve moved to run a hand through Tony's hair soothingly, hoping to reassure him. He could sense his unease and the brief hiss of paranoia that underlined it. They sat like that for a while, Tony's face against his chest with his fingers tracing the mark at Steve's nape - the touch was gentle, made him shiver and almost squirm. It felt strangely intimate, just as the moment had been when that mark was made in the first place.

Tony was trying to find a way not to let this bother him. But of course it bothered him. This was one of the things he'd been most afraid of- another Alpha, encroaching on his territory. Even though he desperately wanted to follow Steve's advice, say fuck biology, he could already feel his body becoming aggressive, possessive. It didn't help that they were still in the stupid honeymoon phase. Tony wondered how long before he'd wrestle his feelings under control. He'd look it up later. For now, he wanted to find a way to forgive Steve. He still hurt. A mean little part of him wanted to kick Steve out and keep crying to himself, but he found that, with Steve here, in front of him, his scent apologetic, Tony was unable to hold on to that rage. It was being redirected toward all the other Alphas in Steve's life instead.

_He's right. No one has to know. No one has to find out. It's under the skin, _he consoled himself.

Who knew about Steve's other bond? Pepper and Rhodey, who Tony trusted. Fury, apparently, who Tony didn't trust one bit. Natasha, who Tony felt threatened by and also found devastatingly attractive, which complicated matters. Basically everyone at SHIELD. Which Tony was trying to join. Ugh. Well... they were a super-secret spy agency, right? They could keep a secret. Maybe it would never leave SHIELD knowledge. That wouldn't be so bad.

When Steve finally moved into grabbing distance, Tony did just that, grabbing his shirt and burying his face into the fabric. He knew he was imagining it but he almost felt like he could smell the other Alpha on Steve, and he found himself stroking Steve's neck, rubbing his face into Steve's chest, wanting Steve to smell only like Steve and like him. There was no foreign scent to cover up, though. (Except, maybe, a brief little hint of Natasha? Tony's hackles rose immediately, unintentionally. Oh, God, this was not going to be easy. If Tony had thought keeping jealousy under control was hard before, learning about another Alpha like this, only a few days after mating and bonding, was going to make it fucking impossible.)

"I got scared a lot. Still do," Steve whispered, just to fill in the quiet. "You do when there's lives in your hands. That alone is scary as hell. Just like a bond is kinda scary; we're suddenly overwhelmingly responsible for each other, right? But that's not a bad thing- being afraid of it. It just means it's something important, something worth fighting for."

Steve fell quiet again and leaned his side against the back of the couch, glancing around the eerily quiet workshop as he felt Tony's breathing slowly evening out alongside the pace of his own. "Do you think one of your suits would be stronger than me?" he asked curiously and abruptly, the thought popping into Steve's head; a convenient, and lighter, change of topic.

Tony felt their breaths and heartbeats sync up again, unintentionally. He fingered the mark on Steve's neck, his feelings a confusing jumble of anger and betrayal and love and trust.
Steve's question snapped him out of his reverie.

"Yes," said Tony without hesitation. "The gantry-based, non-portable armors weigh two hundred pounds and have an output comparable to Hoover Dam, Steve. I can lift like ten tons in some of those things. ...not that all of them are that strong, I mean... you might be able to take on one of the portable armors. But the ones that are hitting sonic speeds and tossing Jeeps across football fields? Yeah, no, forget it. Those suits are designed to take on anything. Unless Fury starts recruiting demigods, then I'm gonna be the strongest one on the team." Tony got a smug sense of satisfaction knowing that, in the exoskeleton, he would be the indisputably most powerful Avenger. Not the most powerful Alpha, but who cared? The suits were artificial strength, inorganic enhancements... but they still counted. Inside the suit, Tony was invincible.

"Huh." Steve processed the information curiously. His mind drifted a little. He knew Tony's securities were rooted in a lot of issues, some of them relating to Howard. But it didn't help that Steve was a super soldier, who was kind of huge and made of muscle and intimidating to most Alphas out there.

Tony sighed and leaned his head on Steve's shoulder, closing his eyes. God, it hurt. Another Alpha. But their bond was what it was. He didn't know what the future held but he couldn't get rid of Steve anymore than he could cut off his left arm. Steve was a part of him.

A vulnerable part of him. Tony's heart pounded a little harder, remembering, with sudden clarity, Vanko's phone call. Alive. How the hell could he be alive? Tony had been notified that he'd died. The frightening thing wasn't that he was alive, no. It was that he was alive and capable of building arc reactors and suits that rivaled Tony's. That sort of power was unyielding. And Steve, for all the super-soldier strength and reflexes, was still a fleshy, organic human who could be easily hurt by a fusion-powered, weaponized prosthetic suit. Between Vanko and the Winter Soldier, Tony was starting to wonder if his omega was cursed.

Tony didn't want to frighten him by telling him about Vanko. He'd just have to keep Steve safe until he had more information.

"Steve, maybe you should take a break from SHIELD for a little while," he said tentatively. "You know, kick back, relax... not go on any dangerous missions... y'know, it'd take you all week alone to see everything at the Expo. And you really need to get caught up on all the latest tech. Hey, didn't you go to the one in '43? Yeah, no, this one's better... the best one yet. 'Cause I made it myself."

The Expo, in Tony's mind, was probably one of the safest places Steve could possibly be. Top-notch security, worthy of a large-scale Stark event. Under Tony's complete control. That would give him time to figure out where Vanko was. Probably not still in Monaco. He could be anywhere in France or Italy... anywhere in Europe by now, really. But since he was working alone, surely he couldn't have gotten too far, right? And once Tony hunted down Vanko, then he could tackle this whole Winter Soldier business. Once those two were out of the picture... then what? Deal with Bucky, maybe? Find the guy and set him straight about whose omega Steve was? Tony wasn't sure he could face the other Alpha who had bonded Steve.

Who knew if the guy was even still in his right mind, at his age?

He was morbidly curious about how they'd bonded without mating; had Bucky pinned him down, bit him, and then just walked away to beat off? What kind of sick fuck could do that? After biting Steve, Tony had felt like he couldn't help but mate him, too. The amount of self-denial and willpower required not to mate an omega after bonding him was super-human.
Tony remembered, though, that Steve had been sick. He's seen pictures of pre-serum Steve. He probably wouldn't have wanted to fuck the fragile omega either; Steve had looked so terribly breakable, so delicate. Tony's stomach turned; what if, once the other Alpha saw the new and improved Steve, he decided he wanted the omega after all? Wanted to mate him properly?

Without thinking, Tony was crawling on top of Steve, laying down on top of him, shielding him with his body.

One thing at a time. He couldn't honestly worry about Bucky, not while Vanko and the Winter Soldier were lurking around. They needed taken care of first.

"Hey, Tony..." Steve laughed quietly as Tony pushed him down and slumped on top of him. "I'm not going anywhere," he promised in a murmur and reached up to run his fingers through the other's hair. Steve looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "SHIELD gave me a week off, actually. The doctor recommended I spend it with you and work on our bond," Steve told him. "She, at least, has faith in me. The Expo sounds good, actually. Will... you be there? You're offering to take me, right?" he asked, sounding and feeling hopeful. Most importantly he wanted to spend the week with Tony, he honestly wasn't all that fussed about where that ended up being.

"I just wanna be with you," Steve said in a whisper after a beat of silence. "I just want...to spend time with you. I want to make this work, Tony."

"Course I'll be there," said Tony gruffly. "It's my fucking Expo, isn't it? My name's all over it. Pep says it's one giant ego trip. Like that's a bad thing." He sighed, still rubbing his cheek on Steve's neck, not really thinking. It was automatic. He wanted his omega to smell like him. Besides, his mind was occupied with the phrase "work on our bond." Tony doubted very much that a week would be long enough. Hell, a lifetime might not be long enough. Steve was a supersoldier; the serum had created a freak of nature, an omega more powerful than most Alphas, rippling with muscles and strength. And Tony was... well. A national disaster. A piping hot mess. Back asswards, absolutely salmagundi. Even with a regular omega, Tony wouldn't have had any clue what the hell he was doing. But when you factored in Steve's status as the world's most powerful omega and also factored in that he'd been previously (no- was currently ) bonded... things were complicated.

Even though Steve was reassuring him, stroking his hair, Tony made no move to get off of him. He heard the beep of the door after a few moments of silence, of the two of them just laying there with each other, Tony hugging Steve, pressing his body down protectively on the omega.

Protecting him, yes. But also establishing dominance. Which was, of course, a ridiculous notion. But like huffing Steve's shirt, it brought Tony comfort, and he was too worn out to act like he was above his base instincts at the moment.

"Tony?" Pepper's voice.

Tentatively, the redhead walked over, heels clicking. Tony remained draped over Steve; he looked up at her questioningly. His eyes were bright again; relief flooded her face.

"...you two work it out?"

"No," said Tony. "Not by a long shot. But we're going to. Eventually. And, good news... according to SHIELD, it'll only take a week." He rolled his eyes.

Pepper offered them a tight smile.
"Can you ask Rhodey if I can have my suit back now?"

"You're kidding me. After the party and the way you've been acting all week, you expect him to hand you that suit back?"

"I'm worried he'll scuff it."

Pepper scoffed. "JARVIS, tell James that Tony's back."

"And better than ever!" added Tony.

There was a second beep from the door and Rhodes walked in; Tony's body tensed on top of Steve's, unwillingly, automatically. Rhodey smelled all wrong. Metallic. Blood on steel. Tony's grip on Steve tightened and he growled, low, in the back of his throat.

Steve squirmed uncomfortably beneath him. It was kind of strange to have Tony's friends there, having a conversation with him whilst he was blanketed over Steve. Tony's body was bleeding warm into Steve, making the super soldier almost hot. Steve was slightly embarrassed but when Tony growled, he froze automatically, letting Tony "protect" him.

"Whoa. Whoa, whoa, I don't want him," said Rhodes, holding up his hands, keeping a respectful distance from the pair. "Come on, Tony, you know me. Chill out."

Rhodey's words made sense. Logically. But Tony's hackles remained up at the presence of a more dominant Alpha. Rhodey kept his distance from Tony and Steve.

"...gimme back my suit," demanded Tony.

"I can't. It's government property now."

"Give it back."

"I told you, I can't." Rhodes looked exasperated. "Tony, I don't know if you've noticed lately, but the way you're acting... hell, it's enough to have a normal person committed. I think you need to take things easy for a while. Not think about the suits or anything, just... be with Steve, be with your omega, take some personal time."

"Sure. Well. We're going to the Expo tomorrow, right, Steve? Just to hang out?"

Pepper cringed. "No. Bad idea, Tony. Justin's presenting tomorrow. He was very insistent, so we gave him a slot, but--"

"No, I wanna see that stupid jerk," said Tony. Hammer was one of the few Alphas Tony felt he could handle, and he was itching to put the guy in his place. The way he'd come on to Steve in Monaco... yes. If Tony was only going to assert his ownership of Steve over one person, he wanted that person to be Hammer. An Alpha of comparable status to Tony who was incredibly annoying, far less progressive, and had already flirted with the omega. He might as well have had a giant target painted on his forehead.

"Tony, it's not a good idea. With all due respect, right now, you're very hormonal, and the last thing your image needs is a feral Alpha brawl in the middle of your Expo," said Rhodey.

"Since when did you care about my image? You crashed my birthday party."

"Your birthday party represented a national threat! You were wearing a weapon of mass
"For the last fucking time, it's not a weapon, it's a prosthesis!"

"You threw me through a concrete wall!"

"Boys!" barked Pepper. "Stop it. Both of you. Tony. It's your Expo, do whatever you like, but stay away from Hammer. He's only there to rile you up. You know that. You should be spending the week with Steve, not stroking your ego and picking fights."

"I'm great at multi-tasking."

Pepper rolled her eyes, but with good humor. The sarcastic Tony she knew and loved was back.

From Rhodey's perspective, it was a little different. True, Tony was no longer catatonic. But unlike Pepper, as an Alpha, Rhodey could sense a lot more of Tony's general emotional state by his pheromones, and Tony was still on edge, nervous, over-protective. He hadn't moved to get off of Steve and Rhodey doubted he would until he'd left the room. Going out with Steve seemed like a recipe for disaster; having had their bond threatened, Tony was at a high risk of aggression. But he didn't want to undermine Pepper. Besides, if Pepper was at the Expo too, if she was there to keep an eye on him... she'd been keeping him in check for a decade. What was the worst that could happen?

"So when are you going to bring me my suit back?"

"When hell freezes over, Tony. You're not getting the suit back. Look, you have, like, what, five or six suits of your own. Let us keep this one as a show of good faith. The government is seriously not happy with you. The Senate wants you locked up in Seagate, you know."

"The Senate actually agrees on something? Stop the presses," said Tony.

"Can I leave you two lovebirds alone now? Can you go a day without having some sort of over-dramatic mental collapse?"

Tony's eyes scanned Pepper and Rhodes. The thought of being alone with Steve. Thrilling. And yet terrifying. Because so far, the highs with Steve and the lows with Steve had both been at almost unbearable extremes, and Tony was nervous that Steve would drop another bombshell on him.

"...I think we're okay," he said quietly. It was more of a hope than a thought. But it wasn't like Steve could reveal anything worse than the partial bond he still had with his old war buddy, right? No, learning that Steve was already bonded to another Alpha was literally the worse thing Tony could think of, the greatest betrayal. There was nowhere to go but up.

Tony closed his eyes and nuzzled into Steve's throat lovingly; he heard Pepper and Rhodes retreat, leaving the two of them alone, and Tony made a small mental note to thank them later for being there for him, even when, lately, he'd been a fairly huge ass to them. (Although, he defended himself, he had been dying and a guy should really get a mulligan when it came coming face-to-face with one's impending, inevitable mortality.)

Steve let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding when Pepper and Rhodes left. Maybe Tony wasn't the only possessive one. Steve swallowed as the quiet filled the room again. "If you have any more questions, you can ask them now. Anything," he murmured as he trailed his fingertips over the ridges of Tony's shoulder blades. His Alpha was already calming down now Rhodes had left. Steve's heart ached; his mate was so sensitive right now. "I want to be honest
with you. I'm sorry I kept things from you...I was just so scared of what you'd think. I won't do it again and I'm sorry," Steve whispered. "I want you to make it up to you. Please."

"Okay," said Tony quietly, trying to think of something to ask. "First of all... there's no one else, right? You don't have any other secrets bonds or romances or love interests, right? Things with you and your Alpha friends, Sam, Natasha... just platonic, right? No previous flirting or anything? Other than Bucky, are there any other exes I need to know about? I'm going to include, by the way, any... any undercover stuff you're doing. You're not... not acting as anyone else's omega, right? Not pretending? There's no other Alphas, even pretend ones?"

"There's no one else. Natasha would eat me alive and me and Sam are just friends. Promise," Steve murmured. "And if you hadn't noticed already, I'm terrible at flirting. I don't flirt at all, usually. You're a lot of firsts for me- including sex. Which I will keep stressing. You're the first person who's ever been inside of me. The only other... other romance I had was with a woman named Peggy Carter."

"Peggy Carter from the SSR?" asked Tony in surprise.

"Yeah. Yeah, she worked with your dad. You know her?"


"I still visit her when I can. But she is absolutely, positively not a threat to our bond. Our romance ended in 1944. We're just friends now. Just a friend. That's the truth, I promise."

Tony didn't feel like he needed a promise; Aunt Peggy wouldn't steal his mate away. Ugh. How embarrassingly weird.

"...did you guys ever... do anything?"

"We kissed once," said Steve.

"...but no ankle-showing, or doing the Charleston together, or anything racey like that?" asked Tony.

Steve snorted. "We showed ankles in the forties, Tony. But no, we just kissed, that was it. We were fighting a war. We weren't thinking about sex that much."

A pause. Tony knew nothing about Steve. They barely knew each other. Their bond had formed rapidly, unexpectedly. He was glad to have it, but... where the hell to even start? Steve had grown up in another era; he might as well be from another planet.

Steve knew a lot about Tony from when he'd been undercover. Things like that Tony didn't know how to tie a tie (except a half-Windsor, which he refused to wear) and that Tony was allergic to opiates. But Tony didn't really know him.

"Favorite movie, book, and food," demanded Tony suddenly. "Mine's Bullitt with Steve McQueen and A Madman Dreams of Turing Machines and cheesecake, unless you count liquor as food, in which case I'd say single-malt scotch or a dirty martini. My favorite pizza toppings are pepperoni and pineapple. I secretly think leather bracelets are cool but I'd never be caught wearing one. I actually didn't lose my virginity until I was nineteen, not sixteen like I tell everyone. I hate tennis. Fucking hate it. I once got my ear pierced in college but I let it grow back because Obie threatened to kill me and I think he was serious about it. Sometimes I choke myself with a belt to get off." Tony took a breath. "I think you know most of my other dirty secrets. But let the record
show that I've always been honest with you, Steve. I may be an ass, but I'm an open book. You're the man of mystery. So if there's anything you're keeping from me... now's the time to spill."

"My favorite movie is Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," Steve said. "Oh! Or the Lord of the Rings! My favourite book as a kid was The Hobbit; waking up and realising there's a whole trilogy now was pretty awesome, I have to admit..." He remembered how much he smiled when Clint presented the DVDs to him as a present. It had made his day. Hell, his week. The visual effects were stunning.

"God, you're a dork," said Tony after a moment, watching Steve look shy. "...I liked The Hobbit too. And I played D&D in college. So I guess I can't talk, huh?"

"Favorite book is either Of Mice and Men, or The Count of Monte Cristo. My favourite food is pizza- that deep dish thing you do now is awful, though. Back in the forties it was a real treat. Anything that tasted of anything was a treat, honestly. I like it thin and crispy and with bacon and mushroom on it. My favourite drink when there was a point in me drinking was actually red wine. Used to get me silly drunk- I was such a light weight..." Steve smiled ruefully. "Other fun facts... uh... I love working out to cheesy pop music and dancing to when no one's watching and singing along too. I actually love dancing, but it doesn't really go with the whole serious Captain America vibe. Clint had to teach me how to use a credit card. Twenty-first century sex toys are a total miracle. Seriously. Though don't ever quote me on that. New underwear is so much better too, way more comfortable. Sorry, I'm getting off track..."

Steve was almost blushing. He looked sheepish, his expression cute. "Anything else you wanted to know?"

"...you've used twenty-first century sex toys?"

"Well, yeah, but... c'mon..." said Steve, blushing in earnest now.

"Steve, I don't care if you're a virgin or not. That's not what it's about. I don't care if you've had a dozen dicks in you-" began Tony.

"I haven't!" cried Steve, who was beet red.

"I just want to know I'm your only Alpha." Tony sighed miserably. Bucky was going to hang over this relationship for a while, he knew. He felt a tinge of guilt, knowing that Steve couldn't help it. He'd bonded with Bucky before Tony had ever been born, and he hadn't realized...

But that wasn't important now. They were a pair; Tony had mated him. If necessary, he'd fight for him. And probably lose. But he'd still fight.

"You are," Steve reassured him.

Tony was still wondering how Bucky had managed to pin Steve down and bite him without mating him.

He huffed a little at the idea of Steve being held down and bitten by anyone else; he leaned to to nuzzle Steve's neck. Mine. Mine. Mine.

"I'm sorry," said Tony suddenly. "I'm sorry the forties sucked. I'm trying, Steve. I'm trying to be a good Alpha for you. And to be... open-minded and progressive and everything. But I also... I don't want to be weak. You know, my dad--"

Tony stopped abruptly, embarrassed. He didn't want to talk about that. Besides, Steve already
knew. He knew perfectly well how Howard had oozed confidence and charisma. He knew perfectly well that Howard was an extremely dominant Alpha.

"You're not being weak, Tony," Steve sighed and reached up to nudge the hair out of Tony's eyes with his fingertips. "You're just human. And no one can fault you for that."

Tony huffed again unhappily. Maybe, he reassured himself, with time, he could be Steve's only Alpha, somehow. After all, Bucky had to be old... maybe the guy would die soon.

Or maybe be killed.

Tony realized as soon as the thought flitted through his mind that his instincts were pushing him to fight. To fight to the death. Something that feral Alphas did over bonding disputes.

He got goosebumps and chased the thought away. He was better than that. Like Steve said, fuck biology.

"Let's just... focus on us. On our..." Tony pause a beat. "...our bond. Our pairing. Yeah? We got a week off, that should be more than enough time to get all the mushy stuff out of the way before we go back to the regularly scheduled off-the-record government-sanctioned spy stuff, right?" A pause. "Oh. But, just, on the down-low, I would kind of like to... um... do a test run. Make sure SHIELD doesn't see anything they're not supposed to. A brain like mine is kind of a minefield, you know? With great intelligence comes great psychoses. Another movie you should watch, by the way: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

"We'll get a test run done after the Expo," Steve assured him. "We'll still have a few days between that and your test. Normally they do the cardio the day before-"

Tony snorted a little when Steve said "cardio." Tony's heart was literally broken, jagged spikes of metal wedged into it, dangling threateningly centimeters away from the valves and arteries. On an X-ray, Tony's heart resembled a hedgehog. His sternum had nearly been completely obliterated by the blast that had ruined his heart, and the pieces had been pulled out to make room for the cylinder and base plate that held the arc reactor. He could just imagine them trying to hook him up to a bunch of electrodes; the energy output of the reactor would probably scramble all their equipment, if not fry it into oblivion.

Actually, he was sort of looking forward to that.

"I just asked for my tests to be condensed into one day. So yours'll be more spread out," continued Steve. They were supposed to separate the physical and psychological tests so they would be completed with a higher degree of accuracy but Steve insisted that wasn't necessary. Physically, it just took so much to exhaust him... all of the physical tests had been laughably easy for him. And he'd really just wanted to get it over and done with.

Steve smiled a little, his expression softening. "I like the sound of doing 'mushy stuff," he said softly and trailed his fingertips down the curve of Tony's stubbled jawline absent-mindedly. He couldn't imagine doing anything for or with SHIELD right now; the test seemed very far away to him. He couldn't imagine being anywhere but here, with Tony. Their connection was magnetic. A constant pull. "What constitutes as mushy stuff exactly...?"

Tony closed his eyes, enjoying the soft trace of Steve's fingers on his goatee and jaw. "I dunno... mushy stuff. Share a malt, drive Dad's jalopy up to Make-Out Point... you know... mushy stuff." He laughed. "Steve, we can do anything we want. I'm Tony fucking Stark, beloved billionaire, and you're Captain America, national treasure and civil rights leader. Seriously, the entire world is
our playground. Pick whatever date you want and we can make it happen. My only rule is nothing with horses. I played polo once, and dear God, never again. Whoever thought it was smart to get on top of a two thousand pound animal and try to boss it around must have had a head injury. ...they probably got kicked in the head by a horse."

(Tony didn't add that, the one time he'd played polo, he had insisted on using his thoroughbred racehorse, a stubborn, ill-tempered, and typically slow stallion named Pursuit of Happiness, who, on that particular day, hadn't been slow at all, demonstrating that his record of losing had nothing to do with his ability and more to do with a refusal to listen to his jockey.)

Something fluttered in Steve's chest when Tony used the word *date*. It was nice to hear it out loud. It made him feel almost giddy. He realised he was smiling, blue eyes glittering.

"I've never ridden a horse, actually. Thought always kind terrified me," Steve admitted. Riding horses for fun, especially in the forties, had been something for people who came from money. Steve certainly didn't and never had. He wasn't sure how he'd cope with the Stark lifestyle of extravagance. He'd always been a humble man from humble beginnings- buying a *laptop* had been a painful experience in itself. They cost *so* much money.

"So...what are the chances of us going flying?" Steve asked curiously, eyes narrowing. "Like...I mean, if Rhodey can fit in one, then I could too, right?" The man was a soldier, a little shorter than Steve, but still. If he could fit in a suit, couldn't Steve? He understood they were precious property to his Alpha, but, honestly, ever since Steve had laid his eyes on them all he'd wanted was to know what it felt like. He'd always been an adrenaline junkie and the thought of flying around in one of those things was *awesome*. "Only if you want to, of course," he added quickly, knowing it was a precious subject.

Tony felt his hackles rise in an instant and it took a moment for his brain to catch up to his emotions.

Steve had spied on him for two weeks. Steve had failed to inform him that he was already bonded. And now he wanted access to a suit?

"...uh... I was gonna take a break from Iron Man for a while," said Tony tactfully, reaching up to try to smooth down the hair at the back of his neck. His fingers brushed his scar and the hair bristled even more. He gave up and his hand dropped down. "...maybe later," he mumbled grudgingly, wanting to give Steve *something*. He felt weird, denying Steve. Steve had looked so excited, so happy and eager. But Tony's hurt was so fresh and he realized, with horror, he couldn't trust Steve.

Caught between a rock and a hard place. Tony loved him, and desperately wanted to give him everything he wanted... but he also knew, in a logical, unemotional way that, so far, Steve hadn't given him much reason to trust him. Not at all. Giving in to Steve would be easy, but it might mean playing into SHIELD's games. Maybe that was the game plan all along- get their grubby little hands on the suit, on the newest version of the reactor.

Tony would have to tread lightly. He couldn't stand the idea of giving up Steve, but he wasn't going to let himself get taken advantage of, either. Learning to trust Steve at all was going to be an arduous, uphill process and the only reason Tony was embarking on it at all was that he felt he had no choice. Life without Steve was an abyss. Even since they'd paired, Tony was unable to untangle his emotions. He loved Steve. He wanted Steve. No matter what happened, he still needed him: deeply, desperately, hopelessly.
Fucking bond, he thought with irritation. The idea of his brain being hijacked by his hormones frustrated him. He'd always sort of thought bonding was stupid and here he was, a complete sucker, falling over backwards to forgive an omega who'd been nothing but trouble and also happened to have the most gorgeous sparkling sapphire eyes that Tony could get lost in for hours.

Steve could feel Tony's own confusion too, a twisted sensation in his chest that almost made it hard to breathe.

"I said I wanted to make it up to you," Steve murmured. "I meant that, you know."

"I know," Tony murmured back. He avoided Steve's gaze, looking down at his hands instead, fiddling with them. Tony preferred his hands to be busy. He wished he were building something. Or playing guitar. Hell, he would knit if he had to. Sitting here like this, doing nothing, was driving him crazy. "...you will," added Tony. He hoped Steve would, anyway. He wanted to trust Steve so, so badly, against all reason, even after two massive betrayals in a single week. He loathed himself for feeling so close to Steve. The only other person he felt this way with was Pepper and she had earned it after a decade of unwavering service to him. The only thing Steve had done was let Tony bite his neck. And yet, here they were, stuck together.

It's like an emotional knot, thought Tony. He giggled slightly. Steve was watching him; he smothered his laughter.

"How about you and I just... spend tonight in, hang out at the Expo tomorrow, maybe grab a spa day over the weekend? It's not like the suits are going anywhere," said Tony. He ran one rough hand down Steve's arm and felt an unintentional pang of joy. Whatever misgivings his rational mind had, his body and his emotions were both in agreement about one thing. Steve made him happy. Being around Steve, touching Steve, hearing Steve, smelling him... his body craved Steve like it craved alcohol.

Speaking of which.

"C'mon. Let's go get a drink, watch a movie," said Tony, rising. He offered the omega his hand.

Steve was a man of action; he wasn't good at the long game. He didn't want to wait. He wanted to make it up to Tony now. He wanted to stop his Alpha feeling so insecure. But it was evident that that simply wasn't possible. Trust was a slow process, something to be built up one brick at a time. If Steve rushed that process their trust would, yet again, have shaky foundations. This was stripping back and starting anew which, in itself, demanded a degree of caution.

Tony's working fingers made him shiver involuntarily as they passed over serum-smooth skin. Steve watched Tony stand and took the hand when it was offered automatically. Their fingers slotted together just right.

"We should eat too," Steve pointed out. "All this talk of pizza has made me hungry."

"I can order takeout with your earlier specifications," JARVIS offered from above, speaking out. It was almost sinister, Steve thought, the way he recorded each piece of information offered.

"Do it, Jarv. One Stark special and one Steve special. And get something for yourself, too," said Tony, unconcerned with the program. Like the original Jarvis, JARVIS was a useful household extension and Tony rarely thought of how unnerving normal people might find him. Yet this time, he felt a pang of unease.

He blinked, then realized it hadn't been his.
"Oh. Sorry. I'm just... used to him," said Tony, looking up. "...I guess when you think about it, having an artificially intelligence cyber butler is... kinda weird. ...it's basically a computerized ghost of my dad's omega. Yeah, okay I'm definitely seeing how that's weird now. We can shut him off, you know, if it makes you uncomfortable. Or send him off to hang out on the cloud or the 'net. Sometimes he likes to upload himself onto the web and just kind of browse. It helps him expand his algorithms. He's a learning program."

Steve looked lost.

"Never mind, I'll explain later," said Tony. "Hey, Jarv, can you give me and Steve some privacy? Why don't you go hack some Pentagon files or screw around with Hammer's private servers or something?"

"My pleasure, sir. I've placed your order," said JARVIS.

"Good job, Jarv, thanks."

Tony gave Steve's hand a tug. "There. No more JARVIS. See? ...he'll check back in tomorrow when the house reboots. It's scheduled to update itself every morning at sunrise. ...so, um, it's just us until then." Tony gave Steve a small smile, feeling suddenly awkward. Why? He was proud of his smart house, proud of the amount of programming that-

Oh. The discomfort wasn't his. He loved his house. He was sensing Steve's trepidation at technology.

Tony's skin crawled. He wasn't sure how much he liked this unintentional connection. It made him feel a little vulnerable. Which was the point. To be as close and entangled and, yes, emotionally vulnerable as possible to your mate. Because you trusted each other. Pair-bonds were supposed to feel this, but it was unfamiliar and Tony wished it had an "off" switch.

"...did you and him- did you guys... feel this way? asked Tony before he could stop himself. So much for not asking about Bucky.

"I don't know," Steve admitted after he belatedly realised Tony was talking about Bucky. "I felt stuff. I have no idea what he felt, however. We never talked about it, but I don't think he did." Or, it was easier for Steve to feel that way. If Bucky felt him, all the jealousy and the pain of every time Bucky went off with some other girl and just simply ignored him...Steve couldn't deal with that reality in his head. That Bucky would feel that and wouldn't care and didn't do anything about it.

"Sorry, I'm not...I'm not used to tech yet. Not on this level. Stuff like jets I can understand- that sort of thing is familiar. But laptops, phones? It's all new. We had nothing like that back in my day." Back in my day... Steve could see Natasha rolling her eyes. "It's not that it's bad. It's just unknown to me. Aaand...I don't like the fact that SHIELD used it to track my every move."

Tony lead them into what looked like a lounge. Steve sat down onto a sofa and tugged Tony down with him, wanting him close. He looked around with interest at the room.

"It's a home theater," said Tony, answering Steve's unasked question.

"What film are we watching?"

"What film are we- oh! You think we're actually going to watch a movie. Cute. Allow me to introduce you, Steve, to the concept of Netflix and chill. JARVIS, TV!" called Tony into the cavernous front room.
Nothing happened. Silence settled.

"Oh. Right," said Tony sheepishly. He'd asked JARVIS for privacy.

Steve blushed when Tony called him 'cute' and was suddenly reminded of his inexperience of-well, just about everything aside from war. "Nets, flicks, and what-?"

Tony leaned forward and snatched a remote off of the glass coffee table, and hit a button. On the opposite wall, a couple of panels slid back silently and Steve was faced with the biggest flatscreen he'd ever seen.

Tony offered Steve the remote and curled onto the couch, setting his head in Steve's lap. He gestured lazily. "Whatever you want, Steve. I just want to-" *Be with you.* "-hang out, y'know."

Steve found himself smiling when Tony's head ended up in his lap and automatically ran his fingers through the man's dark hair. "Hang out?" he echoed, amused. The edges of his smile twitched up into a smirk. "Is that what they're calling it nowadays?" he asked in a light joke and moved to turn the TV on. Remotes he could handle (he had been acclimatised in a SHIELD institution, after all).

Tony's remote was like a spaceship controller.

"I literally know what like none of these are," Steve said after a moment, trying unsuccessfully to navigate through a menu of options. He was slightly overwhelmed by the amount of choices. "What do you recommend?"

Tony stared up at Steve's face lazily, reaching up to stroke his jaw.

"If you haven't seen *The Blair Witch Project*, you should. That one's a classic. Everyone's seen it," said Tony after a moment. "It kind of inspired the entire 'found footage' genre." He found Steve's hand and brought it to his face, kissing Steve's knuckles and nuzzling his fingertips.

*My omega*, buzzed his brain excitedly. Tony took a moment to rue the fact that neither he nor Steve had ever seen sat down and explained any of this stuff. Maybe things wouldn't be so terribly complicated if they knew what to expect. But both of their educations had jumped over Alpha-omega relations and they were flying blind.

"I love you," mumbled quietly. The words were weird and foreign in his mouth. But they were true. "...or if you, uh, don't want to watch a movie, there's, you know- we can just watch TV. The news is still going on and on about you. You really stirred things up."

Steve was halfway through typing in the words 'blai-' when Tony said those three simple words. He blinked in surprise and something fluttered in his chest as he watched Tony's lips move over his hand...exploring. He felt his cheeks turn pink again but for an entirely different reason than they did before.

"I'm not really concerned with the rest of the world right now," Steve murmured quietly. *Just you*. He let the pad of his thumb brush over Tony's bottom lip. He shivered. "I love you, too." They felt so easy to say, so automatic. But their meaning weighed heavy in the air and a new kind of tension settled over them, but not a bad kind.

"I want to go to the Expo with you Tony. Not as your friend...but as yours."

It was a gesture. Steve knew they hadn't planned to come out this early but they also hadn't planned for a Bucky-shaped mark to still be in the picture either. Steve wanted to prove he was serious
"As... my omega?" asked Tony cautiously. He wasn't yet ready to banish the idea that Steve had some ulterior motive, but if they came out as being paired... well, there was no reversing that. Everyone knew who Captain America was; everyone knew who Tony Stark was; the two of them being bonded would be a national headline.

Tony doubted, somewhat, what Steve was offering. He was surprised at how hesitant he was; he couldn't stand to be disappointed, not about this. He didn't want to be let down. But, strangely, that was his only misgiving. Maybe it was because they were in their honeymoon phase. Tony sure as hell didn't want to give up sleeping with gorgeous women, with supermodels and heiresses and athletes. But ever since bonding, all he'd wanted was Steve, and he liked the idea of coming out and having everyone know he'd laid claim to this omega in particular. The best omega.

But Tony couldn't possibly picture Steve kneeling for him in front of the cameras.

Then again, he hadn't been able to picture Steve shirtless with an America flag painted across his abs, and he'd seen that photo, so... really, anything was possible.

Tony closed his eyes, kissing Steve's thumb pad as it slid back and forth over his bottom lip. Even if Steve wanted to come out, Tony doubted SHIELD would let him.

"Yes," Steve said quietly. "I wanna go public about our pair-bond." Maybe it was a little insane, or very insane. But if he wasn't ready to commit to Tony now then when would be he? He swallowed and dragged this thumb away from Tony's mouth and along the curve of his jaw. "I'm here, and unless you want me gone, I'm not going anywhere. I want to prove I mean that. And-" He hesitated. "It wouldn't mean that you have to forgive me, or anything. I don't mean it like that. This would be because I want to do this. Not to pressure you. I want SHIELD to take us seriously and stop trying to undermine us at every step we take. I want people to know that I'm committed to you."

Steve smiled. It was small but sincere. "If you want that," he added. He wanted to give Tony the opportunity to say no, if for some reason he was inclined to.

Tony swallowed. He still didn't want to get his hopes up. "Steve... I don't want people to know you have another Alpha, either. I don't want people to see me as... you know. A cuckold. I've got a reputation to maintain, you know? I don't want you to come out this week with me and then surprise everyone next week with Bucky or someone else. I mean... no offense but so far you have a reputation for making abrupt announcements to the media. I mean, coming out as omega- that was awesome. Seriously. But I'm just saying." a pause. "I'm your Alpha. You can tell me anything. I want us to do this stuff together from now on. I don't want any more secrets or surprises. My heart can't handle it, Steve, and it's powered by a damn fusion reactor, so... so if you want to tell everyone, that's great, but I don't want any surprise announcements later that make me look bad, you know? We're a pair and that means I stand for you and you stand for me, and... well, shit, Steve. SHIELD's right, you're a troublemaker."

Tony smiled slightly. As a fellow troublemaker, he liked how Steve opposed authority. He was a soldier, yes, but he marched to the beat of his own drum; Steve did things according to a personal value system and not simply because he was told what to do. Tony liked that.

He shifted his weight in Steve's lap and leaned up to kiss his throat before dropped back down and closing his eyes again. The day wasn't yet over but he felt exhausted from it- exhausted from sobbing and from all the emotions.
With Steve, he felt better, a million times better. But the wounds were still fresh and painful. Another Alpha. Ugh.

"What? Why would you think I would... I told you, Tony. I was miserable with him. And now I know that-" *That I'm a goddamn person too. That omegas are people.* "I would never let myself be treated like that again. I swear. And I never wanted to make you look bad. I didn't want for there to be scar tissue left. I wanted you to bond me. I wanted it. I've never wanted it from anyone else." Maybe Peggy could have been his mate... if he'd lived. If they'd gotten to know each other outside the chaos of war. But that future was taken from them by HYDRA. And Peggy had grown up, lived a full, rich life without him. It had worked out in the end. "I chose you and that's not changing. If you hadn't noticed already, I'm stubborn as hell. I know I'm impulsive, but I like to think I have good intentions," Steve breathed. "Ever since I can remember, all I ever wanted to do was the right thing. And I want to do the right thing by you. ...and I don't mean to cause trouble." He blushed a little. *Troublemaker* was a pretty good moniker for him. In the thirties, before the serum, he'd often been called bratty and spoiled because he was so headstrong. He'd tried to enlist a half-dozen times, status be damned, and been laughed away over and over. Still, he'd persisted, often having an Alpha recruiter call a weary-looking Bucky to come and collect him, the 'troublemaking omega.'

"I don't have any more secrets," Steve told him. "You literally know like... everything. My life wasn't very exciting, actually, aside from the war bit."

Tony nodded hesitantly. "Okay. Well.... then tomorrow, let's make some headlines." He smiled sleepily up at Steve. He felt nervous, but excited. He felt the way he did back in the old days, when he designed a new missile and went to see see its first field test. That anticipation, waiting to see it level its first mountain...

A major silver lining to all this is that, whatever "big surprise" Hammer had, it was about to be completely and totally overshadowed. Ha. That would show the smug little prick.

"It's probably better for us to get it over with," added Tony reasonably. "If the paparazzi catches that scar on your neck, you'll never hear the end of it."

Tony was, in a way, lucky. No one ogled to back of an Alpha's neck. He kept his hair a little longer in back to hide the mark and no one had ever noticed.

...except Clint.

Tony frowned. He hoped Clint had the decency not to say anything to anyone. Or that he'd been too drunk to remember. Tony didn't want to have to answer any of SHIELD's questions about it. An omega with a mark was like a woman with a big diamond engagement ring; everyone reacted with enthusiasm. But an Alpha with a mark... well. That was just wrong.

In any case, the reality was, now that everyone knew that Captain America was an omega, they were going to start staring at the back of his neck, eager to be the first to report if and when he paired. Tony would prefer that he and Steve controlled that announcement instead of the tabloids.

"Okay," Steve whispered, feeling almost giddy. He didn't want to hide anything- mostly because there was nothing that warranted hiding. He was proud of Tony, not ashamed of him. And if he was bonded it was no one else's business, sure, but it also wasn't a secret.

Finally, he managed to tear his eyes away from Tony long enough to finish typing in the film name. When it popped up he clicked it and then dropped the remote before settling back against the sofa comfortably with Tony in his lap. This felt good, comfortable, *safe*. There was no SHIELD

"Is this really supposed to scary?" Steve asked, sounding unconvinced after twenty minutes of friendly bickering and filming of a car journey and cabin room. "Because I dunno..."

"It gets scarier," said Tony. "It's about what you don't see, Steve. My favorite kind of horror is psychological... because what you can think up in your own brain is always worse than whatever stupid monster they show you. Trust me, the end is great. A lot of people shit all over this movie but when it came out in 1999, it was, like, a really big deal. Also, just wait 'till the part where the guy goes missing..."

Tony grinned. He was fond of horror movies. Pepper never had been. He was curious as to whether Steve would conclude the movie was good or bad. Yet another thing he didn't know about Steve.

But they had all the time in the world, didn't they? Tony was only half-watching, more focused on Steve's warmth and Steve's scent, the fingers that brushed through his hair, the thought of what tomorrow would be like, the thought of standing before a crowd and presenting his omega, announcing that, yes, he'd done it, he'd bonded, he'd really done it, Steve Rogers, America's darling, all his...

Tony was drifting to sleep in Steve's lap, smiling, cuddling into his hard, flat stomach. Steve's willingness to make this public was almost, almost enough to make up for the weeks of secrecy, the weeks of spying on him and reporting on him. This was the real Steve, the Steve who didn't want to hide anymore. As a person who took a lot of pride in having his personal life on display for the public, Tony couldn't have been prouder.

"Okay, whatever you say, Tony..." Steve mumbled, still not convinced, but his tone was good-natured. He didn't understand how watching a load of teenagers get lost in the wood was scary. But he was preferred to give Tony the benefit of the doubt.

Tony was basically asleep in his lap by the time anything interesting happened in the movie. Steve was about three quarters of the way through the movie and a girl was sobbing directly at the camera and he was... getting freaked out. This movie was creepier than he'd anticipated and watching all the characters on screen argue about a map to the point of aggression was unnerving. And all the running around in the night and creepy witch offerings.

So, yeah, Steve was getting freaked out. It just seemed too real.

"Tony-" Steve squeezed his shoulder gently just as they were entering the witch’s house. "Tony, this is actually kinda- okay, it's scary. Tony, can you wake up?"

"Hm? Wha’?" mumbled Tony, cracking open an eye.

Onscreen, one of the character was screaming, "Mike! Mike!"

Tony sat up groggily, yawning. "Oh, man, I missed the part with the guy's tongue..." His heart was beating surprisingly fast considering he'd just woken up. He pulled aside his shirt to check the arc reactor, but it looked normal.

Then he glanced up. The reactor's blue light flooded Steve's face with light and Tony realized why his heart was beating the way it was. His omega was creeped out.

Tony's face split into a grin. "...you're freaked out!" he exclaimed. "This movie is scaring you, isn't it?"
Onscreen, one of the hapless characters was descending into the cellar.

Tony wanted to make fun of Steve, but instead found himself putting an arm around his shoulders and snuggling up to him, pulling Steve close to him, comforting him. Ugh, since when had he gotten to be such a sap?

Steve ended up with his face pressed against the crook of Tony's shoulder, peeking out over the fabric of his shirt. "I'm not freaking out," he mumbled. "Don't know what you're talking about. I'm the the United States Army, you know. It takes more than this to scare me." But Steve couldn't deny he was a little creeped out.

When one character was just stood in the corner, motionless, it was sinister as hell and Steve was fistling a hand in Tony's shirt before he knew what he was doing. He'd never watched a modern horror film before; Steve hadn't realised he could be so freaked out by something that logically he knew wasn't real.

...unless it was real.

"Are you seriously telling me they're all going to die after going through all this shit?" he asked, voice a little more high pitched than usual.

Tony reached up to stroke Steve's hair. "Uh... yeah... yeah, that's it, that's the end," he reported. Personally, Tony liked horror movies that had miserable endings where people either died or were maimed or remained cursed or found out they'd been dead all along. "It's okay, Steve, it's not real, the found footage thing is just a gag. I've got you, baby..." He kissed the top of Steve's head gently as the credits rolled, one arm around his body, the other still stroking his hair. It felt weird to be holding someone bigger than him, but also nice, the weight of Steve's body; Steve had practically wriggled onto his lap.

Which was the point, really, in Tony's mind, of horror films. He liked to watch them with women and had the women snuggle up to him, squealing, and wrap his arms around them. He hadn't expected Steve to be susceptible to the same trick.

There was something about the way that Tony called him ‘baby’ that made Steve's heart skip a beat. He realised they'd suddenly pressed closed together, or rather he'd hidden his face in Tony's chest. The awkwardness from before had seemingly dissipated. Steve swallowed.

The home theater had no windows; it was a perfectly immersive experience. But even if it had had windows, outside, the sun had set, and the house was dim; most of the light in the room was coming from Tony's arc reactor. It was bright, but small, and cast everything into blue shadows, giving the impression they were underwater.

"...maybe I should turn on the lights," offered Tony, running Steve's soft blond hair between his fingers.

The glow from the arc reactor was almost peaceful, the colour not too bright. Steve quite liked it.

"It's okay like this," Steve murmured, halfheartedly watching the credits roll past as he concentrated on the feeling on Tony's hands in his hair. The touch was pleasant, making a shiver run down his spine.

"So... horror movies are a whole... thing of their own now, huh?"

"Oh, that doesn't even begin to describe it, Steve. There's psychological horror, there's thrillers, there's torture porn... I'm pretty sure, at this point, zombie movies have their own category." Tony
laughed, playing with Steve's hair. "You've got a lot to catch up on. But you already knew that."

He fell silent, thinking about Steve's predicament. Sixty, seventy years of culture: lost.

When they'd unfrozen Steve, had they tried to fill him in? Tony had a vivid mental image of Coulson calmly informing Steve that man had been on the moon, that the Beatles were a British band that was very famous, and that omegas could vote now.

That had to be the biggest culture shock for Steve- the casual attitude everyone now had toward omegas, the recognition that their humanity was just as valid as that of betas and Alphas. Sure, there were prejudices- plenty of them. But at least, legally, they were almost equals.

"How the hell did they brief you on the 21st century?" asked Tony, resting his chin on top of Steve's head. "Did you freak out when you found all about omega rights and stuff? Did you demand they take you to a ballot box so you could get one of those little I Voted stickers? Did Coulson ruin the twist of Star Wars yet? Or did they just let you off the leash and assume you would figure it all out on your own? If I were you, I'd be losing my mind."

"They kept me in quarantine for a month. I basically lost it, yeah. I was furious with them," Steve whispered after a moment of quiet. "They wouldn't give access to the internet, or news. The... the first day, they tried to get me to think it was the forties at first but they were stupid enough to play a match through the radio that I'd already listened to. They thought that if I knew what had happened all at once...that I'd go mad. That would be it. But I don't think locking me away from the world helped much, either. After a month on base, with everything being spoon-fed to be, I was goin' crazy. They told me Peggy had made SHIELD. But Peggy would never have done that to me," he added softly, words half lost in Tony's shirt. "Then they introduced me to Natasha and Clint. They started my training, got me back into a routine, and Phil slowly introduced me to the world. He essentially gave me history lessons and started bringing me newspapers. A month and a half in they gave me access to the internet- just through a tablet. But it meant I could research what I wanted...it was a slow process. When I heard about the omega rights- it didn't sound real. Everyone was talking to me like I was a person. I mean, sure the Howling Commandos had been progressive for the time- I wasn't the only 'mega on the team. But this world, it's on a whole new level. I think cried, actually," Steve admitted as he remembered. "When Phil told me everything...how much had changed. I just couldn't believe it. I'm just grateful to be alive, really. I was very lucky." Steve loosened his grip in Tony's shirt when he realised he might be ruining it. "And I know that some guy is Luke's father, or something? I think I saw a meme about it. Is that what they're called?"

"Darth Vader is Luke's father," confirmed Tony seriously. It was easier to talk about Star Wars than to listen to Steve talk about his experience waking up. Imagining the shock as he met Agent Coulson and Agent Barton, two omegas whose status hadn't put a dent into their professional careers; imagining Steve's face when he saw the old newspaper pictures of the first omega to attend college, the first omega vice president (they still hadn't had an omega president yet), the first omega astronaut. Watching newsreels of omegas voting, mixing into society like they'd always been a part of it. Having the right to choose not to have children, getting suppressants and going off into the workforce instead.

Tony had never seriously thought of any of that stuff. It was just another history lesson for him, because he'd never really interacted with omegas at all, except Jarvis. Tony felt a stab of regret. Jarvis would have had an invaluable historical perspective on omegas; he'd been born in the teens, like Steve, and lived through the slow process of omega rights. Tony wasn't sure if he'd ever voted, what that felt like; if Howard and him had gone to the polls together, if Jarvis had felt excitement, what his attitude was on the whole thing. Jarvis had been so subservient that Tony
often forgot that he was a real person... he felt a twinge of shame, knowing that he'd never sat down and had any sort of real conversation with the man. Jarvis had helped raise Tony, yes, but he'd been like a sort of nanny and Tony had never appreciated his role in the house as anything more than a very wise butler. Their conversations had been one-sided, focused only on Tony. Tony had never asked him about himself. Now his oral history was lost forever.

"Steve. I'm real proud of that interview you gave," said Tony quietly. "I'm all about rattling some cages and... you know. Sometimes people need a reminder that things could still be better for omegas. I never thought about it much but, y'know. I'm glad. Glad you're back, Cap. Glad you're putting everyone in their place again, straightening out the record about what omegas can accomplish." Tony gave him a gentle squeeze. "I wish I'd treated Jarvis better," he admitted softly.

"I wish I'd done a lot of things differently too," Steve whispered and sat up a little, but didn't pull away. Their faces were close. "It was hard waking up and having almost everyone I knew just...being here anymore. But the hardest thing was realising that in the forties I wasn't really living at all. All the pain I went through to get here. It was worth it, just to experience this."

To experience you.

"Sometimes I can't help feeling like I'm living on borrowed time, though," Steve confessed and glanced down. "That I cheated some way in getting here and it's gonna catch back up to me one day, you know?" He thought back to his test today, to the Winter Soldier shooting him right between the eyes...

"Borrowed time... I get that," said Tony with a small smile. He took Steve's hand and guided it to his arc reactor. Tony had felt like he was living on borrowed time ever since he woke up from a bomb blast hooked up to a car battery. Sometimes, randomly, it struck him all over again how lucky he was to be alive. No, not lucky. Tony didn't believe in luck. But his almost-death had certainly shaped his entire future and Tony was often hit with a sense of uncanniness, knowing how close he had come to the brink, how delicate his mortality was.

Steve traced his fingers over the metal rim of the arc reactor under his shirt gently. He felt enraptured with it all over again, the blue glow in the dim room ethereal. Steve smiled faintly and his blue eyes flitted up to finally meet with Tony's again, the moment strangely intimate. Steve almost blushed again. Maybe he did a little, but it was hard to tell in the off-coloured light.

"Speaking of interviews and the press...my agent sent me a text."

"You have an agent? You know how to text?" asked Tony.

Steve ignored his teasing. "Apparently this woman called Ellen Something wants to interview me. And the Times wants a follow-up one. And someone called Tyler Swift, I think, wants me to be in their next music video. ...do you know who those people are?"

"Swift. Taylor Swift? Oh my God, Steve, she is adorable. She's got such a cute girl-next-door thing. And she's got a song about the U.S.A.- that's right up your alley. Taylor and Ellen are both omegas so of course they want you. Ellen's only name is Ellen, it's a mononym, like Cher, or Sting."

Steve stared blankly.

"Cher and Sting are singers. Oh, wait, no, actually, Ellen DeGeneres, never mind," said Tony, snapping his fingers as he remembered her last name.
"She's a degenerate?" asked Steve, even more confused.

"No, she's a comedian. Her show is called Ellen and you should do it, absolutely; everyone loves her," said Tony, nodding eagerly. He gave Steve another squeeze. "Steve, I want you to go out there and really... show everyone what you're made of. And I'll be behind you every step of the way. Especially if I get to meet Taylor Swift. I have, like, a huge crush on her. Don't tell anyone, though, she's kind of a pop star. Pepper knows and she and Happy never stop teasing me about it. Like I said, though... I'm sort of a sucker for sweet wholesome-looking blondes." He kissed Steve's temple. "You don't have to do all that stuff this week, though, right? We're having 'us' time. You know... honeymooning it up. I mean, we're still doing the Expo, obviously, it's my Expo, I should be spending more time there... but... but maybe you could, I dunno, only do one or two interviews this week? Tell America to save some Steve for me?" Tony didn't add the sharp, magnetic pull he felt toward Steve, the need to be wrapped around him almost constantly. How leaving Steve at the base and going home alone had been one of the most painful things he'd ever experienced.

"...I think I'll just asked my agent," Steve said with a soft chuckle, still unclear on who Ellen, Taylor, Cher, and others were. And then his expression softened. "But that stuff's all in the future. You have me all to yourself for the week," he assured him. He didn't voice it, but the thought of going on TV? That was scary. There was nowhere to hide.

Also, Steve wasn't entirely sure what a music video was. A YouTube thing? YouTube had been far too random and flashy for Steve's tastes and, during the month he'd spent on base with his tablet, he had preferred to digest news from sites with simple, print formats.

"Thank you for being so amazing about this," Steve murmured. "Most people wouldn't be. I mean, the culture shock, the press-"

"Well... I grew up like this," said Tony. "TV interviews, red carpets, paparazzi... this is old news. And let's be real, Steve. Any Alpha would be cool with anything after mating you. I don't know how it feels for you, on your end, as an omega, but... you have no idea, Steve. I want to give you everything. I want to be close to you, all the time, and protect you from everything, and... it's just incredible. I want to spoil you." Actually, Tony could kind of understand an Alpha's trepidation of an omega going out and working and having a social life outside of the bond. The thought of Steve existing without Tony there was unsettling.

Tony wondered how in the hell Natasha dealt with Clint being dragged out on missions, all alone. If someone tried to take Steve to New Mexico by himself, Tony would lose it. Supposedly, though, those feelings got easier to handle with time.

"Natasha and Clint are really weird," blurted Tony without thinking. He wasn't being rude; they were, hands-down, the weirdest pair-bond he'd ever met.

"They're people who've grown up with death around them. They were never going to be normal," Steve said with a small shrug. "Clint was sent to kill her but couldn't, and then they came back, mated, and Natasha was given a second chance. For them, life has always been full of risks, including getting killed, and neither of them are prepared to give that life up right now."

Steve trailed his fingertips over the smooth centre of the reactor, eyes flickering down to Tony's chest. "For me...I feel everything you feel. It's like instinct. I want to make you happy. Disappointing you is the worst feeling I've ever felt. Sometimes it feels like I'd do anything you asked, which isn't really in my nature...I've always been so adamant about not being submissive or weak before. But with you...with you it feels okay. And I don't feel weak. It feels good, rewarding...I'm not losing anything when I do it. It's natural. Pleasing you."
"You know you're the fourth person to ever touch it?" said Tony, glancing down as Steve's fingers traced the arc reactor.

"Really?" Steve stared down at the glow through the t-shirt and something warmed in his chest. Was this a big deal? It kinda felt like one. The thing kept Tony alive after all. "And yes, I like the plan. Better to just get it out there," Steve breathed. The thought was a little nerve-racking...there would be so many people there. So many cameras. And suddenly they'd be analysing his and Tony's every move. What if the paparazzi started asking inappropriate questions now? How would Steve even respond to them?

But it was still so much better for them to do this their own way.

"Maybe I've said that before. I dunno. ...about tomorrow, Cap. Look. I want us to be on the same page. I don't want to hide anything. If we walk around together, being us, people are going to talk. I want to just go ahead and quash any rumors right out of the gate. I want to get up on stage, announce it, and be done with it. It'll be better than letting everyone say, are they, aren't they, you know? Are you okay with that?" asked Tony. He leaned on to Steve's arm, snuggling up to the larger man. Steve's arms were huge; Tony had never felt self-conscious about his biceps, but Steve was like a bodybuilder and Tony was struck, once again, with how strange it was, this well-muscled omega, this man that smelled so submissive but had such a strong jaw and powerful arms and commanding gaze. It was at times unnerving. Tony had seen some of the news in passing. There was a lot of support: people saying that Steve was brave for coming out as omega, people saying that this was going to help status rights and get omegas more respect than ever before. But there were also people saying Steve was a freak of nature, and they weren't far off from the truth. It was his posture, his look... his total lack of submission. Steve was clearly a confident individual. Aside from his smell, no one would associate him with omegas.

"So...I'm confused about this 'Netflix and chill' thing. Was that just code for watching a movie?

Tony laughed, dragging a hand over his face. "Oh. Oh, man, I fucked it up, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep. I forgot I'm forty now. No, uh, Netflix and chill is when.... halfway through the movie I start putting moves on you. ...like this."

He reached up and placed a hand on Steve's jaw, gently turning his head and brushing their lips together.

"Moves? What-" Steve fell quiet instantly as their lips slanted together

Tony's eyes closed and he nuzzled into Steve's soft, warm lips, pushing them apart with his tongue, tasting.

A quiet sound escaped from the back of Steve's throat as lips parted and Tony's tongue was in his mouth. His Alpha was everywhere, all over him and around him and making his head spin. Steve shivered against him.

The sense of self-consciousness about Steve's build evaporated, forgotten, as Tony's senses explored his omega. Steve's taste, his smell, the feel of his skin... all of it was overwhelming in the best possible way. He let out a breathy groan into Steve's mouth, climbing into his lap, blanketing Steve's body with his own.

Steve curled his hands onto Tony's shoulder and then into his hair. Steve wasn't tugging, his fingers just lightly scratching at Tony's scalp. He gasped quietly when he felt the drag of teeth against his lips and trembled.
"Maybe...maybe we shouldn't...on the sofa again," Steve whispered against Tony's lips between kisses.

Tony broke away, looking down at Steve's flushed face, his swollen lips. He felt his heart skip a beat.

"...my room?" he suggested quietly.

The thought of going to bed every night with his omega, curling up into Steve's warm body... it should have been cloying, but instead, it was comforting. Tony had never felt that sleeping alone was lonely but now he wasn't sure how he'd ever done it.

He put his arms around Steve without thinking, intending to scoop him up and haul him off to bed, then realized there was no way he could pick him up. He laughed. "Sorry. I forget you're a super-omega. How 'bout you carry me, soldier?" He wrapped his arms around Steve's neck and licked a stripe up his cheek.

Steve laughed gently and shivered at the drag of Tony's tongue. He leaned in to kiss the corner of his mouth slowly, tenderly and then moved to hoist Tony up with almost no effort. "How can I refuse an offer like that?" he asked in a murmur, Brooklyn accent creeping through.

He remembered where Tony's bedroom was but still walked slowly, eyes on his Alpha almost the whole time. When they reached a door Steve lifted his leg up effortlessly and opened it with his foot on the handle before he carried them on through.

Steve set Tony down in the bed gently and then crawled over him. He leaned down to nip at his bottom lip. "So," Steve said, voice soft, "how do you want me?"

Tony smiled at the familiar question. "On your back," he said softly. "I want to see your face. I want to kiss you. My omega." He reached out to trace Steve's lips softly with his fingers.

It was unfamiliar, this feeling of caring. Tony wasn't in the business of caring. He'd liked Steve, liked the way he looked and talked and moved. But it wasn't until Steve's heat that something had awakened in him. Something pure and primal that made his whole life up until he'd mated Steve seem inconsequential and gaudy and pointless. And now that they were mated, Tony couldn't think of any cause more noble or worthwhile than spending every waking moment with Steve, being there for him, as his guardian. There was a vulnerability to this level of love that was exciting, like going to a nude beach or trying out an untested suit for the first time by flinging himself off a cliff.

Tony reached up to pull his shirt up, tossing it aside, pulling back the sheets. His bed was at least twice the size of Steve's, and the sheets were imported silk. He was looking forward to probably ruining them.

Steve didn't quite know what to say to that. It was so sweet and sincere that it rendered him speechless. His cheeks tinged pink and his expression was raw and exposed as he watched Tony pull off his top. Steve reached up, his fingers tracing around the arc reactor tentatively before they dipped down into his abdomen.

This was different than before. Steve could feel everything in vivid and burning detail. Before it had been like being high, the thrill of being mated sending his mind into overdrive. But now he was so aware of everything. Of the drag of Tony's fingertips and the wet heat of his tongue. Steve could feel himself responding down there already.
"Yours," Steve whispered, blue eyes dark with something new. "Now claim me."

Tony gently pushed up Steve's shirt, his fingertips lingering over his abs, pulling off his clothes slowly, savoring the moment. It was like unwrapping a present. Even though Tony knew what to expect, it was no less enjoyable to him, pulling off Steve's clothes to reveal his body. He took his time, running his calloused hands over Steve's skin, eyes roaming over every little detail. He would never get enough; every little detail, the bow of Steve's lips and the serious furrow of his brow and one lone freckle on his upper arm, all of it was a visual symphony.

Tony looked down at Steve after he'd undressed him, drinking in the entire picture. "My omega," he murmured, mostly to himself. Those words would never get old. He felt enraptured; this must be how people felt about things like religion or organized sports, both things Tony had never quite understood people's fanatical passion for.

The way Tony undressed him and looked over him and explored him with every touch...it made Steve feel precious. It almost made him feel breakable, in a way. Something he hadn't felt in a very long time. The drag of those dark eyes and engineer's hands over his body made him shiver and squirm under the scrutiny - though it was very, very welcomed. How could Steve not like it when his alpha admired him? It was instinct.

Tony placed his hands on Steve's shoulders, pushing him into the bed, and crawled on top of him, leaning in to kiss his chest, collarbone, neck, throat. All the events of the day had been forgotten, at least for the moment. There was no other Alpha. For that matter, there was no one else in the world. Only Steve.

Steve moved down with Tony's touch, pliant as he moulded into the sheets and arced up into every touch. He gasped softly when Tony's hands explored lower, bucking up into the touch a little in an automatic reaction. Steve felt his cheeks tinge pink. Would there ever be a time when Tony couldn't make him blush? Probably not...

Tony reached down to palm Steve's length briefly, then felt between his legs. He was warm and slick. Tony pulled his fingers away; they were glistening; he gave them an experimental lick. His body reacted automatically; he felt his hardened cock twitch against Steve's leg.

Tony grinned. "Love you," he whispered, leaning down to kiss the corner of Steve's mouth. Steve's blue eyes looked up at him; he nudged Steve's legs apart and prodded his entrance, tense with anticipation.

Steve spread his legs for Tony to settle between, one lightly curling around his back as he moved closer. Steve's blue eyes were dark, lips parting at the teasing kiss. He tilted his head, lips brushing together open-mouthed. There was a hint of a smile. "I love- fuck -" Steve's eyes fluttered shut as the head of Tony's cock squeezed inside.

"You love fuck?" repeated Tony in a murmur, slowly rolling his hips, thrusting rhythmically, languidly, into Steve. "So articulate, Rogers..." he purred teasingly.

He caught Steve's mouth in his again, working their jaws together, still slowly rocking into Steve, feeling the omega's body wet him. He could heard someone making muffled groans and whimpers and it took him a moment to realize it was him.

He'd fucked Steve and mated Steve but this was the first time he'd really made love to Steve; Steve's body was eager and willing, but he still took his time when he felt the base of his knot pressing against Steve's wet hole. He moved his hips slowly, working it in as gently as possible. His body shuddered when he finally felt Steve's body give, pulling him in, clenching around him;
he whimpered unintentionally. "Yes... oh... good... fuck..." he whispered, forgetting how he'd teased Steve earlier for saying the say thing. His hands roamed over Steve's shoulders and arms, feeling the smoothness of his skin, the warmth.

Steve moaned quietly with each roll of his hips, his legs coming up to tangle around Tony and draw him in impossibly deeper. His body trembled with the drag of Tony's member inside of him. He let out a high pitched whine when the felt the nudge of his knot against his entrance, the noise swallowed by their kiss.

He gasped against Tony's lips as all of him pressed inside and Steve suddenly felt so overwhelmingly full and so overwhelmingly loved in that instant. He smiled at the other's own lack of eloquence and then felt his breath hitch as Tony moved inside of him again. Steve's arms ended up curled around Tony's shoulders again, his fingers in his hair, but they weren't tugging just yet. The touch was gentle.

"Tony..." His name came out breathlessly. Steve groaned quietly. "Please..." He whispered even though he wasn't entirely sure what he was asking for.

Tony laughed softly at the sound of his name. "Steve," he murmured back, drawing out the long "e," wiggling his hips into the other's. Steve's arms and legs were tangled around him, drawing him in, and he could feel his body tensing, toes and fingers curling with pleasure. It was hard to tell where, exactly, he ended and Steve began, but that didn't matter. Steve's body was warm and wet and tight, but his fingers in Tony's hair were soft and sweet and gentle.

"Love you... love you..." murmured Tony between breathless kisses, pushing himself in and out of Steve, feeling the omegas body working his knot.

Steve whined lowly as Tony's knot teased at insides and made him blush all over. He gasped and tugged lightly at Tony's hair as they kissed breathlessly, nosing pressing together as he rocked with his alpha inside of him.

It felt so right. Steve felt so at peace. This was where he was meant to be and this was what he was meant to do. Steve moaned.

"Love you too," Steve whispered, finally managing to get his words out, his eyes glazed over with arousal and something more. "So much- ah -" He gasped again. "Please. Tony. Give it to me."

"My sweet omega," murmured Tony longingly, looking into Steve's eyes. Steve was blushing, looking uncharacteristically bashful; Tony closed his eyes and nuzzled his cheek, burying himself into Steve, his hips stuttering as he climaxed. "Steve..." he gasped as he twitched on top of the blond. He had the presence of mind to reach down to fondle Steve's balls, stroke his length; Tony had always been a selfish lover but things with Steve felt different. What they were doing felt... intimate.

Was this intimacy? To Tony, sex had always been a contact sport, not something people who were in love did. Granted, it was a contact sport played with attractive women, but it was nonetheless more of an activity than anything meaningful or sensuous. Tony rode out his orgasm blissfully, one hand between them, touching Steve; when he'd finished twitching he eased himself down onto Steve's body, still inside him, brushing their lips together.

Steve moaned and threw his head back as Tony came inside of him and made him shudder, his back arching up as Tony spilt inside of him and filled his hole. He was stretched out wonderfully, eyes fluttering shutter in please as Tony stroked him. Steve's fingers tugged on his
hair as he came beneath him.

Steve came over Tony's fingertips and clenched around his member as he did so, groaning lowly as he rolled out his orgasm with slow rocks of his hips.

"Tony. Tony, oh my God..."

Tony set his chin on Steve's shoulder, kissing his neck. "Amazing," he mumbled hoarsely. Steve's body was broad and warm and solid beneath him. Better than any mattress.

Tony didn't bother trying to pull away or roll over. He knew they were knotted again. Was this going to happen every time? Was this a normal thing, to knot an omega like this? Tony made a mental note to Google that later. Not that he minded at all. He had no problem falling asleep like this, lying on top of his omega, shielding his body. It made him feel strong, made him feel proud. The semen that was all over his stomach was inconsequential. Normally that sort of thing would have bothered Tony but he didn't care. It was his omega's and therefore practically his, so who cared?

Bonus: this all-night, body-to-body contact ensured that Tony's smell would linger on Steve, further marking him, claiming him, keeping him safe from--

*Other Alphas.*

A twinge of anxiety flared up in Tony. He had felt so blissful, so at peace. But now he remembered. He wasn't the only one to lay claim to this omega.

He huffed a little, shifting to get more comfortable, trying to squash those thoughts, continue to ride out the calm afterglow of sex.

"Love you," he whispered, needing to hear Steve tell him he was loved back, needing confirmation from his omega that, yes, they were a pair, bonded, each other's.

"I love you too," Steve murmured, voice thick with emotion and sincerity as he returned to sentiment. Tony was hot and pulsing inside of him, a branding mark of claim. He let his eyes slip shut, the feeling almost blissful as he felt Tony's breathing syncing up with his own.

He was already falling asleep. Steve could feel it tugging at his bones. The knot lulled him into something, a sleepy something. He wanted to stay connected and close to Tony for as long as possible and this was the best way to do that.

"Hmph...sleep now."

"Mm. Sleep," agreed Tony, closing his eyes. He relaxed against Steve, feeling limp, like he was drifting, or floating.

Falling slowly, peacefully.

Floating. Bonded.

Happy.

Lucky.
"You're a lucky man, Tony."

Tony laughed, even though his ribs ached, taking the cigar, waving to a photographer, tapping a champagne glass against Obie’s. "I know. Trust me, I know it." He wasn't sure how he’d ended up at this party or whether they were talking about his escape from the cave but he wanted to play along, wanted desperately to fit in. Everyone was watching him, and there were reporters, so it was critical that he mask his confusion and act natural. But it was difficult; God, his ribs fucking hurt. And he was feeling terribly out of place in dusty suit pants and a torn shirt, stiff with dried blood; Obie was in a tuxedo and Tony knew he was going to get scolded later for showing up to a black tie event wearing inappropriate clothes. He had a sense that he’d only just left Afghanistan, perhaps mere hours ago, and that he shouldn't be at this party but that he was expected to be here, that this was his party and if he wasn’t here everyone would talk. So far, at least, no one seemed to think anything was wrong; with a cigar in one hand and a champagne flute in the other, Tony felt like he was blending in nicely.

"Your father would've been proud," said Obadiah, offering him a lighter.

"Don't tell him," said Tony immediately. His insides twisted at the thought of his father knowing what had happened. What they’d done to him. He could smell it on himself. He smelled like an omega. They'd ruined him. And everyone knew. He felt exposed; suddenly the reporters seemed like a liability. How was he supposed to keep anything a secret if he was under constant scrutiny, anyway? Why the hell had he come straight to this party? He felt like such an idiot for coming but it was too late now.

"You don't have to worry about it, Tony, he loves omegas. Just look at Jarvis. Look at Steve..."

"No. I'm not an omega. ...where is he?" demanded Tony, looking around. He wasn't sure whether he was looking for his father or Steve, but everyone here was unfamiliar except Obie and it was giving Tony a sense of claustrophobia. The champagne was warm and flat and for some reason that bothered him deeply.

"He's already on his way to Washington," said Obadiah, taking a draw on his own cigar.


Obadiah looked down at him, frowning. "SHIELD business, Tony, remember? He's got a psych eval to fill out. ...you got yours signed, right?"
Panic hit him. No. He didn't remember. He hadn't filled out anything, nothing at all. Had he missed some sort of deadline? He'd meant to take care of it, he'd gotten sidetracked, it was Pepper's job to remind him to sign shit...

He looked at Obadiah, and Obadiah's face fell.

"I thought you were going to deal with that," he said, sounding tired and disappointed.

"I-- I thought I did," protested Tony, looking around frantically. There was still time. There had to still be time. If he could just borrow a pen...

"Don't worry about it, Tony." Obadiah put an arm around him. "I'll take care of it."

"You will?"

"Of course. Don't I always take good care of, my boy?" Obadiah turned his cigar around and pressed it against the back of Tony's neck.

Tony let out a scream and flung himself out of bed, hitting the floor with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

Sunlight was streaming through the west windows; it was another bright, beautiful day in Malibu and JARVIS was reciting the tide and surf conditions for him.

Tony fought to untangle himself from the sheets, still groggy and panicked. "JARVIS-- JARVIS, shut up, seriously, shut up!" he gasped, kicking the sheets away.

"Yes, sir," said JARVIS genially. He was used to being yelled at.

Steve wasn't there, however. There was no sign of him. It was eleven in the morning, according to the green numbers flashing on the clock on the nightstand. Underneath the clock sat a sticky note that read "In the gym X".

"Captain Rogers asked me to inform you that he left a note for you, sir," JARVIS added a beat later. "Shall I let him know you've woken up?"

"He's in the gym? Before noon? What is he, crazy?" asked Tony, rising dizzily, kicking away the sheets.

"Most people rise before noon, sir," said JARVIS. Tony had forgotten how damned contradictory the program could be sometimes.

"Well, most people are wrong," said Tony grumpily. He reached up to rub the back of his neck, staring at the sticky note Steve had left him. His handwriting was neat, far neater than Tony's. Old-fashioned. Tony touched the note, feeling affectionate. Their first love letter. Sort of.

He grabbed his robe out of the closet and went down to the kitchen, leaving the note. Even though the living room was still a mess, the rest of the house was as gleaming and sterile as usual. The kitchen was all stainless steel. There was a neat stack of mail on the center island that Pepper must have left there for him. Tony ignored it.

He had no idea how to work his espresso machine; he'd always had the PA get him his coffee. Instead, he opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of kombucha. He shook it up and opened it over the sink to keep it from bubbling all over the place. Steve wasn't the only one who could be healthy.
He sipped the drink, staring out the window at the ocean and the sun glinting off the water. He wanted to make sure the last bits of panic from his nightmare were completely gone before he went to find Steve.

He was halfway through the kombucha before he felt like he was ready. He picked his way, barefoot, over the messy front room, wincing when his foot hit a piece of jagged concrete. "Jarv, any word on those contractors? This place is a disaster," called Tony.

"Yes, sir. They're scheduled to come by tomorrow at eight."

"Good." Tony stifled a yawn, the glass bottle still cold in his hand. He poked his head into the gym and his face split into a grin; pop music was playing and Steve's back was to him; he was lifting weights with the focus of a guy in prison.

He'd been at it since six and he was breaking a sweat. The gym in Tony's house was amazing. There was everything Steve could possibly ever need and more. He'd raided some gym supplies, stealing some clothes that were probably Happy's. They were tight on him, but only Tony was going to see him in them so it hardly mattered, right?

He'd been alternating running and weights since six AM and showed no signs of slowing. Steve really needed to get back into a proper training routine. Fitness was key and serum didn't do all the work for him; he'd lost enough muscle as Tony's PA as it was.

Remembering their conversation from the previous night, he was listening to Taylor Swift. She was okay.

Tony walked over and tapped his shoulder. "Hey, lover."

"Oh hey." Steve smiled on instinct when he heard Tony's voice behind him. He glanced over the back of his shoulder at Tony, blue eyes bright with energy before he turned back and put the weight down easily. His hair was a little damp and stuck to his forehead. "Sorry I left you, but I figured you needed to sleep," Steve murmured and ran a hand over his face before pushing his hair up. "And I have to get back into a routine." He needed to get back into his rhythm again—back when he'd been running with Sam every day and then training with Nat in the afternoons. He also wanted to make time for Tony too; he was a big part of his life. Steve was going to work training around his Alpha; his schedule was flexible. His bond wasn't.

"Did you sleep okay?" Steve asked after a moment, sensing Tony's hesitation. There was a weird feeling in his gut that he'd thought was a result of doing too many sit-ups.

"Yeah. Great," lied Tony, sipping his kombucha. He watched in fascination as Steve set a weight down like it was nothing more than a loaf of bread. It was a weight for bench pressing, not curls, but that's what Steve had been using it for.

"How come there's no coffee?" demanded Tony, deciding to ignore the fact that Steve was strong enough to lift a two-hundred-pound barbell with one arm like it was nothing. His eyes roamed over Steve. His biceps were glistening with a sheen of sweat; he looked ready to tear out of the shirt he was wearing. He had no idea why a guy of Steve's build needed to train but he figured it was some weird military thing. He assumed Steve might wonder the same thing if he walked down to the shop and saw Tony soldering together circuits.

"Hey... you still wanna hit up the Expo?"

"Sure," Steve breathed and leaned down to kiss Tony's cheek with a smile still on his face. "And
the reason there's no coffee is because you stopped paying me," he pointed out in a whisper against Tony's cheek before he pulled away.

"But I don't know how to make coffee."

"Come on. I'll show you how to use it and then I'll grab a shower," Steve offered and moved to take Tony's hand as they left the gym. "When should we leave for the Expo by?" Steve asked as they headed into the kitchen and moved to grab a cup. He placed it in the coffee machine and then pressed a red button on the top. "And that... is literally it," Steve told him as the dark liquid shot out into the cup.

"...you mean I've been paying Pepper two hundred thousand a year to push a button?" said Tony.

"She also manages your schedule, answers your calls, sorts your mail, books your appointments, does your taxes, and holds your hair back for you when you vomit, sir," said JARVIS.

"Fair point, Jarv," said Tony, taking the mug of coffee and sipping it. He had never felt as content in his life as he did at that moment. The memory of Steve holding his hand, the warm ceramic cup, the silk robe, the smell of his omega mingling with the smell of the coffee... Tony sighed softly, reaching out to touch the small of Steve's back.

"I don't really care when we leave," admitted Tony. "I just like being around you. ...holy Euler, you're turning me into a sap." He rolled his eyes at himself, but he still felt giddy. "Maybe it's the lack of coffee talking." He took a sip. "...nope. Still head-over-heels in love with you. ...you gonna go shower? Mind if I join? We can get dressed, do lunch, swing by the Expo, say hello to our adoring fans..."

"I would love for you to join," Steve whispered and squeezed Tony's hand, his expression sincere and eyes soft. He stepped forward to press a kiss to Tony's forehead, letting his eyes slip shut for a brief moment. "Sorry I just stole some of Happy's clothes... they probably won't be wearable again. I stretched the shirt out. But I wasn't gonna work out naked."

Tony grinned. "You can work out naked if you want. I won't complain."

Steve smirked subtly and moved to tug Tony towards the bathroom. He left his Alpha to finish his coffee in the bedroom whilst he moved to turn on the shower.

Tony only finished about two-thirds of the coffee before he shrugged off his robe and stepped into the shower with Steve, wrapping his arms around the omega's slippery body. Standing in the shower it was painfully obvious how much taller Steve was than Tony. Tony reached up to brush his hair from his forehead.

When Tony reached out for him he slunk away playfully, now naked as he got under the spray of the shower, his expression mischievous.

"We should get you some clothes that actually fit," said Tony quietly. "If you insist on not being naked." He ran his hands over Steve's body, watching the hot water course down it. He nuzzled Steve's chest. If someone had told him, a week ago, that he'd be this obsessed with someone, let alone a someone who lacked breasts, he would have laughed at them. Life could be funny like that.

"My PA clothes fit," Steve pointed out with a smile, reaching up to run a hand through Tony's hair. "They're a little posh for me, though. I prefer jeans over dress pants- they're a revelation. And much easier to get around in."
"Pretty sure you had jeans in the '40s."

"Yeah but you didn't just... wear them around. I mean, maybe if you had a day off and you were walking around on the base. ...we called them waist overalls."

"Shut up, no you didn't!" laughed Tony, slapping Steve's chest with a wet smack.

Steve grinned and leaned his down to kiss the top of Tony's head before he moved to grab the shampoo. Steve squeezed shampoo into Tony's hair and moved to rub it into his scalp before gently rinsing it out too.

"Will there be press inside the Expo, or just outside?"

"...both," said Tony. "...to be honest with you, I barely notice them anymore. Normally Happy keeps them from talking to me and they just sort of orbit around taking pictures. I don't know. I'm used to them."

Tony closed his eyes and rolled his head under Steve's hands, enjoying the feeling of Steve's hands fingers in his hair.

When Steve had rinsed him, he glanced down to click his arc reactor out of the base plate, curious to see how it was holding up.

Most of the rash around it had faded away. He pulled the reactor away, careful not to yank on the wires trailing into his chest, and swiped around inside his chest. Some clear discharge, but nothing rancid like the stuff that used to come out of the one with the palladium core. He flicked the goo off of his fingers and examined the device. It was glowing steadily and the particle ring looked clean and shiny.

Steve blinked in alarm at how casual Tony was about it. It was his chest and his heart and it was like he was just checking the filter of his washing machine. He could feel Tony's ease and relief after checking inside. Steve smiled. Everything was okay. He would be okay.

Tony wound the wires back into the socket and popped the reactor back in with a click. He gave it a whack with the heel of his hand to make sure it was secure.

"So they're going to take lots of pictures of us?" Steve asked in a murmur, rinsing out the last of the soap. He was surprised at how unbothered he was by the thought of having his picture taken. Steve just wanted to be there with Tony... the rest didn't matter.

"Tons of pictures," confirmed Tony. "Which is why I think we should waltz in, get onstage, confirm that, yes, we're bonded, this is all exactly what it looks like... otherwise they'll be creaming their pants trying to get candid shots. That's the thing. It's juicier for them if it looks like it was a secret and they caught us. If you announce it, well, it's less exciting, you know? ...were you listening to Taylor Swift down there?"

"I think I like Taylor Swift." Steve grinned. "Doesn't mean I should be in a music video, though. Don't think that's quite my jam."

Tony caught Steve's eye and grinned back. "Taylor's adorable, right? I would totally do it. ...is she eighteen? JARVIS! When was Taylor Swift born?"

"December thirteenth, nineteen eighty-nine," said JARVIS.

"So she's twenty-one? Awesome," said Tony. He paused. "...how about Captain Rogers here? I
don't know his birthday."

"July fourth, nineteen-eighteen."

"So he's ninety-two? Awesome," said Tony. A look of realization crossed his face; his eyes
widened. "Wait a second. You were born on Independence Day? Captain America was born on
Independence Day?"

Tony burst out laughing.

Steve was pleasantly surprised by Tony's outburst of laughter but he didn't quite know how to react
to it.

"You know...I'm technically only five years older than her, in my head." Steve pointed out, smiling
at Tony's almost hysterical amusement. He didn't think about it much... but really he was only 26
in his head. And yet it was strange waking up in an era that had moved on without him. He didn't
feel like the 'youth,' that was for sure. No, Steve's head was left in a state of confusion. He felt too
old and too young for everything simultaneously. It was like feeling lost.

But Tony was grounding. He dragged Steve back to reality. He was kissing Steve's shoulder
blade.

Steve pushed him away to clean his own hair quickly. "All I have right now is my jeans and shirt
from yesterday. Will they be okay?"

"Sure. You know what? I'll go in jeans and a t-shirt, too," said Tony, grabbing a bar of soap. "But
go ahead and order yourself some new clothes. I'll pay. Do you know how to shop online yet?"

He rinsed himself off and stepped out, giving himself a shake. He paused in front of the mirror.
Tony's bathroom was enormous; the marble counter had a massive mirror over it, which was
currently completely fogged up. Tony scribbled a heart and wrote inside it: 01010011 01010010
+ 01010100 01010011

"...and people say nerds can't be romantic," said Tony, observing the heart. "That's the second
heart I've drawn in a week."

He grabbed and towel and sauntered out of the bathroom to find some clothes. Most of his casual
clothes were in the shop and he used them for working in his home; when he went out, he dressed
up. After a bit of digging, he came up with a torn pair of baggy jeans and a plain black t-shirt.

"...is V-neck gauche?" he wondered, standing inside his carpeted, walk-in closet, staring at himself
in a full-length mirror. The V-neck framed the arc reactor perfectly, calling attention to it. "I think
my only other shirt is this one and I think it's about thirty years old." He held up a gray t-shirt.
The reason he thought it was thirty years old was immediately apparent; it had the logo for the
1974 Stark Expo on it.

"It's retro, right? That's a word people use these days..." Steve chuckled with a shrug. He had about
zero idea about fashion right now. All he knew was how to match colours and what was
appropriate to wear to a dinner party. Turns out that isn't so useful in the 21st century anyway; no
one had nice dinner parties anymore. And also, omegas now wore suits like Alphas instead of just
waistcoats.

Steve moved to tug on his jeans and dark shirt from before turning back to Tony. He buttoned up
his shirt as he watched the engineer frowning at himself in the mirror. The way his brow knotted
together was almost cute. He sighed softly and walked up to him as Tony was holding up the other
"I kinda like retro, I think," Steve murmured.

"Retro shirt, retro boyfriend," said Tony, tugging off the V-neck and swapping it with the grey shirt.

Tony reached for Steve's hand, surprised to discover nervousness creeping up on him.

"Call Happy, tell him to pick us up in the Audi. I don't wanna drive and also we're going to need him to swat the 'razzi away," said Tony. "Oh, and tell him to pick me up some thai. I want noodles. I want... scratch thai, I want pho."

He kissed Steve on the cheek and gave his hand a squeeze, silently reassuring himself that, regardless of what the headlines read in the morning, it would be worth it to go to the Expo to see Pepper and to show off Steve and to rub Justin Hammer's stupid face in his perfect pair-bond. For all of his own personal self-consciousness, Tony was confident he had the best omega. Anyone who thought Steve's assertiveness was unnatural or a sign that he was feral was wrong. Tony liked Steve's gumption.

It occurred to him that, between Pepper and Steve, he clearly had a thing for dominating personalities.

"We've got this- you know that, right?" Steve whispered and pressed a kiss to the side of Tony's neck as he felt the nervousness bubbling up in his mate's chest. He squeezed his hand back and then pulled away. "Give me one sec."

He pulled out his phone and moved to call Happy. A lovely, sound man. A beta who Steve honestly admired; his optimism and loyalty were something else.

"Steve! Or should I say Captain? Pepper told me about- well, should I say? I think a congratulations are in order!"

Steve honestly didn't know if he was talking about Steve coming out as an omega or his thing with Tony- he wasn't sure if Happy even knew about the latter.

"Thank you, Happy," Steve said, moving to lean in the doorway as he watched Tony mess around with cologne and hair gel. He couldn't help but smile a little. Even over the phone the man's joy was infectious. "You can just call me Steve. Listen, Tony was just wondering if you could take us to the Expo, actually?"

"Sure! No problem."

"And he wants some pho noodles? Whatever that means..."
"Yeah. Got it. It's good to hear from you again, Steve. I'll bring the car around."

Happy hung up and Steve tucked the phone away into his back pocket. Having been Tony's PA he'd worked with Happy quite a bit. He could honestly say he'd missed his company.

Steve caught Tony's gaze in the mirror. "Our carriage awaits."

Tony smiled at Steve in the mirror, giving his hair a few last, minor adjustments. "Okay. Let's do it," he said. He grabbed Steve's hand and the two of them descended the curving staircase into the main room.

Several men in hardhats were surveying the room, sweeping up all the rubble, taking measurements.

"Finally," exclaimed Tony. Several of them looked up with interest at Tony Stark, then did a double-take when they realized he was with Captain America. Tony either didn't notice their surprise or didn't care. "Be careful with that sofa, okay? That's a designer sofa, they only made like five hundred. C'mon, Steve." He tugged Steve's hand and strode across the wide, airy living room, slipping on a pair of sunglasses as he walked out the front door. Happy was standing in front of the house, leaning against a car, also in sunglasses; it was already hot out.

One of Tony's peacocks strutted past; Tony shooed it out of the way. "HAPPY!" he barked.

"TONY!" barked Happy back.

The two grabbed each other's hands and pressed together in a half-shake, half-hug. Tony reached behind him, wrapping an arm around Steve's waist and pulling him close.

"Looking good, captain!" Happy greeted him enthusiastically. He grasped Steve's shoulder with a warm smile but there was something else in his eyes, something new. He was no doubt appalled at Steve being undercover; he was almost as protective over Tony as Pepper and Rhodey were. But unlike them he was entirely too polite to say it.

"It's good to see you too, Happy," Steve returned, voice quiet and sincere and almost tentative. He realised he really was quite invested in Happy liking him- in the people around Tony liking him. He didn't care about SHIELD. Anyway, he couldn't help what they thought of him. They had probably a whole room dedicated just to him.

"Has Charlie got the jet ready? I wanna be at the Expo before four. Also, where's my pho?"

Happy offered Tony a brown paper bag; Tony pulled a styrofoam container out of it and a pair of chopsticks. "Nong La?" he asked.

"You got it," replied Happy.

"You're the best, Happy," said Tony, climbing into the back of the Audi and opening the container of soup. His eating habits, Steve had come to learn over the last few weeks, were at best strange and at worst almost inhuman. Tony ate when he felt like it, and ate what he wanted to; his wealth let him request nearly anything at any time, and he had no qualms about taking advantage of that.

Happy just nodded and gestured for Steve to get in. He got into the back next to Tony as Happy settled behind the wheel.

Steve glanced sideways over at Tony, his eyes narrowing a fraction. "Is that the first thing you've eaten today?"
"Uh, no," said Tony, pulling up a long string of noodles with the chopsticks. "I had a cup of coffee earlier, remember? ...Happy, put on the radio. The Steve Rogers story is still big and I want to keep on top of that. Also, once were in the air, call Associated Press and let them know I'll be at the Expo."

Happy flipped on the radio as the car made its way down the long, winding drive. Tony leaned his head against the tinted window, warmed by the sun, and slurped the noodles with a bored expression. Happy was eyeballing them through the rearview mirror; halfway up the drive, he was so distracted, he nearly hit a flamingo. "Hey, watch it!" snapped Tony, jabbing at him with the chopsticks. "That's Bernard the Sixth!"

"How can you tell which flamingo it is?" asked the Happy defensively.

"Because Bernard's the one that attacks cars and keeps almost getting run over," said Tony. "Now turn up the radio, shaddup, listen."

On the radio, three people were having a heated argument about omega rights.

"--demanding equal treatment, but then they want safe spaces, they want special considerations, and my question is, how is that equal?" asked one woman.

"Going back to access to suppressants-- you know, my problem with that is, I'm a beta, why should my taxes pay for--" began a man, but he was cut off by the same woman.

"--I just think that, you know, asking for all these special privileges, that's not equality at all, and it's frankly un-American. Maybe Captain Rogers was a national symbol back in the forties, but it's the twenty-first century, and I, for one, don't feel like an omega crying out for special treatment is really how I want my country represented."

Steve listened to the radio quietly and leaned his head against the window. He watched the scenery pass by and sighed, his eyes slipping shut for a brief moment. "I...I think it's time for a second interview," he whispered and something akin to nerves coiled up in his gut.

Tony considered a piece of meat on the end of his chopsticks. "...they're only going to get more vicious. They always do," he said gravely. "Two years since my company stopped making weapons- it's not even my company anymore!- and they're still calling me the Merchant of Death. I hate that nickname."

He glanced over at Tony again, apparently unphased by it. But Steve couldn't help but feel a stab of anxiety. He didn't know how he could speak for all omegas. Was that too presumptuous of him? Was he doing the right thing? Was he?

"What if I mess this up, Tony?" Steve whispered. "What if I already have? What do I do then?"

"Fuck what up?" asked Tony through a mouthful of noodles. "You're doing great, Steve, there's nothing to worry about. People treat omegas like crap, everyone knows that. You stirred things up... that's gotta make things better, right?"

"It's not like the sixties," added Happy helpfully. He was trying (and failing abysmally) to look like he wasn't eavesdropping.

Steve looked lost.

Right, realized Tony. He'd missed the sixties.
"...there were status riots in the sixties," explained Tony briefly. "People were really pissed about omegas voting and going to college and stuff. That was right after suppressants started really taking off and you could just grab them at the pharmacy. ...but my point is, Steve, this is, you know, it's 2010, okay? People are just upset because you're pointing out we still have a way to go and everyone would rather just, you know... people aren't great at changing, that's all. But you're not going to fuck up. And if you do, whatever, I'll fuck up with you, it'll be a big fucking mess, but we'll still have each other. So don't sweat it."

Tony looked thoroughly unconcerned, and the truth was, he wasn't. Omega rights wasn't an issue on his radar. He was more worried about Vanko. He didn't want to add that issue onto Steve's plate, too, so he was worrying out it on his own. The guy was probably operating alone, right? So he probably didn't have a lot of resources... what was the worst he could do? Tony was in America, Vanko was last seen in France. Nonetheless, their brief phone conversation had scared the hell out of Tony. Was he missing something? No... no, he couldn't be, he was a genius.

On the radio, a fourth person had joined the fray. "Well, it's all very well for him to bitch that we need to be more independent, and treated better... the guy's huge. He can defend himself. Does he even have heats? The reality for most omegas is, we need Alphas, we're happy with the way things are... I'm worried he's going to cause trouble for those of us that are grateful for what we have. He doesn't represent me. I don't want safe spaces. I'm bonded; I'm fine with the way things are."

"Happy, did this come with a fortune cookie?" asked Tony, pawing through the paper bag. "I don't think they had fortune cookies in the forties, I wanna show Steve..."

"Pho is Vietnamese," said Happy. "Fortune cookies are Chinese."

"Oh. ...then pull over right here, stop stop stop, right there, there's a Panda Buffet, run in and get me a fortune cookie!"

"But--"

"I'm Tony Stark," said Tony petulantly. "You're gonna miss it; pull over, Happy!"

Happy yanked the wheel and pulled into a small strip mall on the coast, cutting off another car that honked angrily at them.

Steve was strangely relieved when Happy left the car. He didn't like this. He was always so sure of himself. So certain. But this felt different. This was a strange and new world that Steve didn't fully understand yet. He watched Happy disappear into the Chinese takeaway and then looked sideways over at Tony.

"I've always known I was doing the right thing," Steve breathed. "But ever since I woke up I've not being so sure anymore."

Ever since he'd spied on Tony his moral compass had gone AWOL.

"Sure I want to stir things up. But I don't want to make things harder for people out there. There's backlash from this against me, sure. I don't care. But what about other omegas? I couldn't bare that-I want to make things better for people, not worse."

He ran his hands over his face. "I need advice...I need to speak to someone who knows how to do this. Jesus Christ, Tony, I only get one shot at this and I cannot screw this up."

"Well..." said Tony slowly. "...sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette. I mean... I don't know, maybe there's omegas out there getting shit over this. But it's not because of
you, Steve. All you did was tell it like it is, and there's always going to be assholes out there who use that as an excuse to shove around people below them. That's just how it is, you know? You can't protect everyone. Clearly, you have a hero complex." Tony looked out the window thoughtfully, pushing his hand through his hair, ruining the careful style he'd spent so long on earlier, at the house. "...someone needed to say something, Steve. If it wasn't you, I'm sure some other omega would have come along and started the conversation. Don't feel guilty. You're doing the best you can, but even if you're a super soldier, you're still just one guy. ...maybe you should talk to another omega about this, I dunno. Barton and Coulson- they both seemed pretty enthusiastic."

Happy returned suddenly, climbing into the driver's seat and handing Tony a small bag.

"Here, ask this cookie," said Tony, handing a small, orange-ish cookie in a clear plastic wrapper to Steve. It was clear this was new to Steve. "You break it open, like this..." He demonstrated. "...and there's a fortune inside. Nifty, right?"

"I hate fortune cookies," said Happy from the front seat, putting the car into gear and easing back into traffic.

Tony looked down at the slip of paper in his hand.

*Special touches have been planned with you in mind*, it read.

Tony's stomach turned and he remembered Vanko all over again. Shit.

"...I sort of hate fortune cookies too," he admitted.

Steve watched Tony curiously and the moved to break the cookie in his own hand. He tried a piece of the biscuit and hummed approvingly before he stared down at the paper.

"A tall dark stranger will surprise you sometime soon," Steve read out and raised a brow at Tony bemusedly. "Is the cookie threatening me?" he asked good-naturedly. "Kinda feels like it is."

Happy laughed from the front seat. "Don't worry. They use the same thing over and over. They don't mean anything."

They drove quietly for a while, no one saying anything. It was a peaceful quiet, not imposing. But soon Steve's thoughts forced their way out again.

"...both Clint and Phil are perfectly capable of looking after themselves," Steve pointed out. "It makes sense that they would be enthusiastic, you know? I just...if I'm going to shake things up I want to offer some form of compensation. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me. I have some money from my PA gig... I don't know what it's worth, really." A spark of excitement seized in his chest. "I could donate a lot of it. Or I could just create a charity if there isn't one in place. People can do that, right?"

"Huh?" said Tony. He'd been brooding. Thinking about Vanko. About Bucky. "Oh, yeah, sure, charities are easy. I've been running the Maria Stark Foundation for, like, twenty years. Great for tax breaks. You should talk to Pep about it. She's an accountant, you know- technically. That's how we met. She spotted an error in the books, would've cost the company ten million... and she came directly to my office... Happy, remember?" Tony was getting a gooey expression on his face, half-nostalgia and half-... something else.

"Oh, I remember, alright," chuckled Happy. "She said, 'I've got to show Mr. Stark this, right away--""
"--and you said, ‘No, he's busy, he's not to be disturbed under any circumstance--’"

"--and she said, ‘Trust me, this is important. This is time-sensitive. It's critical--;”

"--and tried to shove past you--"

"--so I grabbed her--"

"--and she pepper-sprayed you." Tony's face split into a grin. ".Pepper," he emphasized, catching Steve's eye, snickering. "She burst into my office with Happy like she owned the place. It was great. And after she left, I turned to Happy and I said, I want that.",

"He likes ’em feisty," said Happy.

Tony looked at Steve fondly, remembering how he'd slammed Happy to the ground the first time they'd met. "...I sure do," he agreed. He gave his head a little shake to clear it. "...feisty and inexplicably socially conscious. Which brings us back to your charity idea. Yeah, I say, go for it. Rogers's School for Wayward Omegas. Or whatever. It'll make you look good, and like I said, tax breaks like crazy if you're heading one of those foundations. Just don't do anything with reproductive rights. If you start passing out birth control and suppressants, you'll make a lot of enemies. People aren't ready for that. Focus on education or something. No one can really be against education, right?"

"Education's safe," agreed Happy. He slowed the car as they passed through a security gate; past a chain-link fence, Steve spied Tony's private jet sitting on the tarmac outside a hangar. It was hard to miss; STARK was emblazoned across the side, bold and unapologetic, much like Tony himself.

Steve mulled it over in his head. "Safe...doesn't really sound like me," he murmured, eyes fixed on the jet as Happy curved them around to it.

The jet was huge and shiny and sleek. It loomed over the car as they drove up to it, a flight of stairs waiting for them to walk in, the door already open. Happy opened Tony's car door for him (his hands were full of noodles, after all). Steve got out of his own side himself, eyes trailing over the jet. He exhaled slowly. He hoped it wouldn't be a long journey. He was nervous; this was a big day. Coming out day. How would be best to do this? He had no idea...and he doubted Clint and Phil wouldn't either. Tony made it sound simple, them getting up on a stage, but then what...what would Steve actually say?

Tony and Happy were talking, too quiet for him to really hear. Happy offered him a reassuring smile as he headed up the steps to the jet door. He'd been on his jet before - it was the same one that took them to Monaco. It felt strange to be back in the same place, but as different people. Steve felt an instinctive pull towards the tablet on the desk, like he should check emails or something.

It was strange; Monaco felt like a world away when really it was only about a week.

Steve eyed the drinks cabinet briefly like an old enemy before he went to take his seat.

Tony, as usual, seemed completely unaware of the luxuriousness of his surroundings. He flopped into a leather seat, concentrating on his phone. He'd really let his e-mail go; there were hundreds of unread messages. He was deleting things at random; if it was important, he figured, they'd e-mail him a second time.

"How long's the flight gonna take, Charlie?" he demanded.

Charlie was the pilot. Steve had seen her in passing, though she'd never spared him more than a
glance before. She was a short young female Alpha with a boy's haircut who looked like she should be climbing trees, not piloting jets; she dressed in t-shirts and wore headphones, and Steve had once overheard her complaining about breaking her collarbone on a skateboard. He had no idea where Tony had found her.

"Four hours, maybe," she said, leaning against the doorway of the cockpit, staring at Steve. Her ears were turning pink. "I can't believe I'm flying a plane with Steve Rogers. You know that was my childhood dream? My whole life? To be a pilot, like you? Wow." She shook her head and laughed a little. "I- I had no idea you were an omega." Her ears flushed darker. She bit her lip. "Would you mind... er... if it's okay... can I have your autograph?"

Tony's eyes snapped up. "You're kidding me, Charlie. Do you have a crush?"

She shrugged with a helpless grin. "He's my childhood hero."

"Are you kidding me?"

Charlie turned even redder and then disappeared into the cockpit.

Tony stared at Steve. "Did you just embarrass Charlie?" he asked. "...wow. I thought she was unflappable. Dani, sweetheart, get me a martini, will you?" asked Tony, snapping his fingers at one of the flight attendants. He had four. They were all equally gorgeous betas. Madison, Riley, Fern, and Dani. Tony mixed up their names constantly; they were almost interchangeable in their beauty. As far as Steve had been able to tell over the past few weeks, their job was to coo and flirt and laugh over Tony. Like Charlie, none of them had ever paid any attention to Steve; he was only an omega, after all, and only Tony's assistant.

Now, they couldn't stop staring. It was like Steve had been invisible before, as an omega; now that he had identified himself as Captain America, it was like there was a spotlight trained on him.

Steve wasn't sure he much liked this. He'd never liked being stared at- when he was small or big. After being given the serum, he'd been offered to "work for the army," and he'd jumped on the opportunity despite everyone protesting loudly that they wanted to run tests on him and keep him back home. But that sort of egg-headed lab stuff wasn't going to win the war. Steve wanted to go out and fight, not be stared and prodded at.

Ironically, "working for the army" was not what he'd expected. They'd forced him into tights and booty shorts and shoved him onto a stage to sell bonds; it had been the most painful weeks of his life. He wasn't a performer, or at least, not the public kind. As Tony's PA he'd been in the background. It was easy. No one noticed him, because of both his workplace and biological status. Now it felt like he had a target on his forehead. In the war soldiers had stared a bit, sure, but he was their captain...they were supposed to look to him. What were these people looking to Steve for now? Photographs?

Dani stared at Steve with almost narrowed eyes. Could she tell him and Tony were together? Tony's scent must have been all over him, but she was a beta, so she couldn't smell that, right? Charlie was obviously far too indifferent to comment on it- Steve had always liked her. She was a grounded and realistic person in the midst of all this money and power. She cared more about the new episode of *Bones* (some TV show Clint was obsessed with) than she did with the news about Tony's newest suit or whatever had dragged 'Stark' into the headlines.

Actually, that was probably why Tony kept her around. Most of his regular staff was people who acted somewhat immune to the glamor of his life, while still being on-call 24/7 for whatever whim he needed fulfilled.
Steve settled into his seat opposite Tony and resisted the childish urge to put his shoes up on the table just because he could. "Since when were supposedly dead war heroes still 'crushes' in the 21st century?"

"Don't sell yourself short, Rogers," said Tony, flipping open a copy of USA Today. "You're extremely attractive. All those old-timey, grainy photos in the history books don't do you justice."

Objectively, he knew was 'good looking' (whatever the hell that really meant). The serum was designed to make him better in every way- it was a perfectly logical side-effect. But Steve still couldn't shake away the self-consciousness that come with being underweight and ill for most of his life. He was still the little guy inside. He might have had the looks now but he didn't really have the swagger to go with them.

He mulled over Charlie's crush while Tony looked down at his newspaper. *Investigation Into French Prison Break Suggests Outside Intervention.*

Tony's stomach flopped. Vanko couldn't possibly have friends, could he? Who the hell would want to be friends with him? Sure, he was smart; smart enough to have reversed engineered a palladium-core RT node. But arc reactor aside, he was unstable, unhinged, dangerous. Who would want to help that guy?

Tony scanned the article, but there was nothing of substance in it. Nothing to help him.

"Dani, another double," he demanded, sticking out the empty martini glass, sucking on one of the olives. "Extra dirty."

Maybe he was over-reacting.

Between Vanko and Bucky, Tony was a lot more threatened by Bucky. But both men were equally mysterious. They were lurking ominously in the margins of Tony's life, just out of reach. He'd only just fixed the damn reactor; this was his second chance and they were threatening it. He wished both would just come out of the shadows so they could just get the inevitable confrontation over with. He wondered if his and Steve's announcement might draw Bucky out. How would it feel for an Alpha to watch his omega suddenly appear with another Alpha, looking happy? If that didn't drag Bucky out from the shadows, nothing would. Regardless of what had happened to him or how messed up his brain was, the bond between Alpha and omega was devastatingly strong. Surely he'd recognize his omega, leap to defend his claim.

...assuming they let him out of whatever nursing home he was in.

Tony tossed the newspaper aside. "I gotta work on the suit," he announced, standing. "Don't bug me."

"Okay..." Steve frowned a little when Tony suddenly stood, his words blunt and tone detached. He didn't protest. He had a feeling that if he did Tony wouldn't listen. Before Steve could worry a moment longer, however, his phone was ringing in his pocket.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Steve."

It was his agent. Aria.

Pepper had gotten her for Steve; she'd warned him that he would need one, and she was right. After his interview, every reporter in the world was trying to get an exclusive statement from him.
Aria had swooped in like an angel and immediately taken that burden off of Steve's shoulders. She was the most terrifyingly blunt beta he'd ever spoken with. She took what he said as granted, didn't argue with him, but calmly explained everything he didn't understand. She gave him every offer, told him which ones were any good, which ones he should consider, and which ones were garbage. Aria's knowledge of the 21st century was a godsend. And she involved him in every decision.

"I think it's time we make a move."

"I'm mated to Tony Stark and, I think, about to come out with him," Steve said abruptly, steeling herself for a sharp or surprised reaction.

"Okay," Aria said. A short pause. "So about your next interview..."

"Wait, you're okay with this?" Steve checked. "You think this is a good idea?"

"Steve. You're not paying me to give you relationship advice. Now. Interviews?"

"I want one," Steve affirmed. "Nothing before this weekend, but yeah."

"Ellen?"

"...yeah."

"Oprah?"

"...uh..." That name wasn't familiar to him. Maybe it had been mentioned but he couldn't remember. He didn't want to do anything small or local, though. "No," he decided.

"Taylor Swift?"

"I listened to her music this morning. Still super undecided on that..."

"She's an omega," pointed out Aria. "I talked to her agent. Also an omega, actually. Really nice guy."

"...it might help to meet her in person?"

"She's coming to Stark Expo on Friday to perform," Aria said, talking as if she was reading off her laptop screen. How was she being so calm about this? Steve was astounded. He really should have given her a heads up but she wasn't even annoyed that he hadn't. "You could meet her then, chat about omega rights and being blonde... whatever you guys actually have in common."

Steve laughed a little awkwardly. "Yeah, okay... you seriously don't care that I bonded?"

"I care, Steve, but it doesn't affect how I'm going to approach working with you. Seriously, Steve. This is a big deal, sure, but also not my business. I think coming out with it as soon as possible is sensible, personally. Scarves really don't suit you."

And with that, she hung up.

Steve looked out the window thoughtfully. Tony had disappeared to another part of the plane to work, leaving Steve alone with his thoughts.

Tony's work schedule, like his feeding schedule, was erratic. He worked when inspiration struck him. Only rarely did inspiration strike at convenient times.
No, Tony was one of those people who worked late at night, from hotel rooms and from private jets and, in one memorable instance, in the bathroom of a Ritz Carlton.

One of the consequences of Tony’s manic drive was piles of materials strewn all over the place, including on his jet. One corner, once used as a board room, had been rededicated as an ad-hoc workshop. It was messy to a degree that an uneducated person might have mistaken the room as a trash heap maintained by a hoarder. Sheets of metal, hinges, plastic tubing, wires, tools... everything was everywhere and Tony refused to let anyone touch it because he knew exactly where things were and hated when they went missing.

He sat on the floor, feeling the rumble of the plane's engines beneath him as they glided eastward, and dragged a gauntlet into his lap. He gave it a few experimental flexes before sliding his hand into the skeletal metal scaffold. The metal hand was a work in progress, an improvement over the old design. He hadn't put any plates over it yet, so it was still was hollow, made up of wires and poles and bits of scrap folded over each other like scaling. He'd drawn inspiration from his own tendons; after all, weren't tendons themselves just organic puppet strings? He flexed, feeling the metal brace slide and shift with his body. It was incredibly heavy and he had yet to weaponize it. But he was pleased with the fluidity of movement. The gears shifted a bit jerkily; he'd have to work on that. He grabbed a screwdriver with his opposite hand and began picking away at the wires and circuits. Nowadays, he didn't go anywhere without at least one suit of armor. Sure, he might look paranoid... but look at what had happened in Monaco.

What if they hadn't had the suit then? He'd be dead.

A shiver ran up his spine.

The number of times he'd been confronted with his own mortality was far, far too high.

"Dani! Where's that martini?" he demanded, glancing behind him. He'd left the door open in case Steve wanted to hover.

"Here." She passed him a third drink; Tony took it with the gauntlet, with surprising delicacy, and sipped it.

"...fits like a glove," he joked, seeing her eyeing the gauntlet. He passed the drink to his unsheathed hand and flexed his fingers, listening to the gear whir quietly. "...not bad, right? I really want to get into models that self-assemble, though. Can you imagine if they were all non-gantry? If they just flew right onto my body? ...like how super-models do?"

Dani snorted despite herself, unable to suppress her laughter. "Yes, Mr. Stark," she managed, giggling.

Tony grinned back at her. "Listen, babe, go get me another drink before Rogers gets off the phone. Make it a double. ...he's not crazy about how much I drink."

"That was a double," said Dani.

"Oh," said Tony, examining the martini. "Well... get me a double-double then. Chop-chop, double-double." He went back to adjusting the gauntlet. His plan was to get good and drunk and sleep away the rest of the flight. Until he passed out, though, he was pretty sure he could get the gear-shift problem fixed.

While Tony was fiddling with his suit Steve had ended up drifting off. He was a super soldier who needed his sleep and he'd been working out for a good four hours. The plane moved slowly and
rhythmically and lulled him into unconsciousness, his head leaning against one of the windows.

He could hear voices. Things were... murky. Details unfocused. The voices were male, American and Russian, with occasional German. He didn't recognise them. Steve's left arm felt heavy, cold...not quite right. Was he hurt? Injured? He shifted a fraction and his shoulder burned in pain. He grated and tried to cry out but there was something in his mouth. A hard piece of plastic, or at least that's what it tasted like. His tongue felt uncomfortably dry.

Steve realised, belatedly, that his eyes were shut. His hair felt longer, tickling the sides of his face. Slowly, he blinked his eyes open and winced at the copper-yellow light of the room. He felt strange. Everything was wrong. He was breathing too heavily. The men in front of him were murmuring. Their bodies and faces were unfocused, he couldn't see them. Steve frowned.

"--needs more time. This is too soon. Something has been off on the last four missions--"

"--no more excuses, Karpov. You said he'd be--"

He was struggling to make out their words and full sentences.

"--another retraining session--"

"--unpredictable--"

"--just standard maintenance--"

"--liability--"

"--dangerous--"

Men appeared around him, their bodies resolving, less blurry. They were wearing labcoats. One of them pushed Steve back in the chair. His arm throbbed again.

Then they moved away and...

"Вы будете соблюдать."

Everything hurt. It was torture. Literal torture. Every nerve was on fire; Steve's whole body trembled with the shock of it, his hands clenching into fists. Everything was taut against the pain but he was incapable of moving away from him; he bit down on the plastic piece in his mouth so hard he was sure his teeth might break, and screwed his eyes shut, a pained, high-pitched groan still escaping from the back of his-

"Captain Rogers?"

Steve practically jumped, his eyes flying open. It was Dani. She had a hand on his shoulder and was smiling down at him politely. He stared back dumbly.

"We're about to land."

One of the other flight attendants walked past, in her pencil skirt and heels. Steve blinked, rubbing his face in confusion. The dream had felt so real. And the plane was so... so comfortably and elegant and different. He felt disoriented.

"Where's Tony?"

"Riley's getting him," said Dani gently.
In the back, Tony had passed out on the floor, propped up against the wall, a screwdriver in one hand and a martini in the other.

"Mr. Stark?"

This was actually fairly typical.

"Mr. Stark?" repeated Riley, louder.

She didn't touch him. Tony had a strict rule about being touched when he was waking up. Instead, she found a metal ruler and prodded him gently with it. Tony groaned. "Three hundred thousand on Scorpion's Ruckus," he mumbled, half-asleep.

"Mr. Stark, we're nearly there."

"Tell Olivia I'm dead."

"Mr. Stark, you broke up with Olivia last year."

"Good. Bring me a bottle of Drambuie and get the hell out."

Riley frowned. "Mr. Stark, you asked me to wake you up before we landed. We're in New York now; you insisted on getting to the Expo in time for Hammer's presentation. It's already six in the evening."

Riley's words washed over Tony like water and he was suddenly aware that he was covered in sweat. So much sweat he might as well have been plunged into a swimming pool. His fingers were wrinkled with it. His mouth was dry as if it had been stuffed with cotton all night. He tried to swallow, but his throat was like sand. Had he had a panic attack in his sleep? He felt terrified and he didn't know why.

"I need water," he moaned.

"Yes, you do. Here."

She handed him a bottle of water; Tony tried to uncap it, forgetting he was still wearing the red gauntlet. He shook it off and it landed on the ground with a clank. He rose unsteadily, bracing himself against the wall.

The air smelled wrong.

Steve.

Tony's heart jumped into his throat and he hurried into the main cabin. Steve was sitting there, looking perfectly fine, but Tony couldn't shake the sense of unease. "Steve!" he croaked, practically flinging himself at the omega. "Are you okay? I felt-- I felt--"

Felt what? He couldn't put it into words. But he'd felt fear, fear and hurt, and it was definitely not his own, and he could smell Steve's uneasiness. He was in Steve's lap before he could stop himself, covering the other with his body, nuzzling comfort into his neck.

"Tony, I'm fine, it's--" Okay? Steve didn't protest. The cabin crew at least had the decency to make themselves scarce at Tony's blatant display of affection, and protection too. Steve placed a hand on Tony's chest and felt his Alpha's heart beating at a pace to match his own- had Tony had a freak out, too, or did Steve really just have that much affect on him?
Steve swallowed and looked down. "I had a bad dream. That's all. Wasn't fun," he whispered and slid his hand down to Tony's hip. He squeezed in reassurance and looked back up into Tony's dark eyes which were currently gleaming with concern. "I'm fine. Honestly."

"Was it like... like a World War II thing?" asked Tony tentatively.

"No. It wasn't PTSD, if that's what you're asking. I don't know what it was. ...I'm not even sure it was mine." Steve murmured shook his head.

"What'd you mean not yours? I didn't-" began Tony.

He hadn't had any dreams; he'd passed out from the liquor and was positive he hadn't had any nightmares plaguing him. So if Steve had had a bad dream, it had to have been--

_Bucky._

The hair on the back of Tony's neck stood up; Tony felt his lip twitching, wanting to curl up.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that. It wasn't him," said Steve quickly. "It was just... weird. I thought I was in an electric chair. ...probably just heard somethin' on the radio that freaked me out. Really. It's nothing, Tones."

Tony's hackles relaxed marginally at the nickname.

"We should go. We don't have long, right?"

Tony climbed off of Steve slowly and smoothed down the front of his t-shirt, forgetting that he was in street clothes and not his usual suit-and-tie combo.

"Yeah. Time to go," he agreed, trying not to dwell on what Steve had just said. Tony struggled to capture a sense of peace, of happiness. He had to be confident. Had to steel himself for the upcoming media onslaught.

The hair on the back of his neck wasn't going down all the way.

"DANI!" he barked. "MADDIE! One of you, grab me a drink, stat! ...and some hair gel!"

"Yes, Mr. Stark!" both chimed in sync.

Tony took a deep breath and let out a slow, steady sigh, reaching up to rub the back of his neck vigorously. He forced a smile. "Okay. Show time. ...I got a few of the newer suits at the Expo, Steve. They make the Mark 2 look like a piece of junk. Wait 'til you see them. They're awesome."

He glanced out the window. It was dark out. Right. Time zone change. They'd only been in the air for three, four hours tops, but they had moved forward three hours in time. Tony looked down to reset his watch. He was wearing an analog Jaeger, which, though impractical, looked damned good.

"You want a drink too?" Maddie asked Steve, significantly more forward than Dani is.

"No, thank you," Steve sighed, standing too.

Tony downed his martini and spent the rest of the time on the plane rubbing hair gel over the back of his neck, trying to get his hackles to behave. Charlie set the plane down gently and Happy opened the door for them; they descended into the New York night air, which was cooler and more
humid than Los Angeles's. A man in a suit had brought a sleek, white car; Happy dismissed him and took the keys, getting in the front to drive.

There were a pair of lattes in the cupholders in the back. Steve reached for his and sipped it; it had cinnamon in it. Happy really was a sweetheart.

"Did you order us this while we were on the plane? Thanks, Happy," said Steve.

Happy looked surprised. Clearly, he was not used to getting thanked. "You're welcome," he said.

The drive to the Expo itself was very short; Steve pressed himself against the window, excited to be close to Brooklyn, but they only got to see highway before they were taking an exit pointing to Flushing Meadows.

Steve was trying to pretend he wasn't nervous. Before he knew what he was doing he was reaching over and taking Tony's hand. "Tony." He was trying to focus on his breathing and keeping it calm. Steve swallowed. Jesus, why was he so nervous?

"I love you," he whispered, voice soft enough so only Tony could hear.

Tony let Steve lace their fingers together, and he squeezed his hand lovingly, staring out the window.

"Love you too," he said, automatically.

The Expo was looking great. He hadn't been there since the opening ceremonies, but it was as busy as ever. There were crowds of people, and everything was lit up. Tony hadn't actually ever seen the front entrance; he'd dropped in from a plane using a suit when the Expo had opened.

"...it occurs to me that, as a guy who was born in nineteen-eighteen, this might be a little overwhelming," said Tony as Happy pulled up to the curb. A monorail glided above them; below them, a bassline was pounding up through the concrete. Neon signs were everywhere.

Steve peered out through the windows, face pale. "Well... they still got that big globe statue," he offered, trying to find something familiar from the '40s.

"It's about to get worse," said Happy, looking up at them from the rear view. "Ready?"

"I was born ready," said Tony, grinning, squeezing Steve's hand a little tighter. Outside, heads were already turning. They were in a none-too-subtle Saleen S7 and there had been a shift in the flow of traffic toward the car. "Let's go make some headlines? ...where's Pepper?"

"Backstage. ...main stage," clarified Happy. "Probably shooing Hammer off of her with a broom."

"He's gonna be so pissed," said Tony happily, pulling his sunglasses down from his head to cover his eyes. The only thing he liked more than being the center of attention was stealing the center of attention from a rival. "Okay, Steve, let's do it."

He and Happy flung open their doors at the same time and Tony dragged Steve out of the car after him. The effect of Tony's appearance was immediate; the crowd swamped him with shrieks of excitement, asking for autographs, chanting about Iron Man, shoving microphones in his face; Tony was laughing, waving, jostling good-naturedly into the crowd as Happy shoulders away the worst of it, and Steve suddenly understood the sunglasses; a lot of cameras were going off.

Tony was basking in it like a lizard on a sunny rock. Apparently, the threat of being trampled
wasn't one that bothered him much.

The roar of the crowd reminded Steve of the sea, the noise like a tidal wave as it washed over them as they stepped out of the car. It was overwhelming but Steve mentally promised himself he could handle his- he would handle this. He'd fought in a war. This should be easy.

"Just stick close," Happy mumbled in Steve's ear and patted his shoulder before he moved to pave the way for him.

The crowd were insane and they soon recognised who Steve was.

"Oh my god! It's Captain America!"

"He's here with Tony Stark?!!"

The flashing was kind of blinding. Steve stuck close to Tony, trying to hide behind him (an impossibility with his size), and didn't dare get in the way of his fans. Tony was accepting things and signing them while Happy fruitlessly tried to get them some space.

A reporter dashed out in front of him. She was a blonde, her smile bright. She thrust the microphone out at Tony and half out at Steve in the process. "Good evening Mr. Stark. Is Captain America your guest of honour for the night?"

"As a matter of fact, he is," said Tony. He let go of Steve's hand, but only to wrap his arm around Steve's waist and drag him closer to him. "Who better to benefit from an Expo that showcases the wonders of the future than Captain America, right? And I think I speak for every progressive, forward-thinking American when I say that I wholeheartedly support his stance on advancing omega rights. It's that kind of dynamic, modern thinking that helps us move forward as a society, and helps our best and brightest, regardless of status, really shine in the tech market."

Tony was speaking off the cuff, but years of giving sound bites came naturally to him.

Tony was so good with people. Steve really didn't know how he did it. He was charismatic and charming and acted like this was his every day or something. He was adaptable in way Steve didn't think he could ever be but he also couldn't help but admire Tony for it.

"-now if you'll excuse me, I've got to get to the main stage, but I'd love it if you'd join me and the other beautiful people- Hi, how're you--" Tony was accepting ticket stubs and scrawling his signature while still walking after Happy. "-yes, thank you, I love you too, you're great- sorry, I don't do handshakes- hi, great to see you, too- c'mon, Stevie- you know, Steve actually attended the first Expo in '43, isn't that something- excuse me-"

Tony's grip on Steve was firm; it occurred to him, dizzily, that in all the pictures, he was going to look extremely short next to Steve. He made a mental note to see if he could buy some taller shoes or something.

Steve let Tony lead, even though he was shorter. He knew the way; Steve was already lost in the crowd. His Alpha's hand was a hot claim on his waist through the thin fabric of his shirt. It made Steve shiver. Tony guided him through the crowds and it was a relief to be with someone who knew what they were doing.

The reporters and fans dogged them.

"So you're saying Stark Industries is a pro-omega organization?!!" someone shouted over the din of the crowd.
"Yes, absolutely, we always have been; I'm not just saying that because he's my omega," said Tony casually.

The crowd went absolutely nuts.

"- your omega?!

"-are you bonded?!

"-are you referring to Captain Rogers?!

"Excuse me, thanks, coming through," said Tony, ignoring their questions with obvious delight at getting them riled up.

"You're mean," Steve whispered with a fond chuckle and shook his head at the desperate crowds they left behind. Happy ushered them into a quiet, back-alley area that was for staff only. The reporters were incensed. Steve knew his neck was a hundred percent on display right now and with all these flashes- photos of his mating bite would be all over the news tomorrow.

Steve was kind of relieved when Tony led them through the quiet, much less crowded back way.

"Main stage is this way," said Tony, turning and leading Steve through another alley. Steve followed him; Happy flashed a pass at a guard who was standing by an unmarked door, and then walked into a covered area. Below them was poured concrete with an epoxy finish; above them was scaffolding, wires and lighting gear criss-crossing. Someone walked past carrying a car battery.

"So...we're doing this?" Steve whispered in Tony's ear.

"Yeah. Lemme talk to them, then we can go backstage and take a breather," Tony murmured back. He reached up to brush Steve's hair, his brow furrowed, fussing over Steve's appearance.

Tony had hoped to see Pepper beforehand but there was no time for that. There was a strict speaker and presentation schedule, and Hammer was on in thirty. Tony desperately wanted to cut the guy off. He also didn't want to have to wait any longer than necessary. The sooner they got this over with, the better. It was like tearing off a Band-Aid.

"Can I get a mic?" demanded Tony, snapping his fingers at a stage hand. She looked over, then did a double-take when she realized who it was. Someone handed Tony a microphone within minutes; Tony tossed it up, caught it, and gave Steve's hand a tug. "C'mon, Rogers."

"...Tony?"

"...Rhodey!" exclaimed Tony with delight, turning. Rhodey was standing there in uniform, looking... not thrilled to see him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Warming up the crowd for Hammer. What are you doing here?"

"Uh, I'm part of his presentation? He's our contractor since Stark, Industries doesn't make weapons anymore?"

"Oh. Well, glad to have you here, buddy," said Tony, giving his upper arm a friendly slap. "Let's get some chow afterwards, okay? ...excuse me, I gotta go address my loving fans."
Without another second of pause, Tony dragged Steve away, through a door, up a flight of stairs and into some wings and then, suddenly, onto a wide stage, and then there they were, staring out at a crowd of at least a thousand people, maybe more. There were spotlights on them and the stage seemed too large, too empty, for merely two people.

Tony gave the microphone a couple of taps. "Hello? Is this on? Can I get this-" There was a shriek of feedback and everyone groaned. Tony winced. "Oh, ouch, that was unpleasant- oh, good, there we go, that's better- can you hear me in the back?" Tony pointed the microphone toward the crowd. He was walking easily around the stage, apparently unperturbed by the vast, empty space, or the fact that he was in jeans and a t-shirt. "...kind of embarrassing that we still haven't figured out microphones, huh-" The crowd laughed easily; Tony was talking to them like he was in front of a friendly crowd of twenty friends instead of a sea of strangers. "-well, it's good to be back- I kind of miss the dancers, though, to be honest, feels weird to be up here without them-"

"I LOVE YOU, CAPTAIN AMERICA!" yelled someone.

"Who said that?" demanded Tony, pointing into the crowd. "That's not even close to how my name is pronounced- kidding, kidding. No, we love Cap- he's great. Isn't he great? Actually, that's exactly why I'm up here today. Not just to thank you all for making this Expo the biggest event of the year- thank you, by the way-" The crowd cheered. ",but to formally announce my personal support for the ongoing omega rights movement, headed by Steve Rogers, who, some of you may know, was also acquainted with my father. Stark Industries has a long history of supporting omega equality and we're going to continue to do so. I'm behind this guy-" he gestured to Steve, "-every step of the way. As an ally, and a patriot, and a friend." He paused. "...and also as his mate. As his Alpha."

He lowered the microphone while the crowd erupted in screams and cheers.

Then he brought it up and added, "Yeah, we bonded." He lowered it and looked over at Steve. "Steve? You wanna say anything?" he asked, gently, gesturing him forward, offering him the microphone.

Well it was certainly a positive response. Positive almost to the point of aggression. The crowd was manic and excitable and it seemed Tony knew just how to work them. Steve didn't. The last term he'd been in front of a crowd this big was... er... never? Tony had not warned him that the main stage was open to the main grounds of the Expo and had television screens all along the top of it, essentially broadcasting themselves to every last person in Flushing Meadows.

But then... through his interview he'd essentially talked to, what, millions of people? He'd not thought of it like that at the time, though. It was less immediate and they edited all of his stuttering and pausing out.

In all his museum displays (the half dozen that Steve had read) they'd said he was a good motivator, a charming speaker. Maybe it was about time he lived up to that.

With a bashful duck of his head he accepted the microphone, their fingers brushing briefly. The touch was electric. "Er, hi- wow, okay. That's loud." Steve lowered his voice a touch. "They didn't make them like this in my day." The crowd laughed. "I don't think I really have anything to say that Tony already hasn't. But...I just wanna say this."

Steve stepped forward and the screaming died down; it was quiet for a few seconds, the crowd softening a little in respect. "The future is great and it's getting better, all the time. But we can only do this if we work together. This isn't about focusing on what divides people. This is about
focusing on what we have in common regardless of status, and regardless of biology. It's important
to celebrate diversity, and respect it. But it's more important to see that we have so many
similarities over our differences, to see ourselves in other people. To have empathy. That is what
makes us strong as nation. Solidarity and support. I know for a fact that America can change for
the better- it already has. And with the help of people like you..."

"And me," said Tony in a stage whisper.

"...and people like Tony here, we'll continue to do so." Steve half-smiled. "So I guess... all I have
to say is... thank you for listening and... supporting me, and my bond, and... uh, being awesome."

And then the crowd went crazy. It went wild.

Steve looked over at Tony and shrugged as if to say, not bad, right?

Tony flashed Steve a grin and reached for Steve's hand, lacing their fingers together once again.
Gently, he took the microphone, turning it off. "Kneel?" he murmured, softly. It was a request, not
a demand, and it was made gently, tentatively. Steve could tell Tony wouldn't be mad if he didn't
want to, but he had come to understand Tony's brand. Tony was bold and brash and confident and
unapologetic, and he liked shoving himself in people's faces. Tony preferred to demonstrate things
instead of describing them; the Expo was a living monument to that sentiment.

Their hands were touching, the microphone grasped between them, forgotten. Tony's excitement
was palpable. Any misgivings he'd had the previous day about other Alphas had evaporated with
their announcement. Steve was irrefutably his; it was official. They were definitely going to be
splattered all over the headlines tomorrow, onstage, hands entwined, maybe with one or two furtive
shots of the mark on Steve's neck.

Steve wanted to. Every bone in his body ached to. But it wasn't as simple as that. He was in the
news every day with people already trying to undermine him and Steve knew what would happen
if he knelt- they'd call him a hypocrite. Say it was archaic. But it would only be because they don't
understand. But Steve also understood why Tony was asking...he wanted to show them.

Well, there was other ways to do that.

Steve squeezed Tony's fingers gently and gave him an apologetic smile- truly sorry that they
couldn't quite do this the way the Alpha wanted.

And then Steve leaned forward, and he kissed him.

It happened so suddenly that Tony didn't have time to react.

He didn't want to be seen kissing another man. Yes, this was Alpha and omega, this was different,
but that wasn't the point; it was something Tony was self-conscious about. Also, their height
difference was glaring; Tony was looking up and Steve was tilting his head down, and there was
something about that that felt very weird to Tony. Maybe it was because he was looking up at an
omega.

But the moment Steve's lips were on his he forgot about all of that. Steve's was a familiar flavor,
and Tony reacted to it automatically; one hand went to his waist and the other to his smooth, strong
jaw, and he pushed into it eagerly. He'd forgotten the crowd and he couldn't hear them anymore;
his world had shrunk into only Steve.

He wasn't sure how long they were like that; they weren't making out, exactly, but both their
mouths were moving; it was passionate but also intimate and Tony could happily continued to
explore Steve's lips and mouth, his fingertips brushing over Steve's skin and the fabric of his shirt.

But Steve, at least, had the wherewithal to break apart and Tony found the two of them gazing lovingly at each other. Steve's face was flushed and he was smiling softly and his blue eyes were sparkling and Tony wished he could throw him down right now and bite his neck all over again.

He reached behind Steve's neck to feel the mark—his mark—and bring their foreheads together.

Steve was smiling stupidly—so much his face hurt, his lips and tongue still tingling from the kiss. It had been dizzying and Tony's touch was grounding. The crowd was going mental; they were roaring in response. It was definitely a positive response but that didn't make it any less overwhelming. The crowd had evaporated into a series of blinding flashes from cameras and cell phones. Steve just focused on the grounding touch of Tony's hand on his neck.

"I love you," he whispered, so softly that it was doubtful Tony could hear it over the scream of the crowd before them, his fingertips brushing the edges of the arc reactor underneath his t-shirt. Steve's eyes dropped down for a moment and then back up to Tony's face.

Tony tugged Steve's hand, dragging him back off stage, behind the safety of the curtains, into the wings. The din of the crowd softened as they slipped through the door toward the backstage area. And then the moment was over, and that was that. They'd opened Pandora's box. But Steve couldn't have been happier.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's showing up next chapter?
In the backstage area of the main stage, Tony and Steve were holding hands and grinning like idiots; they could hear the excited, screaming din of the crowd outside, muffled to white noise. They would probably be like that for a while. Steve was trembling with excitement himself. They'd done it. Just like that. It was over so quickly. Their bond, publicly announced, out in the open... it felt good. It felt liberating.

Steve laughed gently when their gaze met. He didn't think Tony could quite believe it either.

Tony was still gazing lovingly at Steve when he smelled him: another Alpha.

Not a friendly smell.

A slow clapping came from behind them. Steve's eyes narrowed before he turned around to see Hammer. The guy was looking smug (why the hell would he be?) and was dressed in a hideous orange suit combined with a silver tie. He was being trailed by a pair of stagehands, Pepper, Happy, a lone reporter with VIP access who looked like she had died and gone to heaven, and another man in a suit Tony was certain he'd seen before but couldn't quite place.

He stopped in front of them and slipped his hands into his back pockets. When he smiled it didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Well, that was quite a performance," he commented, still smiling.

Tony had nearly forgotten about the guy but the mere sight of the smug little jerk put Tony's guard up.

Tony flashed Pepper a stupid grin; she pressed her lips together. She was wearing a long sweater-dress and clutching a binder (a schedule of some sort, no doubt; she loved schedules) and looking more than a bit frazzled. She'd probably been dealing with Hammer for at least an hour, by the look at it.

"You could have warned me..." she said to Tony in a low voice.

"Oh, that?" said Tony innocently. "That was nothing. ...it did seem to steal the show, though, didn't it? I'm sure everyone will totally be paying attention to whatever little presentation you're giving, though," he said to Justin. "...You've met Captain Rogers, right?"

Justin didn't seem the slightest bit embarrassed to discover Steve's true identity. He inclined his head toward the blond with an unsettling level of friendly familiarity. "Gotta hand it to you- hiding in plain sight? Very clever. Is it back to Captain now? I would've thought you were happy being Tony's... what, secretary?"

"Personal assistant," said Pepper, glaring daggers at him. During her time as Tony's assistant, she'd loathed the word "secretary."

"It's a more natural position for an omega to be in, isn't it?"

Tony bristled. "Didn't you hear a damn word he said up there?"

"Tony, please don't," said Steve.
Pepper was a beta and she couldn't smell the tension, but she didn't need to. The air was electric with it; Tony and Justin were staring at each other with an intensity that was frankly frightening. She stepped between them, trying to neutralize things, hyper-aware of the eager reporter hovering nearby. "Okay, boys, there will be plenty of time to talk later. Hammer, you're on in fifteen, so if I could just grab--"

"It was a very nice speech," conceded Justin smoothly, shouldering Pepper out of the way and taking a step forward. His hands were still casually in his pockets, but he and Tony were standing far too close to each other. "But not grounded in reality, if you want my opinion. Statuses are an inherent part of a person's biology. Omegas like being submissive."

Tony took a step forward as well. He and Justin were nearly touching, their faces less than a foot away from each other.

"This isn't necessary," pleaded Steve, putting a hand on Tony's shoulder, trying to ground him.

"How would you know what omegas like? Steve's not submissive. And he doesn't have to be. Not anymore. It's 2010, Hammer. Wake up and smell the coffee," snarled Tony, ignoring Steve entirely.

"Justin," said the man in the suit, pleadingly. It struck Steve that he'd seen that man hovering around before, in Monaco; the man was an omega and anxiety was dripping off of him, and Steve realized Tony wasn't the only bonded Alpha in the room. He'd heard Justin speak directly to the man only once, in Monaco: "Jack, get me a drink." That man was living like omegas lived back in the forties, hovering on the periphery of an Alpha's life, expected to be grateful to take orders. Justin's viewpoint made much more sense in the context of his own relationship.

"Tony," said Pepper warningly.

The Alphas ignored them. They were staring into each other's eyes, barely blinking; the hair on the back of their necks were up and their upper lips were twitching. The reporter was clutching her camera, looking blissful.

"Of course you're going to stand up for your omega," said Justin softly. "You're not the first Alpha to act like a fool after bonding. But you're only proving my point. Alphas protect. Omegas serve. That's just nature, Tony."

"Omegas don't have to serve. Steve doesn't serve."

"Is anyone listening to me?!" Steve demanded and it was apparent that the Alphas weren't. They were too lost in their own world fuelled by competition and hormones. It was ridiculous. Steve could have both of them pinned in minutes and they were fighting over him. He was slowly beginning to understand why Natasha used to roll her eyes and mutter 'men' under her breath when they'd passed useless and testosterone-fueled training sessions on their way into the gym.

Justin's eyes flicked over to Steve, then back to Tony. "Oh course not. I don't expect him to act normally, not after the serum. He's a freak--"

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Tony lunged, and the two Alphas fell to the ground, snarling, limbs flailing. Later, Tony would have realized he should have just clocked Justin in the face; they'd been close enough that a single punch would have been perfectly effective. But the moment Justin had insulted Steve, he'd lost whatever semblance of control he'd had. This wasn't a fight between men; it was a fight between
Alphas. Neither was throwing punches; they were clawing and biting and tearing and their only goal was to inflict as much damage as possible to the other until one was dead. There was no strategy to their fight, no thinking; Tony was snapping and growling and going for Justin's eyes, his throat, any vulnerable part of him. If Tony was getting hurt, he was unaware of it; he was trying to strangle Justin with his tie and Justin was kneeing him in the groin and Pepper and Jack were both screaming at them but the two were deaf to the world around him, too bloodlusted to react to anything other than each other.

Later, Tony wouldn't be able to really recall any details of the fight. He felt it was perfectly summed up by a single quote. As a child, Tony had read *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (a recommendation from Jarvis) and he remembered one line in particular that had given him chills: And it seemed that I too was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain that sent it to wander alone.

"Do something! Do something! They're going to kill each other!" yelled Pepper. But no one tried to interfere; sticking a hand into an Alpha fight was as dangerous as sticking a hand into a dogfight. Steve had once watched Bucky get into one and he'd had to have a hose turned on him.

The reporter looked delighted; she was filming the fight with relish. Two billionaires going feral and trying to tear each other's throats out was excellent reporting; she was pretty sure she was going to get a raise after this.

No normal person would interfere with a feral fight... but Steve wasn't a normal person. He shoved both hands into the frantic, snarling ball of ten-thousand-dollar suits and snarling aggressive, and grabbed both Alphas, one in each hand, separating them. He hoisted Justin up the scruff of his neck easily, like he weighed nothing more than a load of bread. Tony had a split lip but Hammer had a shiner on his cheekbone that would be a dark purple within the hour. Steve lifted him, his feet not touching the floor, waiting for the two of them to come to their senses.

"How dare you! Put me down! Tony! Get your omega under control-" spat Justin, squirming in clear discomfort; Steve had a fistful of suit and tie and hair and showed no sign of loosening his grip.

Justin sucked in a breath as Steve leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"Would you like to know what happened to the last Alpha who asked me to serve him?" Steve hissed and then threw Hammer to the floor before promptly turning to the reporter, kicking the glass of her camera, and shattering it. The woman shrieked in upset. "Send me the bill." Steve said, dropping Tony onto the ground. Tony crumpled; Steve offered him a hand up.

Tony scrambled to his feet, ignoring Steve's hand, heart throbbing his his chest, staring murderously at Justin; Justin was staring murderously back, still lying where Steve had thrown him, but they were separated now.

Tony spat on the ground, realizing his mouth was filled with blood.

"Oh my God, oh my God, Tony!" Pepper grabbed a handkerchief from the pocket of one of the stage hands and pressed it to his mouth. Tony didn't even remember Hammer biting him, but his lip was bleeding freely.

"...and he fights for you, too," said Justin very, very softly, rising unsteadily to his feet, brushing himself off, wincing.

Tony stared at him, not able to formulate words yet. His overwhelming emotion was still one of
rage. But there was embarrassment, too. He hadn't needed an omega's help. He was confident he could have settled the fight himself.

Justin was nearly slapping the other omega off him; Jack was offering him help just like Steve was offering Tony, and Justin was clearly not willing to have his pride wounded by accepting it.

"-oh my God, you had to fight, didn't you- you can't even just keep calm. He's on in five! I need make-up in here; someone clean that up. Excuse me." Pepper was shuffling everyone around, somehow managing to direct the stage hands and comfort the distressed reporter and make sure the Alphas stayed far enough apart that they couldn't restart the fight. "Tony, go to the bathroom, you're bleeding everywhere. Someone get him some ice, hurry up" She caught Steve's eye and gave him a look he was familiar with, the disapproving glare that she gave Tony when he was drunk or late or otherwise making her job much more difficult.

"I had him," Tony growled at Steve. "I didn't need your help, Steve, I had him..." Justin's words about controlling his omega were echoing around in his head. For some reason it bothered him. It bothered him a lot.

"And I didn't need your help," Steve pointed out, frustrated as ever. It was frankly ridiculous. There were bigoted Alphas everywhere; was Tony going to fight every one of them on the floor? Or was this still about the fact that Hammer had hit on him last time they'd met?

He stalked back toward the quiet backstage area, still pressing the cloth over his split lip, furious with Steve for breaking up the fight and furious with himself for not doing more damage when he had the chance.

"Go. Oh my God, you're on right now. Just- go, get, it's fine," fussed Pepper, practically dragged everyone after Tony, leaving Justin to the stage.

Jack caught Steve's eye as Pepper was shooing them away and he offered him the tiniest smile, one omega to another. The smile communicated a sort of embarrassed sentiment. Alphas, right? Clearly, he thought the scuffle was stupid as well. But Steve had the impression Jack wasn't used to actually voicing opinions like that.

"If you decide you're done with him, I'll pay for your lawyers," Steve told Jack passingly and then moved to follow Tony into the backstage area.

Pepper accosted Tony where he was leaning over a table of food, darkly contemplating a plate of cantaloupe and honeydew.

"You asked me to organize an Expo in your name, you showed up late and hung-over to the opening ceremonies, you've been gone all week and then you show up in a thirty-year-old t-shirt to make a big announcement without consulting me and also get into a feral fight with one of the presenters you asked me to book for you minutes before he's scheduled to go on the main stage? Are you kidding me, Tony?" demanded Pepper.

"...there is nothing wrong with this shirt," snapped Tony, who had no better reply. He reached for a piece of cantaloupe; Pepper swatted his hand away.

"That's for staff and they're unionized so don't you dare even look at those cheese cubes," she hissed. She rounded suddenly on Steve. "Congratulations on your pair-bond, Steve. Really. I think it's lovely." She turned back to Tony. "How dare you undermine this Expo's schedule after all the work I put into organizing it for you, Tony? Do you have any idea- don't touch that honeydew!"
Steve met Pepper's gaze but he didn't really know what to say to her. He just followed Tony into the bathroom to see him washing his face in the sink, the water pink as it bled down into the plug hole. Something tugged in Steve's gut.

"At least let me help," Steve sighed. "This is what I'm supposed to do right?" He said and went to grab some tissue paper. When Tony turned around Steve stepped up to dab at his lip gently, frowning when he saw the small but deep damage Justin's teeth had done.

"You don't think I'm a freak, do you?" Steve whispered after a moment as he dabbed at Tony's lip gently.

Tony gave a sharp, hissing intake of breath as Steve dabbed at his lip. His eyes softened a little.

"No. You're not a freak. You're amazing," murmured Tony, reaching up to touch Steve's cheek. ",...thanks," he added, grudgingly. "...I didn't mean to fight him, I just... when he said that... I snapped. Steve, you're perfect. You're better than perfect. And we both know, even without the serum, the real you... you're a fighter. You're a leader. They chose you because of your spirit. You're the most badass omega ever. That doesn't make you a freak. It makes you a fucking treasure."

"Thank you. I needed to hear that," Steve whispered and kissed Tony's cheek because his lips were sore. He leaned his forehead against his cheek briefly, his eyes shut. He wanted to kneel down and rest his head against his thigh but now he wasn't the time or the place.

Tony glanced at himself in the mirror. His shirt was dirty and splattered with blood. "...the media's really gonna lose it now. God, their heads are gonna explode," he sighed. "Well... this can't really get crazier, huh? Come on, let's go steal some cheese cubes."

Tony was feeling calmer. Here in the dark quiet of the backstage bathroom, where the only smells were cleaning products and his omega, where it was just them... yes. He felt better. His lip was throbbing painfully.

He took Steve's hand and gently tugged him back out. He needed to ask Pepper for a new shirt.

Pepper was hovering by a bank of television, eyeing them sternly. "Tony! ...Tony, are you-- are you watching this?"

"Watching what? I've been cleaning my face. The fucker bit me," said Tony. (He didn't add that he was certain he'd bitten Hammer back.)

"Tony, look."

Pepper grabbed Tony's head and pointed it toward one of the screens. Tony stared, confused. Justin had managed to get cleaned up fairly nicely, and he was just finishing what sounded like a fairly confident speech. "--very first prototype in the Variable Threat Response Battle Suit and its pilot, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes!"

"Is that my suit? Are those arc reactors?" No. That was impossible. Tony was the only one who knew how to make those, except Vanko, who--

Vanko.

Investigation Into French Prison Break Suggests Outside Intervention.

Tony had wondered who would possibly want to ally themselves with an unstable, dangerous
maniac like Vanko. Who would give him help. Who would value his smarts enough to ignore the fact that he was an unhinged murderer. Who was desperate enough.

Steve didn't fully understand what was happening; they were watching the TV screens backstage; Justin, in his orange suit, was addressing the crowd, a line of armored suits like Tony's behind him. Tony's reaction told him about everything he needed to know; Tony's face had blanched white.

"Vanko," he said.

"What?" asked Steve.

Tony ignored him.

Palladium-core RT nodes; Vanko's designs. The phone call. The fortune cookie.

*Special touches have been planned with you in mind.*

The pieces of the mosaic fell into place, clicking together instantly in Tony's mind, resolving into a dangerous, deadly picture.

Hammer had begged for a spot. Hammer had been trying to reverse-engineer Tony's suit designs. Hammer would do anything to upstage Tony, especially at his own expo.

"*Holy shit.* He's working with Vanko."

Vanko. Vanko, who would do anything to exact revenge. Who did not care about upstaging Tony. Whose primary goal was to kill him, to cause him harm and pain. Who had probably just heard Tony publicly announce that he was bonded...

"I gotta suit up, now!"

"Suit up?" He echoed, eyes widened. "Tony- are we going to fight? Are we under attack?" Steve asked, already reaching to grab his phone from his back pocket. It was a good thing he had Natasha on speed dial.

Steve's voice.

Oh, God. He'd just let the entire world know that he was bonded to Steve. That Steve was the most important thing in the world to him.

"I'm under attack, I'm going to fight!" he snapped. He gave Steve a shove, but Steve didn't budge; he was as solid as a brick wall. "Steve, Pepper, get the hell out of here, get everyone out, now, it's too dangerous, go!"

Tony didn't wait to make sure they were listening. If he was right (and he had a sinking feeling that he was) then he was about one or two minutes away from being attacked. It was Monaco all over again.

He had at least a few suits on display, thank God. He made a beeline for the nearest, the Mark VI, conveniently located next to stage 4. He wasn't even sure if it would work with the new arc reactor. Fuck. Oh, fuck.

He shoved through the crowds of people, aware that his lip was bleeding all over again and he probably looked like a bum. Actually, it was turning out to be a decent disguise. No one
recognized him; a few people gave annoying cries as Tony pushed past them.

He nearly bowled over a security guard on his way to stage 4.

"MOVE!" he barked.

"Sir, this is a restricted--"

"I'M TONY FUCKIN' STARK!" he scream, yanking down his shirt to show the arc reactor. The security guard's eyes widened and he moved aside, opening the door for Tony. Tony practically flung himself against the suit, initiating the suit-up program with frantic, desperate murmurs for it to please, please, please go faster.

"JARVIS!" yelled Tony, cramming on the helmet and turning on the HUD display before the suit was even on. Thank God he'd left all the gantry equipment here from his drop-in a few weeks ago. Thank God every one of them had an uplink and could communicate with each other. Thank God he had JARVIS.

But was it enough?

He wished he could speed it up, but there were hundreds of interlocking components to be placed, adjusting, snapped, bolted--

" JARVIS! " he shouted again, impatient.

"...yes, sir?"

"The Mark V. I need to talk to the Mark V- connect us, connect our headsets, right now. Find Rhodey--"

Tony was talking too fast, unable to keep the desperation from his voice; it was torture to wait, to hold still, while the suit assembled around him; he was trying not to think of Steve or Pepper, oh God, Happy was there, too, literally everyone in the world he cared about was in one place, the worse possible place--

There was a click, a release, and Tony was free from the gantry, enclosed in his suit, like a deep-sea diver, removed from the world by hundreds of pounds of metal gears. He'd never felt claustrophobic in the helmet; the detachment from the real world was actually sort of comforting.

"RHODEY!" he yelled into the helmet

"-Jesus Christ. Tony ?" a voice responded. ",-how are you in my ear?"

Tony flicked on the repulsor jets and spiraled upwards, scanning the crowds. They were scanning back, pointing up, oohing and aahing, but Tony ignored them; he was looking for signs of trouble. The throngs of people, the spotlights, the amount of sensory information coming from multiple stages was overwhelming.

"Rhodey! Rhodey, listen, Vanko--" began Tony.

"Tony." Rhodey sounded tired. "I’m here on orders. Let’s not do this right now."

"You don't understand!" shouted Tony. He knew he didn't need to shout; they were talking through a headset, after all, but he was panicking too much to keep the volume down. "All these people are in danger, we gotta get them out of here, he's working with Vanko, Hammer and Vanko,
the suits, the reactors, Vanko called me--"

"Slow down."

"-no, there's no time, Rhodey! Listen, I'm sorry I threw you through a wall, I'll buy you a drink, okay? Just listen- Hammer is working with Vanko; Vanko called me- he planned this. I think he's going to attack me--"

Tony gave up trying to look from above the crowd. It was too bright and busy and the augmented reality in the HUD display was honestly making things worse.

Tony angled himself toward the main stage and dove, dropping next to the Mark V, the suit that had gotten away. It was nearly unrecognizable; it was bristling with new weapons, and it was looking, in Tony's opinion, a lot bulkier and less streamlined than his old model.

Also it was painted red, white, and blue.

"-what the hell did you do to my suit?" blurted Tony.

"It's not your suit anymore," replied Rhodey calmly.

"Never mind. Listen, Rhodey- watch where you're pointing that thing-" said Tony, spying an anti-personnel gun mounted on Rhodey's shoulder. Hammer Industries. Ugh. Seeing the H.I. logo on his suit was unsettling, to say the least.

"Huh? ...I'm not doing that."

There was a split second of pause.

Tony reacted without thinking, hitting the jets and getting out of the way a second before the gun went off.

The shell hit a scaffold that was holding up several stage lights; the whole thing came down in a shower of sparks and groaning, crumpling metal.

"Shit!" exclaimed Tony.

The stage lights went down in a hiss of sparks and some of the scaffolding collapsed with a groan as it smashed into the stage surface. Steve and Pepper automatically ducked down, Steve curling an arm around her to guard her from the scattering of sparks that followed.

Steve dialed Natasha.

"Steve? I just saw you announced your bond at the Expo. Congrat-"

"No time. Are you or any other SHIELD agents in New York? I need my shield and I need you to get here now," Steve said flatly, firm tone and Natasha understood that he was words were unwavering. It was a command. Not a request. Steve didn't have time to explain right now.

"What the hell is happening?" Happy asked, pulling out his firearm and shoving Pepper behind him. Steve had all-but forgotten that Happy was usually armed. Not that a handgun was going to do a bit of good against a mech suit with military-grade weapons all over it.

"I don't know," Steve said, straightening up. "We'll figure it out later; right now, we need to get everyone to safety."
"Where's Tony? Where did he go?" Pepper demanded cutting him off, her eyes wide as a suit flew past them. It was quick but Steve saw a flash of red - it was Tony, not Rhodey. The crowd, once jubilant, was now stampeding in every direction without any clear idea of where to go; they simply wanted away from the main stage, where the armed sentinels, once standing stock-still in tidy ranks, were now abandoning, clanking away in every direction, their motives unclear.

Steve lifted up a piece of broken scaffold and tossed it aside so a couple of stagehands could run past. "You guys stay safe. I'm gonna work out what the hell is going on," he told them and then lifted his phone to his ear again. "Nat? You on your way?"

"Yes. What's going on, Steve? Are you okay? What was that noise?"

Steve was already charging up the steps to the stage. He walked out and peeked around the corner to view the crowd. It was chaos. "I'm okay," he said after a beat. "But I have...no idea what's going on. Send back-up. A bunch of mech suits by Hammer Industries just went rogue and they're stomping around the expo and we've basically got a right on our hands here."

"Can you deactivate the suits?"

"Natasha, I'm from the forties."

She paused. "Okay. I'm in D.C. and on my way now. Sending back-up agents in the area. Try to run crowd control; get Tony to deal with the suits."

"Roger," said Steve, hanging up.

The only problem was... he had no idea where Tony was.

In fact, the only person who did was Rhodey.

"Tony, I've got a target lock," he warned as a small, red crosshairs appeared on his HUD inside the helmet. It bounced around, keeping its target in the center with shocking precision.

"Okay, okay, I'm dealing with this, I'm dealing with his!" replied Tony. "What's the lock on?"

"On you, Tony! Firing!"

"Right!"

Tony cut the jets and let the suit drop; he felt the heat of a missile pass over him, where he'd been seconds earlier.

"I told you I was sorry about throwing your through the wall, okay?!"

"Tony, I'm locked in, I'm not in control here- the suit's gone rogue."

"Great, fucking fantastic! JARVIS! JARVIS, can you break in? Brute force it if necessary-"

"Yes, sir."

"Fuck!" Tony banked a hard left to avoid slamming into one of the monorail's support beams. He was flying too low and too fast but he couldn't go up or he'd be wide open. "I can't believe you were in business with Hammer, Rhodey, can't even fuckin' believe it--"

"I was following orders!"
"Well, I hate to invoke Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies, but--"

"Is now really the time? I'm trying to kill you. On your right!"

Tony jerked right and slammed into a drone, tumbling through the air and clipping his ankle on the roof of a building. He yelled out; maybe it was broken, maybe just sprained, hard to tell.

"Tony! You okay, man?"

"Fine, fine, fine."

"How come you nearly die every week!"

"I dunno, I guess I'm just special!"

"Drones on your six and your two!"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," chanted Tony. He deployed flares, released the shoulder ailerons, and grabbed onto a passing radio tower, clinging to it like a bat, trying to catch his breath, hoping he'd scrambled their sensors for long enough to figure out a plan. He wasn't sure how many drones he was up against. Eight? Ten? Minus the one he'd slammed into the roof with. Not only was he critically outnumbered, but he was also trying to avoid missiles that were being shot at him and probably landing among civilians when they failed to make their mark. First priority was getting them away from the Expo, away from the crowds. Away from Steve. Away from Pepper. At a glance, Tony was somewhere around Avenue D, which put him west of stage 3 and south of an observation deck, with the Oracle Dome to his right and an excellent jerk chicken joint to his left.

"...Rhodey?" he called into the headset tentatively.

"Still here, I've got three hostiles going due east from the main stage and another pack scoping Avenue F."

"Okay, I'm going to try to lure them away from the Expo," said Tony. "JARVIS is still trying to get into the mainframe."

"Well, no rush."

"Sorry, he's running kind of slow, I'm trying to download the last season of Top Gear."

Tony took a deep breath and hit the jets, hard, kicking off from the radio tower and back into the air. Almost immediately, his display began flashing warnings at him, and he jerked to the side to avoid getting shot.

"Come and get me!" he barked, corkscrewing upwards and banking west.

"Locked back on, coming in hot. Watch yourself!" called Rhodey.

"You just can't stay away from me, can you?" asked Tony. He dove, twisting in the air, trying to make sure any shots fired were going up, not down and into the crowd, but it was impossible; he felt like he was in the middle of a fireworks display. He was relying more on the digital navigation than his own eyes because the air was thick with smoke and lights; he was dodging every shot but just barely keeping up.

"So you and Steve worked things out?" asked Rhodey.

"Is now really the time for that? Yes! We did!" Tony saw an opening and took it; he directed full
power to the boots and shot off, leaving the Expo behind, a pack of drones on his tail. He followed the curve of the highway. He wasn't sure where he was going, just away.

"Well, you looked good up there."

"Thanks. Brawn and brains together, huh? I'm the brawn, obviously."

"Obviously. Drone at ten o'clock."

"Got 'em."

Tony folded his arms in and dove under an overpass, zigzagging through the concrete pylons.

"Jesus Christ, I had no idea you pulled this many G's in the suit."

"Oh, this, this is nothing, man; the second one broke the sound barrier." Tony flung out an arm snatching up a car and swinging it around, batting two drones into oblivion.

"Four just peeled off. They're heading back to the Expo," reported Rhodey. "They're trying to lure you back. Don't take the bait."

"Why would I go back?" wondered Tony.

"Because Steve and Pepper are there."

"...oh, fuck!" Tony flipped mid-air and hit the jets.

"Wait! Tony! I said don't take the bait!"

Tony ignored him, watching the Expo grow in front of him. It looked like Christmas— all lit up with lights, the stadiums and avenues and the biodome and spotlights all blinking prettily up at him. If he weren't currently being shot at, he would have liked to have stayed up here, flying around and admiring it. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the layout as the element in his chest. Edvinium, or badassium, or whatever Stark men were calling it these days.

On the ground, it was chaos. All Steve could hope to do was to get as many people out of danger as possible (at least until SHIELD arrived, or the National Guard, or... somebody). He left Pepper and Happy backstage, and dared the drone-filled arena outside. The crowd was manic. The main entrance had been blocked off by two tactical blasts to pillars. Steve rolled out of the way of a drone blast on stage and then slipped down, pushing through the panicking crowds towards one of the fallen pillars. Ugh, it looked heavy.

"Captain America's here!" yelled someone.

The crowd's attention went from the blocked exit to him; he was almost instantly nearly drowning in frantic people clutching at him.

"He'll save us!"

Steve swatted them off, practically wading toward the exit.

"I need you to get out as quickly as you can!" Steve shouted over the rumble of panic. He moved to the nearest pillar and knelt down, tucking his hands underneath and gritting his teeth. With a groan he lifted the thing up. It was goddamn heavy and he could only lift it so high, certainly not over his own head. The people rushed out from the gap he'd made, though they had to duck as they went. Steve's arms trembled a little with the effort, he couldn't stand like this before. With a grunt a
moved backwards, leaving a decent enough gap before he set the pillar down. His arms felt odd once the weight was gone, a few beads of sweat having broken out on his forehead.

A woman stopped by him, her beautiful red dress ruined. It reminded Steve of Peggy's. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Steve nodded. "Just doing my duty, ma'am."

"I can't believe you're an omega," she said, shaking her head, and with that, she was swept away by the crowd.

"...that's cute. That's adorable," called a familiar voice behind him. It was being projected from a microphone. "You're just too sweet for this world."

Steve whipped around to see Justin on the stage, his left cheek slowly turning purple. His eyes narrowed and he stalked towards him. The crowd was running past Steve and, thankfully, slowly thinning out.

"What the hell are you doing? People could be hurt!"

Justin raised his arms. "I'm not the one controlling the drones. This isn't me. I swear. Zero liability."

Steve heaved himself up onto the stage. "Well, they ain't controlling themselves! Call them off!"

Justin's fake smile fell as Steve approached him and he looked irritated to admit he wasn't in charge.. "I can't! Where do you get off telling me what to do, anyway? You're nothing but a spade who needs to be put in your place."

"I'd like to see you try," Steve huffed out, hands clenched by his sides.

Then Hammer smiled and this time it was for real. The sight was unnerving.

"I'm not going to," he said, his gaze fixed on something over Steve's shoulder.

Steve felt a chill run down his spine. And then, before he could even whip around, there was something piercingly hot digging into his ankle and he was dragged to the ground with a thump. He winced as his jaw smacked into the floor.

He twisted around, onto his back, and looked up.

Before him was a familiar site. It was the man from Monaco, Vanko. But the suit he was wearing was no longer one cobbled together in a basement; it was a terrifying feat of engineering, its contours slick, its design professional; it was not unlike something Tony himself would have built. At the end of each arm, a wire was curled, an industrial one thicker than a carrot, and it was one of these wires, Steve realized, that was curled tight around his ankle and dragging him across the ground right towards him.

"ROGERS!"

Steve looked over and caught a glimpse of a familiar face and a SHIELD insignia on the shoulder.

"MAY! SHIELD!" he yelled, throwing out his hands.

He was banking on her having it, on someone having something, some weapon; his prayers were answered when, a moment later, she was pitching a disc at him. And while it wasn't quite the same
as *his shield*, a shield was a shield and Steve wasn't going to complain. He caught the shield as Agent May threw it, and managed to yank it in front of him a split-second before a second whip lased out and cracked against the surface instead of Steve's face.

Steve yanked his foot as hard as he could, knocking Vanko off balance just enough to buy him some time.

"AGENT MAY!" he yelled.

She was already scrambling on stage. Steve only knew her passingly; Melinda May was a slight Asian woman whose short stature belied her toughness. Steve had seen her sparring with Natasha, once, impressed by her reflexes.

He was no less impressed when she tore across the stage toward Vanko and, with a flying leap, landed on his shoulders, wrapping her arms around his neck. He stumbled and the second whip loosened enough for Steve to get free.

Vanko reached up and grabbed May's hair, yanking her free from him, throwing her to the ground. She'd barely even hit the stage floor before she was drawing a pair of pistols and aiming for Vanko, but the bullets bounced off the core of his armor like pellets.

"Мало омега должно быть проучить," Vanko seethed, voice tinny through the suit.

"Они говорят, что вы не можете научить старую собаку новым трюкам," Steve replied coolly as he stood and adjusted his grip on his shield, eyes narrowing.

Vanko laughed. "Я собираюсь убить альфа и, затем, я собираюсь уничтожить тебя."

Steve smiled grimly. "The last man who tried that got his spine severed in two," he breathed and then he ran right at Vanko, ducking out of the way of one of the whips before he jumped up and slammed his shield into the suit helmet with full-frontal force.

In the air, Tony was still desperately trying to deal with the drones. He had not been able to count how many there were. Not that it mattered. Any more than one was too many.

"Rhodes! Rhodes, I need to know you're all still locked on me," demanded Tony, scanning the avenues below him. Crowds were stampeding toward the entrances, looking like ants; there were bubbles where the drones that were not flight-capable were stomping down the fairways. The crowds swarmed around them like schools of fish avoiding a shark.

"Yeah, still locked on. Why?"

"Because I'm about to do some really kick-ass maneuvers and I wanna make sure someone sees it."

"Tony, what are you--"

Tony swooped low, running through one of the fountains, hoping that the water would help scramble the drones' navigation systems enough to help him out. He made a beeline for the center sculpture: a hollow metal globe.

"Tony, what are you doing?"

"Going on a world tour," said Tony.

"Tony, you can't- stop- wait- wait, wait, wait!"
Tony urged the suit to go faster, skimming over the surface of the water; he blew through the wrought iron sculpture, clipping an arm on the tip of India. Behind him, he felt the shock waves as several drones slammed into the back of continents, not fast enough to tear through the sculpture after him.

"Rhodey, buddy, you still with me?"

"I'm here, I'm coming up behind you. You lost about six!"

"Sorry, had to thin out the fan club... I'm heading over to the main stage to see if I can find Hammer... he'll know where Vanko is. JARVIS, can I get a status update?"

"I am unable to access the mainframe, sir. Rebooting all systems."

"Good man, Jarv." Tony looked over the Expo, as if he might conveniently had to spot Vanko strolling down the thoroughfare. Only panicking crowds and the occasional rogue drone shooting anti-aircraft artillery at him.

Tony dropped down and sped toward the main stage. It had once been covered by a glass dome so that presentations could be given even in inclement weather, but the glass had long since been broken through by the drones.

Tony tucked his arms in and sped down, dropping with a clank onto the main stage.

He looked up just in time to see four people before something slammed into him, rattling his bones to the very core.

Rhodey.

The split-second pause after landing had given Rhodey enough time to grab him; the weight of the suit slamming into the other, combined with the speed, causing both of them to slide all the way across the stage, through a screen, and down a half-flight of stairs into the table of food Tony had been eyeing less than thirty minutes earlier.

They nearly killed two people. A lone lighting technician, and Jack the omega, who was cowering against the wall.

Tony groaned, flipping up his faceplate, trying to get some idea of where he was. The force of the crash made him want to vomit.

"...reboot complete. The Mark V's system is online again, sir," said JARVIS helpfully into Tony's ear.

Rhodey twisted a little, trying to get up from the wreckage. He flipped his own faceplate up.

"...hi."

"Oh, hi," replied Tony dizzily, climbing to his feet painfully. He looked back toward the main stage. "Did... did you see...?"

"Another suit?"

"...Vanko. It's Vanko."

"Vanko..."

"The guy from Monaco who tried to kill me last week. He's in cahoots with Hammer."
On stage, Steve was reconsidering the decision to fight Vanko. Maybe Steve should have listened to Tony when he told him all of his suits would be stronger than him; one punch from its metal arm sent Steve flying.

He didn't have time to get up; second later, he was rolling out of the way an electric whip and Vanko was laughing like a goddamn madman. Melinda managed to get a shot in; a bullet found its mark on the back of Vanko's hand, and one of his whips flickered, snakes of electricity flickering over it before going out.

Vanko roared in frustration and Steve took the opportunity. He ran at him again with the shield and smacked it across the helmet's face. Then again. Vanko hissed, the sound muffled from the suit, and reached out to catch Steve's jaw. Steve ducked out of the way and rolled back.

A whip curled around his thigh. There was a violent tug; Steve twisted around, raising the shield to bring it down on his bindings, but a metal hand flew out, gripped the shield, and wrenched it from his grip, throwing it aside.

Huh. Not good.

It's almost like Steve wasn't used to fighting modern technology.

Steve caught the first aimed punch but the second hit landed, dazing him. Metal fingers closed around his throat and squeezed. It wasn't enough to kill him but it was enough to make him breathless, make him struggle.

He clawed at the eyes of the helmet, hoping to find a weak spot. But Vanko was having none of it. He slammed Steve's head against his own metal chest. Once. Then twice. The blond's vision swam.

Backstage, Tony took a few unsteady steps. The ankle he had clipped was throbbing, but he ignored it. He let the suit do the work, forcing his body to walk even though, without the suit, he doubted his ability to stand.

His footsteps made a slow, hollow clanking noise as he approached the open area. Several drones stood there, faceless, lifeless. Hammer was there, looking shocking unconcerned with the situation. A second suit was there, the long whips trailing from its arms ominously. A woman he didn't know, looking lithe and dangerous in tactical gear; there was a SHIELD patch on her upper arm.

And- this was what caused Tony's heart to beat, to ache, to scream in his chest- there was Steve, looking remarkably under-dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, his hands scrambling uselessly over Vanko's armor as Vanko held him up like a ragdoll.

"I told you to leave!"

"An omega that doesn't listen. ...like I said. ...a freak," said Justin softly.

Tony whipped around, ready to kill him, but caught something out of the corner of his eye.

He lunged. But not at Hammer.

A moment later he was holding an omega against him. And for the first time since the whole mess had started... Justin actually looked afraid.

"Let him go."
"...call off your drones. You're putting people's lives in danger. It's me you want, isn't it?" demanded Tony, one metal arm wrapping around Jack's neck. "Call them off. Let everyone go."

Justin turned to Vanko in an instant. "You heard him. Let him go. Shut them down."

Vanko laughed. "I quit."

"What?"


"I have your bird!" shouted Justin suddenly.

Now Vanko looked upset.

Everyone else looked confused.

"Okay. Okay, let's... hash this out," said Tony slowly. "I have Jack. You have Steve. Hammer has... a bird, apparently. Let's just agree to get the omegas, civilians, and birds somewhere safe, and then settle this like men. Okay? Deal?"

"So now Stark wants to do honorable thing, act noble? Too late," sneered Vanko.

"*Let him go!*" shrieked Justin again. He actually stamped his foot in anger. Tony had Jack in a chokehold and had no intention of letting him go because it was the only insurance he had, currently. The man's fingers were prying weakly, desperately, against the unyielding metal arm wrapped around him.

Would Tony kill him? He wasn't sure. He didn't feel good about what he was doing, but having Steve here, in danger, was making his moral compass go haywire. He would have done nearly anything, no matter how despicable, to protect the blond. But feeling Jack writhing in his grip wasn't making him feel good about himself. And the smell of fear rolling off of Justin was palpable and upsetting.

The only one who looked unfazed was Vanko. His smell was vicious and Tony was certain he was absolutely crazy. Completely unhinged. So far, the only sign Tony had had that he cared about anything other than revenge was the mention of a bird, which made no sense. If anything, it only further convinced Tony of Vanko's utter madness.

It was a proper Mexican standoff and Tony wasn't sure what to do, if anything he could do would fix things.

Steve was only half-aware of the exchange that was going on. Steve could hear Tony's voice and his heart ached. Fuck, why wouldn't his vision stop spinning? He wasn't getting enough oxygen; he was feeling woozy...

His eyes slipped shut and the memory of Tony pulling his own arc reactor from his chest flitted into his mind. Steve smiled when he made a joke; Tony always made him smile...

*The arc reactor.*

Te blond's eyes flew open and, without hesitation, he plunged his hand into the suit, his fingers fighting to pry the arc reactor from its socket. He'd seen Tony do it, in the shower, the way he found the edges and pressed and twisted; Steve tore the arc reactor out. And it took effort; he felt a nail bend backward, and it made his fingers bleed but Steve was strong and the heart of any beast
or machine was vulnerable. And he could not let Vanko win.

Vanko let out a roar and then promptly threw Steve against the nearest wall, hard.

The reactor was already in his hand; he half-crushed it as Vanko shoved him off, even though it was already too late.

Time slowed to a crawl and Tony watched Steve's body arc through the air, coming to an abrupt stop as it hit a wall. Tony felt like he was being impacted himself; all the air left his lungs; he could have sworn his heart stopped for a moment; he was watching his omega get hurt, maybe even killed, and he couldn't stop it, there was no time...

He was at a crossroads; he could go after Steve, grab him, save him... or he could finish it.

Jack made a small sound in his arms and he mentally swore, because he knew what he had to do, and it wasn't going after Steve. Every fiber in his body was screaming at him to get to his omega, cover him, protect him. But that wouldn't be what Steve wanted. Steve was selfless; Steve would want everyone to be safe, not just them. Steve would want Tony to neutralize the threat.

And so that's the choice Tony made, even though it killed him to turn away from Steve at that moment, to ignore the lifeless, crumpled body on the ground and turn his attention toward Vanko.

Tony shoved Jack away; Hammer darted after him. Tony hit his hand jets and half-flew over to Vanko, slamming into him with the force of a car trying to run a red light and slamming into another vehicle. The two hit the ground and slid, the loud shriek of shearing metal making Tony's teeth itch.

Something hard and heavy, rope-like, wrapped around his body and the screen in front of his face scrambled almost immediately.

"Goddammit it, Miracle Whip!" shouted Tony, landing a punch on Vanko's jaw.

Vanko was writhing beneath him; his arc reactor was nearly dead, and without an external power source, the suit was too heavy for him to control, but one of the whips was wrapped around him like an electrified anaconda and it was scrambling nearly every single of one Tony's systems.

A shoulder flare went off and burst next to Tony's right ear, leaving it with a loud, insistent ringing that drowned out all other sounds.

"You lose, Stark." Tony saw the words mouthed at him, even though he couldn't hear them.

He twisted under the heavy, electrified whip, trying to get it off him; he managed to find one end of it and yanked it clean off of Vanko's arm. He hoped he dislocated the bastard's shoulder in the process.

"инициировать самоуничтожение!" yelled Vanko. Even if Tony was capable of making out words, it wouldn't have mattered. He didn't speak Russian.

"Shut up. Get this thing off me- you lose. This is it. It's over-" griped Tony, managing to rip the whip off of him and get up. Vanko was lying on the ground, chest sparking, and the drones around them were lifeless, their chests blinking red- on stand-by, maybe? He let out a shaky sigh and turned.

Justin and Jack had disappeared.
"Fucking figures, thought Tony darkly. "...Steve?!" he called, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice.

The SHIELD agent, the woman, appeared in Tony's field of vision. Her mouth was moving, but Tony could only hear ringing. Whatever she was saying was clearly important; her expression was stern, sharp, his gestures almost frantic.

"Steve?!" repeated Tony. Now that the drones weren't attacking them and Vanko wasn't moving, Tony could only think of the blond, remember how his body, his fleshy, organic, and very mortal body, had been tossed by Vanko, tossed and slammed into a wall, and panic was rising in him.

The woman was tugging on his arm but Tony couldn't feel it and he began walking, ignoring the throb of his injured ankle, not realizing she was pulling him. The suit clanked and whirred, its gears doing the work for Tony's muscles, his own strength and agility because artificially enhanced by the technology, and, in the case of his bad ankle, replaced entirely.

He was still deaf but that didn't matter. The threat was over.

Rhodey was yelling into the headset, too, but Tony wasn't aware of it. The HUD display was off because Vanko's whips had taken down the interface, overloaded it. Didn't matter. Fight was over. Tony had to find Steve. Make sure he was okay. That was all that mattered.

Then he could chase down Hammer, maybe. Had to find Pepper, too.

He felt like he was sleep-walking. Maybe he was in shock.

Again, the woman appeared in his field of vision, her mouth still moving wordlessly; Tony shoved her aside. "STEVE!" Why was he yelling? If Steve was responding, he wouldn't have known, anyway. The ringing was high and tinny and sharp; Tony's mouth was filled with blood; his mind was full of static, a combination of panic and shock. His only coherent thought was finding Steve.

When they got to Steve, Pepper and Happy were knelt down beside him. Happy was speaking into a phone, calling for help, probably, while Pepper had a hand on Steve's chest, the other keeping his head propped against her knee. There was a small cut on Steve's temple that looked worse than it was. And there was a few other cuts and bruises here and there. One of his shoulders looked at a bad angle- it was probably dislocated when it hit the wall.

"Tony! Over here!" Pepper beckoned him over but Agent May was shaking her head.

"He's either too besotted or he literally can't hear me," she said and moved over. May stared down at Steve, her face twitching for a moment. "Will he be alright?" she asked quietly.

"I think so," Happy hummed.

"I'm sorry," Pepper frowned. "Have we met?"

"No. I'm one of the agents who followed them here to make sure something like this didn't happen."

"Follow them? I beg your pardon?" demanded Pepper.

But Agent May had already stepped back as Tony barged past in his suit to Steve.

Steve was on the ground. Steve wasn't moving. Steve was dead.
Tony felt fear like he'd never felt before coil in his gut. Suddenly, he was back in Afghanistan, waking up to discover a bandage around his chest, wires trailing away from it, that he'd woken up to some sort of horror movie, that he was in hell-

Steve sat bolt upright.

Steve abruptly sat up and Pepper yelled in surprise.

"Oh my God! Steve! Be careful; lay back down; you're-"

Steve then reached up, put a hand on his shoulder and winced as he pushed it back. A horrible clicking sound filled the room and everyone who could hear it recoiled.

The arm that had been out of place no longer looked out of place.

In the suit, Tony knelt by Steve; Steve reached up to put his hand on Tony's cheek. "I'm okay," he promised him. "Honestly." Sure there was some glass in his hand and two burns on his legs- but it was nothing major. Nothing Steve hadn't dealt with before.

Tony's breath hitched. He could have cried with relief but he was too in shock. He was kneeling by Steve, the ringing sharp and painful in his ears, watching Steve move his arm with a wincing expression. Steve touched his cheek. His mouth was moving; his brow was furrowed and whatever he was saying looked sincere.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Steve," said Tony, too loudly. "I wanted to go to you but I had to take him out I thought- I thought that's what you would want. I'm sorry, oh, fuck, your hand-" Steve's hand was bleeding; it was bleeding all over Tony's cheek. Tony couldn't handle this, seeing his omega's bright crimson blood, smelling its warm, coppery scent; he was moments away from a full-blown panic attack. They were supposed to be honeymooning and instead he'd nearly gotten his omega killed. He was a terrible Alpha, a terrible mate, a terrible human being. He'd dragged Steve here, it was his fault, and Vanko--

Tony turned. Vanko was lying, unmoving, on the ground. The drones were standing there, silent, their arc reactors still shining, and Tony realized something suddenly. Vanko had gone down too easily. And the words he'd mouthed: You lose, Stark. There was something very, very ominous about that.

Tony turned back. "We gotta evacuate. Now. Right now." He grabbed Steve. Could Steve walk? He wasn't going to wait to find out. He tossed Steve over his shoulder like he weighed no more than a sack of flour. "Rhodey, grab Pepper. Happy, move, now. Clear the Expo, it's not safe. Vanko wouldn't give up this easily- can you hear me?"

He was shouting to be heard over the ringing. They could hear him just fine, of course. Tony didn't wait to confirm this, however; he was giving Happy a shove toward the exit. If he was being paranoid, he didn't care; he needed to take Steve to the hospital, needed to make sure he was okay, because he would lose it if Steve was hurt, and he couldn't tell how much of the blood he was seeing was Steve's or his own or someone else's, but the sight of it was like a bright red warning sign that he needed to act, now.

"We called an ambulance," Happy said awkwardly.

"Tony, stop, you're not supposed to move him--"

"Tony, wait," protested Rhodey, his own suit limping brokenly behind Tony's.
"Let me down, Tony!" demanded Steve, who was not thrilled with being carried.

Agent May had disappeared briefly and returned with the shield. She offered Steve a small smile, one reserved only for friends, holding up the shield as she jogged after them.

"Nice shield. What is it?" asked Steve, draped over Tony's shoulder.

"Adamantium-steel alloy," she said. "..better or worse than the vibranium one?"

"It got the job done," said Steve with a shrug and a wince.

"Don't worry, Steve, I'm gonna get you to the hospital!" shouted Tony, oblivious to the conversations going on around him.

"Tony, calm down, please. Stop shouting. I'm fine. Oh my God..." This wasn't comfortable. But Tony still couldn't hear him. "He's not going to put me down anytime soon, is he?" He sighed.

"Nope," Agent May said and walked behind Tony so Steve could see her face as they headed to the exit. Pepper went out first, slipping through the gap in the pillars Steve had made earlier. "You do need to go to the hospital, though, for the record."

"Melinda, I'm-"

"The serum can't pick glass out of your hand Steve," she pointed out. "Besides," she gestured to Tony in his suit. "you might not have much of a choice in the matter. Also never try and fight a war machine in jeans again."

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, wincing a little as Tony was rushing down the steps of the Expo, jostling him. His grip was firm but cold on Steve's legs.

Melinda's expression softened a fraction. "You don't need to worry about me, Rogers." Her tone was affectionate. She held his shield out to him. "Catch you later folks," she breathed in a simple goodbye and winked at Pepper before she pulled away to an ominous looking black car on the curve. Normally she would have stayed with Steve until the hospital, but he had Tony now and she had no doubts he would be looked after.

"You're really not supposed to move him! He could have a neck injury," Pepper insisted. "Tony. Tony? Can you hear us yet?"

Tony ignored her, leading them toward the front of the Expo; firetrucks, ambulances, and police cars had all arrived, even a SWAT vehicle, and the merry fair-goers had dispersed to a safe distance, clearly terrified of the drones.

"Let me down!" repeated Steve, giving the suit a punch that left his knuckles numb.

Tony felt a whack on his shoulder, the suit vibrating around him; he set Steve down on the front steps of the Expo, but kept his hands on the other man's shoulders, as if terrified he might fall into pieces if Tony weren't holding him.

"Tony, everything is fi-" began Pepper.

There was a loud explosion behind them.

Tony picked Steve back up, scooping him into his arms. "Meet you at the hospital!" he said, and hit the jets before Steve could protest to being carried.
The fact that the Expo was destroyed, both physically and in reputation, didn't bother Tony in the slightest. As he soared upward and it faded below him, he could see the drones starting to go off, but it didn't matter to him what Vanko did anymore, because the battle was over and won and everyone had been evacuated, at least as far as Tony knew. He would have traded a hundred Expos for Steve's well-being; he couldn't shake the guilt, knowing that any injuries Steve had were entirely his fault, that he'd brought them here and Vanko had been after him. He didn't care if Vanko was alive or dead, didn't care that Hammer had slithered off, and didn't care that tomorrow, the massive attack was probably going to be heavily reported on. He only cared about Steve. He was second-guessing himself, wondering if, in the moment Vanko had thrown Steve, he should have gone to Steve after all instead of Vanko, if he'd chosen incorrectly.

All he could do now was make sure the omega got to be somewhere safe, that he was taken care of. For once in his life Tony wasn't feeling selfish, not at all; the idea of Steve being injured was too intense.

He flew to the nearest hospital and nearly hit the glass panes in front of the ER when he landed, coming in too fast.

"Steve. Steve, it's gonna be okay," he said. There was blood on Steve's face and Tony could feel himself shaking inside the suit, literally shivering. The blood was his, from the cut on his lip, but he wasn't thinking clearly; the mere picture of Steve with blood was terrifying, the worst thing ever; he stomped into the ER in the suit, clutching Steve like a ragdoll.

Heads turned, curious, eyes widening with recognition. A television mounted in the corner was tuned to a local news station, where there was a breaking story about a terrorist attack on the Stark Expo.

"Help," demanded Tony, unable to formulate any better words.

The intake nurse looked up and blinked. She reached for the phone. "Dr. Wolfe, I need you to the front, now. Iron Man is here. He's bleeding all over my counter."

"What- no! Steve! Help Steve!" protested Tony.

"He's in shock," reported the nurse into the phone.

"I'm not in shock!" Tony was definitely in shock but he wouldn't have cared if he was missing limbs. He wanted, needed, Steve to be okay. The ringing in his ears was still there, still obnoxiously loud, but Tony could hear enough to tell that they thought he was the one that needed treatment and it was infuriating because he was motherfucking Iron Man and his omega was bleeding and clearly they weren't doing their goddamn jobs correctly because it was clear to Tony that Steve should be a top priority, considering the burns and the handful of glass and the bruise forming on his jaw and the bruise forming on his temple.

What have I done? thought Tony. He felt the same horrified feeling of guilt when he learned his missiles were being sold to terrorists and targeting civilians, but this was worse, so much worse; if he hadn't been in the suit, he was sure he would have collapse onto the ground. His legs felt weak and the only reason he was maintaining his composure was because Steve needed him to. He had to make sure Steve was safe.

Doctor Kate McCloud really hadn't been having a good day. Being an ER doctor was stressful enough as it was. It didn't help that her ex was trying to get full custody in their divorce settlement, that his new girlfriend was now pregnant and that that morning, Kate's boiler had broken down and
she'd had to take a cold shower. That night she'd already amputated a man's mangled leg from a car crash and had a 80-year-old die on her after a second heart attack. So, Kate wasn't in a particularly good mood as it was. She was obviously too busy to have been paying attention to the news and hadn't really been keeping up with the whole Captain America drama anyway. She was an omega who'd married another omega- she'd done the whole "defying stereotypes" shit in her twenties. Now, she was focused on saving lives.

"Kate?" It was Sandra from the front desk. She was speaking over the telecom. "We need you out here."

"I'm just cleaning up!" she called back, sounding tetchy as she was washing the blood from her hands.

"Kate...you should really get here now. We need an O doc and you're the only one on call right now."

"Can you not wait five goddamn seconds?!"

"Er...not really."  

Kate groaned loudly.

When she got to the lobby outside it was to chaos. Two nurses were trying to pry Steve out of Tony's arms but Tony was having none of it. Steve was trying to placate him best he could, explaining that he had to let him go- Kate sighed and balled her hands up into her fists by her sides.

Tony had the presence of mind not to lay down on Steve, but he couldn't bear to let him go. He remained clutching Steve to him, oblivious to nurse's pleas that he needed to let go.

Kate marched up to them. She didn't give a shit if she was treating Captain America or the goddamn queen of England. Kate was already done. It had been a shit day.

"If you want me to treat him, then you then let them put him in a bed," Kate stated, tone unwavering as she stared into Tony's face. It looked oddly small in the helmet; the faceplate was off and it was strange to see the bruised human face behind the Iron Man. "Get out of that god-awful tin box and put it somewhere safe and then you get your face fixed up. I can't treat him in your arms, and right now he's looking a little worse for wear."

"Hey-"protested Steve meekly. He didn't exactly like being clung to but he also didn't need anyone talking for him; he'd been trying to convince Tony to let him go for several minutes already.

She gave Steve an unapologetic look.

Kate crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes at Tony. "Drop the omega and let me do my work or I swear to God, Tony Stark, I will make you do it."

The voice that snapped him out of it was authoritative. Tony's eyes snapped up and he met a pair of green ones. It was Pepper. Pepper in omega form. Pepper in a white doctor's coat.

He let go of Steve, slowly. "You're an omega," he blurted.

Dr. McCloud got that a lot. There was no malice in Tony's voice, just surprise; it was an unusual position for an omega to hold.

"...this isn't a tin box," he added, feeling acutely offended. Everyone in the lobby was eagerly
taking pictures with their cellphones, despite their various maladies, and security had been called to shoo a crowd from the doors. Calls from the Expo were pouring in and the combination of a sudden influx of patients along with Iron Man in the ER lobby was causing the hospital to fall into chaos. Dr. McCloud had every right to be furious. But in Tony's mind, insulting the suit was a bit much.

Besides, he *couldn't* take it off. Not without the gantry, which was back at the Expo. The Mark VI was not self-assembling.

Tony's brain was already trying to do the math. They were at Northwell, which was in Rego Park, and he'd seen Queens Boulevard just a few blocks away. They were probably only two miles from the Expo. But once the suit was off, he would have to get back to the hospital, and traffic was a mess and he couldn't just leave Steve here.

"Please. He's my mate. I gotta stay with him. He needs me," pleaded Tony. Even though he'd let go of Steve, he was still hovering so close that the nurses were having difficulty irrigating Steve's hand. The suit was bulky and unyielding but Tony felt like it was literally holding him together.

He knew it was dirty and damaged but without it he couldn't protect Steve and even though Steve had been protesting the entire time Tony had been clinging to him, Tony was half-convinced he was on death's door. "*Please*, please help, he's bleeding. He's my mate. Please," Tony was babbling. This was the first proper doctor he'd seen (he didn't trust nurses to be good enough for Steve) and on top of that, she was an omega, which made Tony feel inexplicably safer, as if her status made her more likely to understand just how important Steve was. (Tony had already gotten into several fights with triage because he couldn't understand why everyone was acting like Steve's injuries weren't taking first priority.)

"Just stay out of the way," Kate huffed as they were ushered into another room, one of the nurses helping Steve walk. Another nurse blocked off the cameras that tried to follow, shutting the door behind them and locking it.

Steve let out a sigh of relief as he moved to sit on the hospital bed. "Tony needs looking at too," he protested and winced as the doctor poked at his shoulder which was bruising beautifully underneath his shirt. "I dislocated it against the wall," he told her, "but then I clicked it back."

"I don't know how doctors worked in the forties, but you usually leave that to *them*," Doctor McCloud said, sounding agitated as she promptly pulled Steve's shirt overhead. His torso had a few bruises from the suit, pink and purple in places from where Vanko's suit had got a hit in. "Right. Trousers off. And you- stay calm."

She pointed firmly at Tony, knowing he wasn't going to be happy about the nurse helping Steve get his pants off. There was two thin pink marks on either leg, his left ankle and right thigh. They didn't look as bad as they should have, really; the denim had absorbed a lot of the heat. But they still weren't great.

"I want this washed, salved, and bandaged up," Kate announced. "And then the cut on his temple needs some tape. And someone clean up Mr. Stark, please. He's covered in blood and I need to know how much is his own."

Kate started prodding Steve's ribs, he winced. "And we have... I'm guessing four broken ribs. You were thrown against a wall huh? By one of those?" She nodded to Tony and his suit.

"Yep."

"Well," the doctor cleared her throat. "You should be dead."
Tony let out an inhuman whine at Dr. McCloud's proclamation of Steve's possible mortality; the doctor's pointing at the suit made him feel even worse. It was his fault Steve was hurt.

One of the nurses was attempting to get through to him, to dab at his face, but Tony was too agitated to hold still; he was pacing desperately, footsteps ridiculously heavy as they clanked up and down the floor.

"He's gonna be okay, right? Four ribs? Did you say broken? Is he going to be okay? He's definitely okay, though, right? Please, make him be okay. Fix him, please, he's my mate--"

The door slammed open and a young woman strode in. She was wearing black pants and a crisp white shirt with a shoulder-holster. She flashed a badge at one of the protesting nurses. Her hair was tied back in a non-nonsense bun and her eyes flashed a sharp, intelligent blue. "Agent Maria Hill," she snapped at the nurse. "Rogers, what the hell? You were supposed to be honeymooning!"

Tony nearly knocked her over in his pacing; she darted out of the way just in time. "What happened out there? We've already mobilized. Do you have any idea how- excuse me!" she barked as Tony nearly knocked into her again. "Take off that suit; that thing is enormous. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Can't you see Steve needs help?" Tony shrieked frantically. "He's got broken ribs!"

"Tony! Please, just-" Steve put his face in his hands and exhaled slowly, his shoulders tense as hell. The pain wasn't so awful. Really... his adrenaline rush was dying down though and soon it was going to start to hurt to breathe, a lot. But while broken ribs could take weeks or even months to heal (for normal people), for Steve they took no more than one or two weeks.

"None of them appear to have punctured anything vital. You're very lucky, Captain," the doctor informed him.

Tony let out a weak groan of relief.

"But we'll still need X-rays and an MRI. Which you can't be there for."

Tony protested loudly. "Why not?!"

"Because you have several pounds of metal in your chest!"

"It's nonferrous! ...I think! It's actually a new element I just made up like a week ago. Steve...!"

"Stark. No one's treating Steve until you take the suit off," snarled Maria.

Tony's face blanched and he tore out of the room like it was on fire. Maria turned back to Steve. "I'm going to need a statement- this is a PR disaster. Fury is on the phone right now with the Department of Defense and we're about two minutes away from a federal indictment. What the hell happened, Rogers?"

He lifted his head up to look over at Agent Hill whilst a nurse moved over to clean up his face and doctor McCloud maneuvered his left leg so she could start to put salve on the burn on his thigh. It was awkward, considering the burn went the whole way around, but Kate didn't seem phased in the slightest.

Maria Hill was a fierce beta. Steve didn't know her all that well but he knew it was dangerous to underestimate her. And right now she didn't look so happy. Steve sighed. "I'm pretty sure that Justin Hammer teamed up with Ivan Vanko- the guy from the racetrack. He must have helped him
fake his own death too." He pressed his lips together in a thin line. "They had these 'bots...they were attacking people, and Tony. And James Rhodes' suit appeared to be out of his control. Vanko had a suit of his own- which is how I got thrown against a wall. We thought we had him beat but then his suit was set to self-destruct and destroyed the entire building."

Steve let out a long breath. "Hammer and his mate, Jack, disappeared. I don't know where to. I don't know is there were civilian casualties but people definitely got hurt. Could you get Rhodey, actually? Tony needs someone to calm him down and I don't think I'm the one who's gonna be able to do it."

"Until you've had your scans you're not going anywhere," the doctor hummed as she moved onto the burn on the other leg and lower down. They already felt better from the salve. The gel felt soothing his heated skin, some of it starting to blister. "These might scar," Kate warned him.

"I don't scar easily," Steve whispered and watched her work, her movements diligent and efficient.

Outside, Tony was able to get to the Expo in less than a minute, land, and have the suit taken off. (More like "pried off." It had taken a few hits that had left components badly damaged; the gantry had struggled to remove the components, some of which were crumpled into each other.)

The moment the suit was off Tony practically threw himself off the stage, landing hard onto the glass-and-concrete rubble of the abandoned promenade. His brain was whirling with math: at six miles an hour (a light jog) he could get back to the hospital in twenty minutes, and if he ran, he could be there in less than fifteen.

The problem was the crowds of people, including media and police. Tony hadn't even left Corona Park before he was stopped by several members of a SWAT team.

"I gotta get to the hospital. My mate- I'm Tony fucking Stark! Move!" he pleaded with them.

For once, his status was becoming a liability. He was on the verge of getting cuffed when a woman shouldered her way in a flashed a badge. "SHELID, Agent Simmons, I'll take him from here."

"I swear, I had nothing to do with this for once. Ivan Vanko was working with Justin Hammer. I was just here to schmooze." Tony said frantically. "Steve is at Northwell Hospital, I gotta get to Northwell; he's all broken up. Vanko threw him against a wall."

"Slow down," protested Agent Simmons. She and Tony got into an unmarked car; she slapped a siren on the roof. "How bad is he?"

"Really bad!"

"Is your ankle broken?"

"Huh?" Tony looked down. He had forgotten all about that; he'd been hobbling along without noticing, practically dragging his leg behind him, but now that she'd pointed it out, he realized it wasn't really weight-bearing and limping two miles on it wasn't his best idea. "No, it's fine. Just take me back to Northwell!"

Agent Simmons complied, and the two of them burst into the ER examination room just as Dr. McCloud was holding an X-ray up to the light.

They'd patched up Steve's hand, removed the glass and wrapped bandages around it. Steve was all cleaned up and then moved into an MRI and then an X-ray. If Doctor McCloud noticed the extra
scar tissue on his neck she didn't mention it. They'd given him new hospital clothes. They were white and awkward-fitting but it was better than nothing.

Agent Simmons looked at Steve in surprise. She'd assumed he was in critical condition from the way Tony was acting, but Steve looked fine.

Tony limped up to him and sat beside him, pressing their shoulders together, shivering. One of the nurses wrapped a blanket around him and began trying to clean the cut on his lip. Tony didn't take his eyes off Steve; he groped for Steve's hand, found it, and clung to him.


Bucky would have been a better Alpha than him. They'd been mated only days and already Steve was in danger because of him. Tony's guilt was pushing him over the edge; he wasn't equipped, emotionally, to handle these kinds of feelings.

Steve was relieved when Tony appeared again but he also frowned when he realised he was limping. They were cleaning up Tony's face but it was obvious he wasn't putting any weight on one of his legs. "Tony." Steve curled an arm around him and squeezed a little and held onto Tony's hand with his other arm. "You need to let them look at your foot."

"It's at least sprained," Doctor McCloud hummed and knelt down to look at it. She then grabbed some scissors to cut the bottom off of his jeans before pulling off his shoe. She didn't expect Tony to be prepared to move away from his mate again just yet. "I need this X-rayed. For now I want it bandaged with a splint," she told the nurse who was finishing up Tony's face.

Steve turned and pressed a kiss to the top of Tony's head. "This isn't your fault. You know that, right?" he whispered.

Tony closed his eyes at the feeling of Steve's kiss. He was furious at himself but no words could communicate the feeling of watching his omega being injured in front of him, so he opted to say nothing. He was wincing automatically as they moved his injured ankle but his primary focus was on Steve and Steve alone.

"You might want to put two or three stitches on this," said the nurse working on Tony's lip.

"I'm in such deep shit, my eyes are brown," said Tony, feeling miserable. Hopefully, Pepper was calling his lawyers; hopefully, SHIELD would be merciful (fat chance); hopefully-

The door flew open and Rhodes strode in.

"Who is letting all these people in? demanded Dr. McCloud irritably.

"Tony. I just got off the phone with the Secretary of Defense. We apprehended Hammer," announced Rhody.

"Vanko?" demanded Tony.

"We found most of him. The suits self-destructed. Four confirmed causalities, about three dozen injuries. ...you okay, Tony?"

Tony let out a groan, drawing a shaky hand over his face. "My Expo..."

"Don't beat yourself up over this, Tony. We've got Hammer in custody and no one's blaming you
"I'm going to recommend both of you stay here overnight for observation," said Dr. McCloud, scribbling notes to herself in a folder marked with Steve's name. It was strange to see his birthday displayed on the plastic hospital wristband he was wearing; Tony stared down at it. July 4th, 1918. It occurred to Tony that his birthday was only a few weeks away. He'd be turning 93.

"I have to stay with Steve," said Tony, still clinging to Steve uninjured hand. "He's my mate. Rhodey-"

"Yeah, I know," said Rhodes, patting Tony's shoulder. "He's okay, Tony. What did you do to your foot?"

Tony barely glanced down at it "I hit a building. It's fine, the suit took most of the impact. I need Pepper; she's got all the contact info for my legal team-"

"Tony, I got this. I'm still the liaison for Stark Industries. And SHIELD is handling Steve. You need to take it easy."

Take it easy? How the hell could he take it easy? Steve's injuries, those four casualties: it was all his fault. But he nodded because he doubted anyone would listen. Somehow, it was making him feel worse that everyone was being so nice to him. He wanted someone to get angry and yell at him, confirm his guilt for him, validate his feelings of remorse. He felt like Steve was too good for him but he couldn't let go of the omega. He **had** to protect Steve, just like that time outside the movie theater when he'd taken on that guy twice as big as-

Tony blinked. He'd had a flash of memory but he was positive he'd never been to the movies with Steve, nor even seen Steve in a street fight. Also, how the hell could Steve pick a fight with someone twice his size? *No one* was twice his size. Steve was huge and the idea of a regular person kicking his ass in a back alley was ludicrous.

Maybe he had a concussion.

"I think- I think maybe I hit my head," he informed the doctor, feeling uneasy. The knowledge of Steve being in harm's way, being in danger, was shaking him to the core, but he knew for a fact that he'd never seen Steve in any actual danger until tonight, unless you counted SHIELD's artificial simulation. The sudden pangs of rage and horror, and the desire to protect, had flared up unexpectedly and with it, memories that felt strange and out of place, like an old movie Tony had watched long ago while he was half-asleep. "Am I gonna lose any IQ points? ...am I gonna be a regular genius instead of a super-genius?" asked Tony.

"You'll still be a super-narcissist," said Rhodes comfortably.

The rest of the day mostly involved them fussing over Tony. They took an x-ray of his foot, with Steve on stand-by, and then fixed it up properly. It had been a very bad sprain but fortunately hadn't needed a plaster cast. They put a brace on it to help it stay in place while it healed and gave Tony crutches which they **insisted** he'd use.

In between speaking with doctors, they spoke to government agents, giving statements, groggily trying to recount what had happened to the best of their ability. SHIELD and CIA and NSA agents wandered in and out, much to the chagrin of the nurses, who demanded they leave their patients alone. They were ignored; Tony and Steve were giving statements until well past midnight, until, finally, one of the SHIELD agents decided they needed at least a few hours of rest, and shooed off
all of the other agencies who wanted a statement.

That night they were given their own private room. Both Steve and Tony were sore but still insisted on curling up together in one bed, Steve's head tucked under Tony's chin on his chest. The day had been chaos and death and a battle. It felt so strange for it to suddenly be quiet. Steve just listened to Tony's heart beat. It was a comforting sound. He'd been scared he was going to lose him. His Alpha, his everything...Steve didn't know what he'd do. He swallowed.

The room was dark. The sound of the fan consistently beat from the ceiling and light from the streets outside filtered in through the open window. It was warm but Steve didn't care, even with the bad hospital air conditioning.

Both he and Tony had concussions; a throbbing headache had developed behind Steve's eyes and he was desperate for sleep.

"I love you," Steve murmured into the silence. "And I'm proud of you. I know you don't believe it... I can feel you don't. But you did the best you could do and no one ask anymore of you than that."

"...I'm supposed to protect you," murmured Tony back into the dark quiet of the room. "Trying isn't good enough, Steve. Today, I put you in danger. Steve, you're my whole world. When I bit you, it meant something. I'm supposed to be a better Alpha than this." He cuddled into Steve's body. Steve's face was in his chest and Tony's arms were wrapped around Steve's body, and he was all too aware that Steve was bigger, his body solid.

"You did protect me. You literally beat Vanko down and then saved me from an explosion and then flew me to goddamn hospital, Tony," Steve protested with a soft sigh. "You didn't do nothing. You were there and you did the right thing. And you look good in that suit too," he breathed and traced the rim of the arc reactor with his fingertips. "I didn't realise they could fly so fast. I shoulda realised how strong they were. You literally told me yesterday..."

Tony nosed Steve's hair, kissed the top of his head. He knew Steve had already forgiven him but Tony didn't ask for that forgiveness because he didn't deserve it.

"...you looked good out there, too," said Tony softly. "...I forget how strong you are. All the time." He sighed a little.

His mind flipped back to being flung into the wall, his vision going black.

"It didn't matter how strong I am. He was always going to one-up me in that thing. At least now I know not to fight a weaponized robot suit in my jeans," he joked gently and then exhaled. "I'm just...I'm glad you're okay," Steve murmured. "I was so scared."

"I'm always okay," said Tony dismissively, kissing the top of Steve's head again. "They call the suits invincible, you know." He reached up to stroke Steve's hair, his fingers playing lightly over the scar on the back of Steve's neck.

How was the media going to cover this? Their announcement was supposed to be joyous but it would no doubt be completely overshadowed by the attack. Steve was so wholesome, so noble; Tony felt terrible for dragging him into this. Tony was used to be shit on by publications, especially liberal ones. He was aware that as an ex-weapons designer and tech mogul and part of the "1%," he was an easy target. But Steve didn't deserve that. Now that they were bonded. Their actions spoke not only for themselves, but for each other.
Tony was worried SHIELD wouldn't want him now, not after this fiasco. So far he'd mostly caused them trouble. In the past he would have enjoyed stirring things up, but bonding had caused him to leap about ten years forward in maturity. It wasn't just his own life he was toying with anymore. Steve was a part of it and Steve was a part of SHIELD and Tony had a vested interested in at least partially behaving himself.

"...your birthday's coming up," said Tony quietly, playing with Steve's hospital band gently, still holding Steve to him. "Not to make things even weirder, but you know, biologically, you're half my age, young enough to be my son, but technically, you're also old enough to be my dad? ...what the hell am I supposed to get you?"

"Don't say it like that," Steve groaned and huffed out a soft laugh. "Makes it feel weird." He thought quietly about his birthday. Before they'd never had enough money to do anything really. Bucky would get pizza from the local Italian, a few of their friends would come over and they'd drink cheap whiskey till they passed out on the sofa. That's what they did for birthdays. They never really had the option to do much else. Apart from that time Bucky took him to Coney Island, that had been perfect. But they'd never done presents beyond practical things like clothes, or maybe sketchpads and pencils. It was just too expensive.

"Something that will surprise me?" Steve suggested with a soft smile and pushed himself up onto his elbow so he could see Tony's face. "I don't know. I've never really done presents. I'm not very materialistic. I'd rather have a home-cooked meal than something flashy." It felt funny to say it, but it was true.

Steve leaned down and nipped at Tony's jaw softly, an intimate gesture. "Is it...is it weird if kinda like your age?" he asked in a murmur. "That you're...you know." He blushed a little. "Experienced."

"Experienced?" repeated Tony with a small grin. "You mean old? ...I'm glad you don't mind." He touched Steve's jaw back, the only sound in the room the faint buzz of the air conditioning. "...to be honest, though, I can't say I know very much about omegas."

"Hm. I don't know as much as I should and I'm one of them," Steve pointed out as they settled back down. "I've never been taught about it either. All I know is to warn you that the first heat will be messy... and not in a fun way. I think they stop being sexy after about a day and just become pretty painful. Clint doesn't speak highly of them."

"Suppressants?" suggested Tony.

"Nothing's strong enough for me. 'Cause of the serum. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," said Tony. "I... wanna do right by you, Steve. So far I feel like... like I keep fucking up, big time. Don't get me wrong, I'm known for fucking things up, making things difficult- you can ask Pepper, but... but this is pretty large-scale, even by Stark standards. I've been attacked twice in a week. Hell. You were probably safer before we bonded." He ran his fingers over Steve's lips. "How do you think Natasha keeps from going crazy, with her omega running around getting shot at all the time?" he wondered. He rolled onto his back, pulling Steve onto his chest. He stared at the ceiling. "Yoga? Valium? Big bag of weed? I can't see her hitting a bong but, seriously, how does any Alpha stand this?"

"I think for Nat and Clint it's different. Like I said, all they know is the work. The fight. Natasha probably kills a few men a week, I imagine that helps her deal with a lot of stress. Their protectiveness makes them stronger, honestly. It means they'll always be there for each other when it counts. It means they understand each other better than anyone else. Every strength comes with a
weakness, but I think the former outweighs the latter.

"You have no idea what it's like on my end, Steve, how much it hurts to think that you're in danger, how guilty I feel. I keep trying to remind myself that this is what you want, but... but when I smell you, my brain goes haywire. It's like putting a fork into a toaster, you know? I just want to lose it."

He sighed a little.

This, he understood, was why so many Alphas on the news were saying no one would want to bond to Steve, why they were saying he was practically feral. An omega with Steve's level of independence was difficult to be bonded to. Tony had probably aged more since mating Steve than he had in the five years previously. The stress was killing him.

"For the record, I feel safer with you. Before you, I felt lost; I hated it here, in this century. With you...it feels like home. Like I was supposed to be here. Like all the shit I went through to get here was actually worth it."

"...it gets better, right? Everyone says after a few weeks it gets better," Tony murmured, pulling Steve's bandaged hand up to the arc reactor and laying his own hand over it.

Steve smiled faintly as Tony's fingers curled over his own. "It'll get better," he whispered. "I promise next time I'll be in amour...not in jeans. I'm usually better than that." Steve nuzzled against Tony's neck with a hum. "And I don't just mean you were old...I mean that I like that you know what you're doing. Or at least, know what you're doing most of the time," he teased softly.

"Well, I act like I do, and that's almost as good," said Tony back, kissing Steve's temple.

Steve's talk of heats unnerved him. He remembered Steve's last one- how desperately Tony had wanted him. Steve's smell had been like a drug and Tony had been out of control with desire; he'd been so finely tuned to it, able to smell Steve's sweat and the slickness between his thighs and he'd been willing to do nearly anything to have him.

He wanted to ask questions because that was the closest he'd ever been to an omega in heat. Jarvis's heats were always spent locked away in Tony's father's study and he never heard a peep from the guy; he'd return within a few days looking like he just got over a terrible flu; exhausted-looking, a little slower than normal. Tony had once poked his nose into the study the next day as a teenager, curious. The place had reeked with desire and Tony was ashamed to feel a lot of very confusing, lustful feelings. The only other thing he remembered was that the place had been a total mess and that he'd wondered how Howard would react. He never found out. He knew a lot of omegas engaged in "nesting" behavior. He couldn't imagine people like Clint or Coulson tearing apart a room to create a trash-lined mating nest but then again, he had always viewed Jarvis as completely unflappable, up until seeing the state of Howard's study when he was fourteen.

During Steve's heat, Steve had been too preoccupied with Tony to do anything too destructive. Although he had nearly broken down a door on the plane- something that Tony was pretty sure still needed fixed.

"...I thought omegas synced up," said Tony suddenly. "...is... is that a thing? Do you and Coulson and Barton...?"

He wasn't sure if it was rude to ask. The idea of a mixed-status team with a bunch of synced-up omegas sounded like a terrible idea to him, but SHIELD seemed to take pride in being diverse. Their director was black, their assistant director female, and half their agents were omegas. Tony wouldn't have been at all surprised if the next recruit was a wheelchair-bound Asian. They looked like an equality poster on display at a public library, reminding people that people were people, regardless of race, gender, creed, status, or sexual orientation. It was sweet in kind of annoying, preachy way.
He wondered if they were allowed to make jokes about Clint making nests. The guy's name was Hawkguy, for crying out loud. He wondered if they were allowed to make Alpha-omega jokes at all. He probably should have checked how offensive and sarcastic he was allowed to be before demanding to join. Assuming they even let him join now, after the whole fiasco at the Expo.

"I think we will eventually," Steve murmured. "But we haven't spent enough time together yet. Besides, my cycles are all messed up. I barely had them before. I guess we'll work this out together," he said and nudged his nose against the other's jaw line. Steve let his eyes slip shut again and breathed in the comforting scent of his Alpha. Safe and with him and all around him. It was like they were in a bubble. A safe, impenetrable bubble. "We have another five or six months at least until we have to deal with it," Steve assured him and shifted a little, getting comfortable but making sure he didn't nudge Tony's sprained ankle. Steve could feel sleep tugging at his bones.

"...Steve. You're a lot bigger than me," said Tony. There was a slight sense of embarrassment, knowing his own omega could easily hurt him, but there'd never been an omega like Steve before.

"I'm not going to attack you, Tony," Steve said, sounding amused. "When you're in heat, you feel... frustrated. It's like a junkie not getting their fix; it drives you crazy. So I've tore up a door, or two. But with you around I shouldn't feel the need to do that, you know?" he tried to assure him. The last thing Steve ever wanted to do was hurt Tony. The thought was abhorrent. But sometimes he simply didn't know his own strength, especially not in a heat. "Like I said, we'll figure it out together when it comes to it."

What the hell had Steve been thinking when he let them inject him with the serum, Tony wondered. Did Steve realize he was signing up for what was very likely to be a life where he'd never be able to bond? Did he care? His previous bond sounded so miserable, so tragic. Maybe Steve hadn't really cared anymore. Maybe, back in the forties, bonding had been seen as an imprisonment, and Steve didn't want anything to do with it anymore.

In the past, Tony reminded himself.

Tony cleared his throat. "Let's sleep, Steve," he said quietly, stroking Steve's neck, nosing his hair. "We'll deal with SHIELD in the morning, then we'll go home, and... I dunno. Maybe we can get through the week without any more bullshit. ...Seriously, I swear, I don't normally get attacked more than once a month. This has been a busy week for me..." He tried to sound light-hearted, but he couldn't help but worry that he was putting Steve in danger. What could he do, though? Steve was a soldier; he would always be in danger, as long as he was fighting, as long as he was with SHIELD. It wasn't Tony's fault Vanko had come out of nowhere.

"...I wonder what's gonna happen to Jack," Tony murmured. If Jack had been in on Justin's plans, then maybe he would go to an all-omega prison. If he hadn't, he'd be on the outside, his mate incarcerated. Then what?

"I offered him money for lawyers if he ever wanted to break up with him," Steve said light-heartedly, smiling a little when he remembered the look on Jack's face. Like it had never even occurred to him that it was something he could escape from. But then, it had never occurred to Steve either.

"...lawyers can't take a mark off the back of his neck," mumbled Tony sleepily.

It was only in the last twenty years or so that bonding had begun to have legal repercussions. It was such an inherent part of the social dynamic that legislating it had been nearly impossible. Even though omegas and Alphas could legally break a bond, doing so physically was, as far as Tony was aware, impossible for omegas. Alphas were the only ones who could sever it, and even
then, it was known to be a difficult thing. A divorce did not mean the bond, and the ability to feel each other, went away.

Tony should have felt nervous about being paired with Steve for life in such a profound way but he wasn't. There was no anxiety there. He had been so desperate to mate Steve, he'd almost not even had a choice.

He wasn't sure if knowing about Bucky beforehand would have even changed anything.

"G'night, Rogers. I love you."

"Night Tony. I love you too."

Tony drifted off with the omega in his arms, the comforting, familiar smell of him making even the sterile hospital suite feel like home.
"моя омега!"

He’d only just come to, and he knew exactly one thing: Steve was in danger.

He didn’t know who Steve was, only that he was in danger; something was wrong, and he had to find him. He writhed a little, hell-bent on going to rescue him, but he was restrained.

"У вас нет омега, солдат."

His vision was swimming. The air smelled bad, like singed hair. His breaths were shallow, each other painful and burning; he was in so much pain he felt sick from it, but it was nothing compared to the sense of loss he was feeling. He couldn’t understand it. He didn’t know anyone named Steve, did he? Yet for a split second he felt like maybe he had.

"Я... Я не..." he repeated uncertainly. His whole body ached; it was like he was freezing and burning at the same time.

"...you see, this is what we've been telling you. There's something wrong with the programming," said someone far away.

"Then fix it! You've fixed him before, haven't you?" The second voice was familiar.

"полковник Карпов..." he moaned. He groped blindly for... someone. His hand felt wrong, heavy. It was itching but in a wrong way, on the inside, and he knew scratching it wouldn't help.

"полковник Карпов, пожалуйста..."

Tony's eyes flew open. Natasha was staring at him.

"Who is Karpov?"

"Huh?" said Tony.

"Karpov. You were asking for Karpov."

Tony sat up, blinking in the pale morning light, shaking his head. His heart was pounding but the dream had already faded. He only remembered being tied down and in terrible pain. An Afghanistan flashback, no doubt. Automatically, he pulled Steve to him. "Hey, Steve, your scary redhead friend is here. Where's Eyeball?"

"Director Fury is busy with Project PEGASUS."

"...that sounds awesome."

"Sorry, Stark, but you're a long way from getting involved with that one. How's the ribs, Rogers?"
"Hm?" Steve blinked awake at the sound of their voices. He could feel a distant sense of panic throbbing in his chest. Was it Tony's? He frowned. Perhaps another nightmare? He wasn't sure. It didn't...it didn't feel like Tony's. But who else could it belong to? He rubbed at his chest. "Ribs? Oh-"

Steve looked down and poked at his ribcage. It ached, but the pain was nothing like before. "Healing," he hummed and then ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "What's up? Did we miss anything?" he asked.

Natasha held a tablet out to both of them and smiled a little. "I thought you might want to know how your evening's being... perceived."

The screen showed the cover of a magazine. The photograph on the front was oddly touching, yet harrowing. It was Tony in his armor standing in the ER, with Steve cradled in his arms, Steve's head tucked against his chest. They both looked bloody and battered, not the look they'd exactly been going for. Tony's faceplate was off and he was looking down at Steve in the picture, his eyes full of concern. Like he was looking at his world. One of the news crews must have taken it. It was touched up a little, the blurriness hidden with Photoshop and the bright fluorescent lighting of the lobby dulled down a fraction. But the feeling in it was still raw.

The headline read simply: **IRON MAN AND CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WORLD'S GREATEST SUPERHEROES, THE WORLD'S GREATEST BOND?**

"The world's... greatest... pair-bond," repeated Tony slowly. His face broke into a grin. They'd ended up giving his lip a few stitches after all, and it hurt to smile, but he couldn't help it. "This is great!"

The picture wasn't what Tony had expected but he was fine with it. In the suit, the disparity between their height and musculature erased completely. Cradling Steve in his arms, he looked every bit the strong, powerful Alpha he wanted to be. He looked like a fucking badass. There was real concern on his face, but his stance was wide and dominating. Steve looked almost small.

"It's not all great," warned Natasha. "Mother Jones is already asking what it says that 'Captain America' jumped into bed with one of the world's best-known weapons designers."

"I don't design weapons anymore."

"And what's the suit, exactly?"

Tony shrugged, scrolling through the article. "It's a... highly defensive prosthetic." Further in the article, there was a picture of Tony and Steve kissing on stage, but the camera was angled upward and Tony didn't look especially dwarfed by Steve. There were honest-to-God fireworks in the background; it looked like the happy ending to a romantic movie. Dressed in t-shirts and jeans, the two of them looked like they had wandered on stage by accident and were sharing an intimate moment without any awareness that they were being watched.

He flipped open a few more tabs, excited to see more headlines.

"A few rags are saying it's staged. Faked. Obviously, betas wrote the articles," added Natasha, watching Tony pull up a few more news articles. "Can't really fake a bond. There's already shots of Steve's neck. And Tony, you smell... well, bonded."

"Tech Billionaire Mates Beloved American War Hero," read Tony. "Aw, they think I'm a beloved hero!"
Natasha rolled her eyes at him. "No, they think you're a spoiled tech billionaire and Steve's a beloved hero," she correct. But Tony ignored her, still going through headlines.

"Truth Serum: Captain America, ageless super-soldier, talks omega rights... that's an old article, sorry... oh, but look at these pictures!" He flipped the tablet around to Natasha to show off a picture of Steve, shirtless. "And who's going to get to mate that hot piece of ass? ...maybe a certain spoiled tech billionaire...?"

"Overall, no one's pegging this on either of you. There's a lot of damning evidence against Hammer and everyone knows Vanko was out to get you. SHIELD took over the investigation on your behalf," said Natasha.

"Great! This is great! ...and now I gotta join the team, right? Obviously. Since we're, you know, the greatest pair-bond ever... we'll show you how it's done, according to this article... Hey, look, look, Steve; look at this one!" A picture of Steve and Tony stepping out of the car when they first entered the Expo, Tony waving, Steve ducking shyly behind him. "Tony Stark and Captain America saved thousands of lives during a terrorist attack last night in Flushing Meadows, New York, mere moments after announcing their pair-bond... I'll never say another bad thing about MSNBC ever again... Steve Rogers earlier stated in an interview he had met some incredible people and felt he had a relationship with 'potential,' but shocked the nation by unexpectedly announcing a bond to Tony Stark, former CEO of the military defense contractor, Stark Industries... Um, and Iron Man, why aren't they talking about Iron Man? ...this is great press! Oh, look at this one, look look look! Stark and Rogers: America's Newest Super-Powered Pair-Bond. ...Yay!"

Tony laughed, hugging Steve to him, giddy with delight.

Steve laughed gently at Tony's joy and ran a hand through his hair soothingly as he cuddled against him. It felt pretty good, actually. It felt good that people knew and that the response was positive and supportive...that meant so much to Steve. He represented the people, didn't he? If he was going to make change then this felt like the right way to do it.

Natasha pushed her hair behind her ear. "Some people are also calling Steve a hypocrite, because you saved him," she said and pulled a face with a small shrug. "The press really, really likes that ER photo and... well, it shows Steve being cradled by his Alpha. People are saying he shouldn't have put himself into that position in the first place."

Steve sighed.

"They would say that..."

"It's okay. Can't please everyone. Anyway, this all stuff you can address in interview or press release, if you want," Natasha hummed. She looked over to Tony. "I hear a lot of people also want to interview you now. You're the insight into the country's favourite sweetheart."

Tony frowned a little. "Me, have insight into Steve?" he replied. "I only got to know him a week ago." His frown deepened. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say, exactly, that's not going to come off really bad. The government was using Steve to spy on me and I couldn't control myself and ended up mating him? It's not exactly the love story they're gonna wanna hear. And I'm... I'm probably not the best guy to talk omega rights with. I mean, I support them, I guess. I'm behind Steve all the way, but- but, you know, let's be honest, guys, I've got a lot of prejudices. This will come as a surprise to you, but I'm not perfect."

Natasha snorted. "Does it kill you a little to admit that, Stark?" she asked.
"Humility isn't a practice I'm especially fond of," answered Tony. One of his hands was subconsciously running up and down Steve's arm lightly, half-paying attention to the screen of the tablet as Steve browsed the news. "Besides, I thought we weren't gonna do any interviews 'til our honeymoon period was over. I'd like to spend a few days with Steve not almost getting killed.

"People want answers."

Steve flicked onto another picture of the Expo in flames and quickly skipped onto the next. "Thank you for bringing this to us, Natasha, really. It means a lot."

Tony's fingertips slid up Steve's shoulder to the scar on the back of his neck. Steve, who barely scarred at all, who healed so rapidly. Who still retained Tony's bite. Tony felt a surge of affection; he kissed Steve's temple. "...where's Pepper?" he asked, changing the topic. "Can I talk to Pepper? Where's Rhodey? Is he okay?"

Steve shivered a little as the pads of Tony's fingers danced over the mark. His skin technically should have healed it over it, but it hadn't. It was almost like a form of acceptance that went beyond the subconscious to the physical.

Unfazed by their affection, Natasha calmly answered Tony's question. "Rhodes is fine; he left for Washington last night. Virginia is in the lobby. She was waiting for you two to wake up, but she's been running damage control pretty much continuously. According to her, running Stark Industries is a lot like trying to race a horse that's on fire."

"She can handle it," said Tony with a casual wave. He pulled the sheet up a little more, settling back against his pillow, arm around Steve. "Nat, do me a solid and go get me a cup of coffee, will you? And throw a few shots of bourbon in it."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "No," she said flatly.

Tony looked thoroughly shocked at being said no to, but before he could protest, a doctor, followed by two residents, came in.

"You're not Dr. McCane," said Tony immediately. He'd come to like the aggressive omega quite a lot during the night. The new doctor was an Alpha. Tony's arm tightened a little around Steve.

"Dr. McCloud," corrected the doctor, flipping open a chart. "She's on night shift. I'm on day shift. I'm Dr. Martin. A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stark, Captain Rogers. Congratulations, first and foremost, on your bond; I read about it on the news this morning."

"Thank you," said Steve in surprise, not expecting a congratulations. Something warmed in his chest.

"How are you two feeling?"

"Under-caffeinated and sober," said Tony, glaring at Natasha.

"Sober?" Dr. Martin echoed and raised a brow. Her hair was jet black. "Are you an alcoholic, Mr Stark?" she asked bluntly.

Natasha answered before anyone else could, her arms crossed over chest. "Yes," she said flatly. "A functioning albeit, but yes he is." She shot him a glare back. "You're on the team now. Your welfare is our responsibility." Was there perhaps a hint of tenderness in her tone? It was hard to tell. "Get used to it."
"Right, well, we don't serve drinks on hospital wards, Mr. Stark," Dr. Martin sighed and flipped through her notes. "Captain Rogers, I need to check your burns, and then Stark, I need to check your foot. Who's going first?"

"I am not an alcoholic," protested Tony. "My welfare? Are you kidding me, I don't need you to treat me like I'm some neglected kid or something, I take great care of myself!" His grip on Steve tightened a tiny bit more. "Do me first," he said. "...aren't there any omega doctors?"

"Kate's the only one at this hospital," said Dr. Martin, unfazed. "I assure you, Mr. Stark, I understand your feelings completely right now. It's natural to be protective after bonding. I just want to make sure Captain Rogers is healing well."

"He's a super-soldier; he's healing great," said Tony petulantly, pushing off the covers and sitting over the edge of the bed. "...and why don't you serve drinks on hospital wards? Ethanol is a disinfectant, isn't it?"

"You could've had any Alpha in the world and you paired up with him," Natasha muttered to Steve, flashing him a smile to let him know she was kidding. Bonding wasn't always rational. It simply was."

"How's it look?" asked Tony. His goatee was twitching slightly as he repressed a grimace; one of the residents was gently moving his ankle around, checking the range of motion.

"Swollen," reported Dr. Martin, scribbling away in Tony's chart. "But that's expected. You're on track; it'll make a full recovery as long as you take it easy for the next week or two. Hold still, we need to take your blood pressure." One of the residents took his arm; he paused as he slid on the cuff. "What are these?" he asked, touching a couple of small, circular scars on Tony's collarbone.

"...chicken pox scars," said Tony, a little too quickly. "I got it late in life- I lived a sheltered childhood. What'd you care, those are old scars, just ignore 'em." His eyes narrowed at Dr. Martin as she picked up Steve's bandaged hand.

There was something about Dr. Martin... Steve just simply didn't trust her. Maybe because she was an unbounded Alpha? Maybe because he'd just liked Kate from last night? Maybe because he was tuned in to Tony's protective aggression? He knew it was unfair, but he just... didn't like her like he had Dr. McCloud. He didn't like it when she inspected his burns near his more intimate areas and commented on the lower possibility of scarring. When she handed him painkillers for his ribs, he told her they wouldn't work but took them anyway.

Steve swallowed them down with a gulp of water while Natasha and Tony watched on warily. Natasha was keeping herself an arm's length away from Steve at all times; whenever another Alpha came too close to Steve, Tony bristled.

"When can we be discharged?" Steve asked and Doctor Martin smiled. It didn't quite meet her eyes.

"Soon," she said evasively. "It's in the works. But hospitals move slowly. You know how it is."

No, I don't, Steve thought. He had spent the first half of his life too poor for hospitals and the second half too healthy.

"I'm just going to call an orthopedic doctor in," Dr. Martin said. "I want a second opinion Mr Stark's foot. While there's no obvious fracture, I'm still concerned there could be some damage to-"
Natasha stepped forward. "That's hardly necessary."

"If it's not broken then it's fine," said Tony dismissively. "I take whacks all the time in the suit. Gimme two days and I'll be ready to run a marathon." He was trying not to bristle at Dr. Martin but he could tell, instinctively, that she wasn't bonded and it made him extremely upset when she touched Steve. Every time his hackles went up he reached up to try to flatten them back down.

Funny, how they all said status wasn't important, but how things like that could still affect him so intensely. It took an enormous amount of willpower not to crawl on top of Steve and bare his teeth at her while her gloved hands ran up Steve's legs.

Dr. Martin frowned. "The effects of getting injured over and over again in that suit can be cumulative. You may feel fine in a week, but you have to consider the long-term consequences on your body. Frankly, humans aren't designed to sustain the kind of trauma you put yourself through."

"Well, Iron Man isn't retiring anytime soon," retorted Tony. He felt personally offended by the idea that he shouldn't be slamming into buildings at fifty miles an hour.

"Which is why it's important to get a second opinion," she countered.

Tony pouted. He avoided doctors like the plague, something that had always irritated Pepper; unless he was carrying his head under his arm, he was inclined to suffer through most maladies without any intervention. Maybe it was because he hated the interest they always took in his arc reactor. Doctors seemed to fixate on the fact that he'd had open-heart surgery in a cave; Tony would prefer to forget that.

"Okay, fine, whatever, just make sure someone brings me my coffee," snapped Tony, who just wanted Martin and co. to leave. The moment they did, he looked at Natasha. "We can just leave, right? We can just get up and walk- or, in my case, limp- out of here. I want to go back to Malibu. Sleep in my own bed. Bang my omega."

Tony wiggled his body against Steve's.

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Эти шрамы... они не от ветряной оспы," she observed, leveling Steve with a questioning look.

"I know," Steve said quietly and glanced up at Natasha, leaving the topic there.

"Can we please put the kibosh on Russian for a while? I'm very, very opposed to Russian at the moment. Sorry, Madame Gorbachev," snapped Tony. He buried his face into Steve's neck. He had already decided he was going to probably leave today, even if it was against the doctor's orders. His only reason for sticking around was to see Dr. McCloud again, make sure Steve was okay. He didn't care about himself much. His foot hurt but he was sure he could drag himself back to Malibu.

Steve reached out to squeeze Tony's hand softly, reassuringly.

It wasn't easy hearing a doctor say that Tony was hurting himself, but Steve was in no place to criticize him. He was equally reckless; he'd literally been throwing himself against a mechanized military war machine a day before, in *jeans*. Steve knew he was really no better and the last thing he ever wanted to be was a hypocrite. He was quiet for a moment as Tony talked and Natasha said something about leaving now. His hands twitched in his lap. Steve's left arm felt uncomfortable but his right was the one bandaged up. Maybe he'd hit it with his encounter with the wall or something.
"I think we should leave," Steve hummed. "I don't like her and Tony can just get home visits from a doctor no problem, right?"

Natasha shrugged.

Steve turned to Tony. "Yeah. Let's leave. But only on the condition that you let me carry you out so it doesn't get worse."

"Absolutely not," said Tony. "Steve, there's a swarm of vultures- sorry, I meant reporters- standing outside this hospital waiting for us to leave. I don't want to look hurt. Besides, I'm not hurt- they said it wasn't broken. I bend stuff the wrong way all the time in the suit and I'm always fine. Y'know they call me the invincible Iron Man? Emphasis on invincible." Tony reached up to scratch his left arm idly, rubbing the shoulder with the palm of his hand. "It's a hop, skip, and a jump to the car. I'll be sitting in the car, sitting in the plane, sitting around the house... I think I can walk, like, ten meters from the lobby to the car. Seriously. You're worrying too much."

Tony paused, thinking.

He wasn't used to anyone worrying about him.

As a child, his father had been too busy to worry much about his son, and as he got older, his mother had grown distant, too. She and Tony had grown apart; he resented her for putting up with his father's alcoholism and she spent more and more time involved with charity work, probably trying to steer clear of Howard, who was unpredictable when drunk. Jarvis and Obadiah had worried about him in their own way but they seemed to share the opinion of Howard: that Tony was best left to his own devices. Besides, Obadiah was more worried about the business and Jarvis was more worried about Howard. The only other people who had cared for him in childhood were paid to care; Tony had had two extremely worn-out nannies whose sole purpose was to wrangle him away from electronics. (They were only partially successful; anything with circuits was like a siren's song to Tony, and he took apart dozens of appliances as a child, which inevitably caused Howard migraines and ended in a massive family fight.)

In adulthood, the pattern was the same. The people who cared were few and far between and most of them were paid to care. Tony was fully aware that Pepper was on his payroll, and so was Happy, and their relationship was complicated by the fact that he was signing their checks. Rhodes, similarly, was someone with whom he had a professional relationship; before Afghanistan he had been the military liaison to Stark Industries, and afterwards, when their weapon contract was canceled, Tony kept him at an arm's length, not wanting to talk about Afghanistan. For years now, Tony had been living his life with the awareness that he could build and test suits to his heart's (arc's) content because no one would tell him no and no one cared enough to try to stop him. Only Pepper occasionally protested, but she was easily dismissed.

It felt weird to have someone care about him for no reason at all.

"...I'm not letting anyone carry me. It'll only churn up the rumor mill. It's better that everyone sees us walk out together," said Tony stubbornly. He'd already pulled out his phone to text Happy, Pepper, and Charlie. One of the benefits of being filthy rich was that he could go anywhere he wanted at the drop of a hat. And currently, he wanted to go back to California, far away from New York and, more specifically, far away from this stupid hospital. His foot didn't even hurt that much! He was pretty sure that, with a few shots of scotch, he'd be able to walk on it without the slightest hint of a limp. This was one of the ways he kept Pepper from protesting suit tests too much; he took a few drinks every time he accidentally smashed into a wall. Alcohol was a perfect pain killer and his tolerance was high enough that he could keep working even after a couple of shots.
Natasha was staring at him and he wasn't sure he liked it. She was clearly judging him but her own face revealed nothing at all. Tony hated people like that. He found himself staring back, not willing to seem submissive to her, not while Steve was in the room.

"Fine. Okay, but I'm helping you walk. Jesus Christ, Tony," Steve sighed, and moved to stand up himself with a slight wobble. Natasha reached out briefly but didn't touch as he steadied himself. He understood that this was a point of pride for Tony but it was still frustrating as hell to see him willing to hurt himself to just for the sake of it. The picture most papers were using was the one from ER. It made sense. It was good quality, powerful and moving, and it fit a familiar narrative, that of a powerful Alpha protecting his omega. The picture alone made it clear that Tony had saved him, and was his Alpha, and was tough as nails... but that apparently wasn't enough.

"I'll go pull a car up outside the entrance," Natasha offered quietly and then slipped away. Steve nodded in thanks.

Tony got dressed and stood up with a noticeable cringe. He let Steve link their arms together but tried not to lean on him.

"Right. Come on," Steve murmured and moved to take Tony's arm in his. It wouldn't be obvious, but Steve could still help him walk like this. Tony was right, though, about it being better to go home. All Steve really wanted was to be back in their bed and away from all this. There was no need to be mothered over by doctors. They wanted and needed each other right now. They were still recently bonded, in their honeymoon phase, and being in a hospital bed felt wrong.

With some difficulty, they made it into the door and into the corridor. Tony initially tried to resist Steve's help, but Steve was having none of it; every time Tony tried to push off him, Steve grabbed his arm. It probably looked ridiculous.

A nurse stopped them in the corridor. "You should really be back in your beds."

"We're leaving. Thank you, but we're good now," Steve told him and moved them on. The nurse didn't look convinced but he certainly wasn't going to argue with Captain America either.

They walked slowly, Tony clearly trying not to limp.

By the time they got to the front, Tony had a death-grip on his arm.

Tony worried, momentarily, that he might be hurting Steve, then remembered that it was Captain America and he probably couldn't have gripped his arm too hard if he tried.

Natasha had pulled up the car out front but there was still a decent swarm of reporters. The flashes started before they even stepped outside. Steve was beginning to understand by Tony called them vultures. They'd both just nearly died; did these people have no respect? Were they this bad in the forties? Steve wasn't sure he remembered.

Recorders and microphones and cameras were shoved into their faces.

"Are you and Captain Rogers going to be alright?!

"What's it like being finally pair-bonded after all this time?"

"Do you really think your playboy side can be tamed, Mr. Stark?"

"What's next for you after this shocking ordeal?"
"What's your prognosis, Cap?"

"How do you respond to accusations that this was all staged for publicity?"

Tony stood a little straighter and held up his hands, waiting for quiet; the crowd was still screaming questions but after a few moments, it died down, and everyone leaned forward expectantly.

"Well, folks," said Tony. He managed to look cool and collected, even in the old blood-splattered t-shirt he was wearing. "Obviously, Steve and I are extremely disappointed that what was supposed to be a fun, sunny announcement was twisted into an unprecedented and violent attack. We're working closely with authorities, and a full investigation has been launched. Needless to say, until further notice, the Expo is officially on hiatus. Sorry, Ars Technica. You're gonna have to actually write your own stories for the rest of the year. Regarding our bond, we'll be giving another interview sometime next week; until then, we'd like some privacy to enjoy our honeymoon in peace. But I know there's one big question on everyone's minds and I don't want to keep you waiting, so let me just address that now."

Tony paused for effect. "...yes, we'll be releasing a sex tape shortly."

With that, he wrenched open the door of the car and dove inside, yanking Steve after him. The media went insane, shouting questions at them, swarming the car. Natasha turned in her seat to glare at him; Tony stared back, straight-faced.

"They love me," he said, sounding unapologetic. Outside, there was a minor stampede around the car; it was turning into a frenzy and Natasha looked like she wanted to reach back and slap him for getting them so worked up. Tony ignored her; he was texting Charlie and Pepper. He hadn't seen her in the lobby and was hoping she could meet them on the tarmac. He wanted to make sure she was okay, talking about his bond one-on-one with her. Lately, they'd been distant, and if Tony was honest, Pepper was one of the very few people in the world he actually considered a friend.

"A sex tape? You mean like pornography?" Steve asked, sounding scandalized, and Natasha yelled a responding yes as she pulled them out of hospital grounds.

He looked over at Tony in a panic; Tony was grinning ear-to-ear. Clearly, Tony was just joking. Hopefully one day his jokes would stop going over Steve's head like this.

About five minutes into the drive their hands found each other's. Steve didn't know who reached out first but it didn't really matter either. What was important was how warm Tony's hand felt in his. How well their fingers slotted together. How Tony's thumb felt drawing circles on the back of his hand.

"Enjoy your honeymoon. Call if someone tries to kill you again." Natasha threw them a deadly smile over her shoulder as she pulled up to one of the airport's gates.

"Thank you, Nat," Steve said softly. "Seriously."

Natasha flashed a badge at the gate and drove them onto the air field. (SHIELD, wondered Tony? Or CIA? Or NSA? What sort of badge gave her such instantaneous access?) It was oddly devoid of reporters; only Charlie, Pepper, and Happy were waiting for them.

Blessedly, Pepper was on the phone, yelling at someone from the Department of Defense, which meant Tony didn't have to answer any questions about his limp; he pushed Steve off and leaned on Happy instead, feeling slightly better about having a beta help him than an omega.
The two of them went to the suite in the back of the plane and all but collapsed into bed. They slept like the dead until landing; the stress of the reporters and the short trip from the hospital to the plane had worn both of them out.

When he woke, his ankle was killing him. He grabbed Happy and leaned on him; Pepper pursed her lips in disapproval.

"You left against doctor's orders, didn't you?"

"Pep, we're in the middle of our honeymoon. I've been through worse. I wanna go home," said Tony stubbornly as he limped down the steps from the plane and onto the tarmac. California was wonderfully warm and sunny; he squinted happily in the light. "Hold my calls, will you?"

"Hold your calls?" repeated Pepper incredulously. "Do you have any idea how many different departments--"

"Okay, thanks, bye!" called Tony, slamming the door of the car.

He and Steve cuddled up in the backseat; Happy drove them silently home. Tony had never been happier to see his house sitting on the cliffs of Malibu, dutifully awaiting his return.

He got out of the car and nearly fell, grabbing himself at the last minute, and limped stubbornly into the foyer, wanting to leave Happy with a good last impression, since he was willing to bet that Pepper would grill him later for an update, and he knew what a shitty liar Happy was.

The minute they were inside Tony's house, Steve picked him up without waiting for permission. It made his ribs twinge a little but it was only a short walk upstairs to the bedroom.

Tony let out a small noise of protest as Steve picked him up. It was different when he'd been drunk or when they'd been alone, but now that they had gone public, Tony had a deep sense of pride. Seeing that picture of himself holding Steve, looking heroic, had stirred something up in him. He wanted to be every inch the strong Alpha his father had always wanted. Which meant not being carried around in Steve's arm like an infant.

"Do you seriously want to try the stairs like this?" Steve pointed out as he turned toward the steps in the middle of the front room.

Steve had a good point about the stairs.

The builders done for the day so they had no audience. It felt like quite a novelty in that moment—being alone, with just each other.

"Okay, but if anyone asks, I carried you up," said Tony, putting his arms around Steve's neck.

Steve chuckled and made his way up the spiral staircase and down the hall to Tony's (their) bedroom. It felt more like home to him than his new, 21st-century apartment in Westwood did; maybe because this was the first place where he had felt like he actually had someone in the 21st century. More than a co-worker or fellow soldier or sparring partner or ally. Tony was more than that.

Steve set Tony down on the bed gently. "Now just give me a second to get out of these God-awful clothes and I'll join you." Both of their outfits were probably ruined beyond repair.

Tony propped himself up after Steve laid him down on the bed, watching him. He wanted to explain to Steve that he didn't need coddled like this, but Steve's comments about taking off his
clothes and joining him shut him up.

He pulled his shirt off and tossed it aside, then grabbed a pillow and leaned over it, partially covering his chest. It was an automatic movement. Tony had taken home plenty of women in the last two years and he'd grown used to covering the worst of the scarring, the bright light that illuminated it.

"Steve," said Tony quietly. "...I'm sorry. I know you'll say it wasn't my fault, and that you don't mind, and that you can take care of yourself. But I'm sorry I put you in danger. A good Alpha's supposed to protect their omega. And I know you're a soldier, Steve, but... but I can't help that-wanting to keep you safe, wanting to take care of you. I'm sorry I put you in danger. I love you. If anything ever happened to you, Steve, I don't know how I'd ever go back to how I was. I didn't know I was missing anything and now... it's like..." He trailed off. He looked at the window, struggling with his emotions. He hadn't felt this vulnerable since he'd first came out of the cave. "...don't you dare tell Nat," he added. It wasn't a joke. He hoped Steve would have the decency not to tell anyone about this outpouring of sincerity. He'd never live it down. Tony had been known for being sarcastic and uncaring for decades. It was an image he'd cultivated since he was a teenager, even since he was fifteen and someone asked him what he was going to do in college and he'd answered "drugs," which had been worth the blow-out fight it had caused with Howard.

Steve stripped and sat down in bed before moving to lie down next to him on his stomach, head propped up in his hands. He listened to Tony intently, expression softening at the man's own sincerity. Steve reached out to tug the pillow to the side and then leaned his head down to press a single kiss to the surface of the arc reactor. He felt the trembling vibration of life against his lips and shivered before his blue eyes flickered back up to Tony's face.

Tony stiffened and his skin prickled when Steve kissed the arc reactor. His knee-jerk response was to scramble away; his breath hitched a little and he barely managed to keep from shoving Steve off him.

He had gotten so used to compulsively touching the reactor over the last few weeks that it took an enormous amount of willpower not to snap it out then and there and check it. Watching the palladium cores oxidize inside of him, watching the reactor discharge into his chest and poison him, Tony had come to hate the thing. It was funny, how first he'd hated it, then love it, then hated it... now he supposed he loved it again. After all, it was no longer killing him, and Steve didn't seem to mind it.

He relaxed, however, only once Steve had moved up. He closed his eyes at the light, wet touch of Steve's lips on his.

"I'm not going anywhere, Tony," Steve murmured, pressing a kiss to Tony's jaw line. "And neither are you," he added pointedly. "We didn't even see them coming yesterday and we still won." His bandaged hand was less mobile than the other but he still reached up his hand to gently glide his fingertips through Tony's hair. "Our bond isn't going to be a weakness," he whispered and moved his fingertips to trail down Tony's jaw like he was mapping out his face for drawing. Like he was only just seeing it for the first time. "It's going to make us stronger."

Tony's top lip still had the stitches in. It looked a little sore. So Steve pressed a kiss to his bottom lip gently. "I love you."

"Love you," echoed Tony. With Vanko dead, there couldn't be any more threats, right? No one else knew how to make an arc reactor. That knowledge belonged to Tony and to Tony alone. He doubted Vanko was stupid enough to hand over the plans to Hammer Industries, but made a note to hack into their systems as soon as possible that the knowledge had died with Vanko.
He put his arms around Steve's neck and pulled Steve over his chest, gently. "We did win... it's over," he conceded. "...everything after this should be easy, right? An interview next week, a psych eval for me the week after that... but the worst of it's over." He sighed softly, running his fingers lightly over the back of Steve's neck. "...what do you think Project PEGASUS is? A flying car or something?" wondered Tony suddenly. "You think that's what Clint's been doing in New Mexico? Test-driving a hovercraft or something?"

"I have no idea what PEGASUS is," Steve sighed as he settled down against Tony's chest, focusing on the feeling of his fingertips moving over his skin. "I think...whatever it is, is important. If both Phil and Clint keep heading over there then, yeah, it's big. But if it was an actual threat I think I would know about it already..." Or at least, Steve sincerely hoped he would have been told.

Tony stifled a yawn. His own bed, his own house, his own omega... all of it together was making him sleepy. The toll of the previous day was catching up to him. His ankle was throbbing. "Steve, can you get me a drink before bed?" asked Tony, giving Steve a gentle push. The fact that it was only mid-afternoon was inconsequential; exhaustion was taking hold of him.

Steve's head stuck up at the question and he raised a brow, clearly unimpressed. He wanted to say no but after some light reading on tackling alcoholism (because that's blatantly what this was) he'd learned that if you cut it off all at once you could actually kill or damage the alcoholic themselves as their body depended on it. Tony was already drinking considerably less than he had been before-baby steps, Steve reminded himself. In the end Tony, was his own person and Steve couldn't protect him from himself forever however much he might try to.

"Only because your foot is screwed," Steve told him and then slid out of the bed.

Walking around Tony's house in basically no clothes was strange...it felt like he was flashing because of all the big windows even though there was no one around to see.

Tony cracked his eyes open, watching appreciatively as Steve walked away. His back was as muscled as the rest of him. He was gorgeous; it was like having a Greek statue come to life and wander around the house. Tony felt a throb of arousal between his legs. He watched Steve stroll back, casually, as if they'd been doing this for years.

Steve got Tony a finger of his favourite whiskey and set it down by the bedside before moving to get back under the sheets. Steve was happy to sleep himself. It had been a long day- a long week. And he could almost feel Tony's drowsiness and it was making him sleepy too.

Steve set a shot on the bedside; Tony grabbed it and tossed it back, noting with some disappointment that Steve had only poured him a single shot.

"G'night Steve. Wake me up when it's tomorrow," mumbled Tony, pulling Steve close to him, cuddling their bodies together. Steve's was smooth and warm against his. This was how honeymoons were supposed to be; not scrambling away from exploding artillery shells and dodging electrified whips and flinging I-beams around. This was normal, domestic, safe. Even with the sunlight filtering in through the ceiling-to-wall windows that lined the west wall, Tony passed out easily, his head resting on top of Steve's, his arms around the blond.

There were no dreams; his body's exhaustion had gone beyond that of his mind, and he slept like the dead for nearly sixteen hours before he woke up, mouth dry, hands quivering with the need for a drink, feeling groggy and weird.

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*Steve woke up in a place he didn't recognize. It was cold. The building was old and ruined. He*
was in his armor. His steps felt too light as he took them, almost as if he was quite... there. He moved cautiously, feeling the greying walls as he went. Out of the windows he could only see more ruins and greying clouds to match the color of the concrete. The stone made his fingertips feel chilly.

He could hear voices. They were speaking in Russian, but it was too muffled and quick for him to really understand. Steve leaned around a corner carefully. He saw men dressed in black with big guns muttering to each other in the corner. Steve's eyes narrowed.

Then dead-cold fingers curled around the back of his neck and wrenched him back.

Steve gasped and then a human hand clapped over his mouth and silenced him. He trembled as he pulled back against the winter soldier's chest. He felt immobilised. He could fight back but he wasn't and he didn't know why.

"Вы не должны быть здесь," he whispered, breath hot against Steve's neck. "Как ... как ты сюда попал? Как ты в моей голове?!"

Gingerly he reached up and peeled the fingers away from his mouth. The Winter Soldier let him.

Steve turned to face him; his face was murky, like it was underwater, but still oddly familiar. Which made no sense because Steve could barely even see it; dark hair tumbled down around his face, and half his face was obscured by a mask, anyway.

"Я не знаю. Но позвольте мне помочь вам," Steve whispered, hoping his Russian was good enough to be understood.


The soldier reached out and squeezed the back of his neck. Steve didn't move away. It should have felt violating but somehow, it didn't. The soldier's smell was not offensive to him. No. It was shockingly familiar, a weird mix of his 20th- and 21st-century homes.

Rough fingers traced the bonding mark on the back of Steve's neck.

"Грязные," he muttered after a moment of quiet. "Отвратительно." And then he leaned down and bit at Steve's neck and it burned like hell and Steve was screaming and screaming and screaming

He woke with a gasp. He reached up to touch the back of his neck. The circular bite scar, Tony's bite, was still there.

Steve went to the bathroom and splashed cold water over his face. He doubted he'd be able to get back to sleep; he left Tony a note like he had before. The dream had felt so real... the only thing that hadn't felt real in it was him. That was until the pain. He rubbed at the back of his neck subconsciously, Tony's scar a comforting bump in his skin.

He let JARVIS pick a new band for him and hopped onto a treadmill to watch music videos while he ran. He found music videos to be a fascinating art form. The fact that so many seemed pornographic was even more fascinating to him. He wasn't sure if he actually liked a lot of modern music, but he appreciated that the rhythm was fast and the beat easy to run to. Steve needed to run this out. Push the dream from his mind. It was disturbing as hell. Either he was going crazy, or the Winter Soldier had found some weakness in his mind and was exploiting it. But there was nothing in the dream that implied HYDRA was behind it. It was like the Winter Soldier was a ghost, haunting Steve... but not for his own amusement. More out of confusion.

He knew he should tell SHIELD but he didn't dare. They'd take him out of the field. What if this
was just... a natural part of bonding? Or an expected after-effect of the simulation SHIELD had put him through earlier? Maybe he was just emotional and having bad dreams that would go away in a week. No need to scare SHIELD yet. Plus, he didn't want to seem like a weak, over-emotional omega. He had to look stronger than that. He was the Captain.

Steve really didn't know what to think of it, but he knew that he wasn't being manipulated and that, consciously, he was perfectly in control of himself and his actions. Therefore he was not really a threat to SHIELD. The Winter Soldier might want his help... but that didn't make him one of the good guys. Steve prided himself on being able to make that distinction. He ran to a band called the Black Eyed Peas and after a while, the dream as nothing more than a vague memory and he couldn't even remember anything, aside from the feeling of guilt at the end, when he'd been called dirty.

The sun was up, but a glance at the bedside clock told him it was the next day. Tony's brain did the math instantly. He'd been asleep for sixteen hours.

Tony swung his feet out of bed, rose, and his leg immediately buckled under him. He hit the ground, hard.

He groaned into the floor. This had happened before. Failed suit tests always left his body battered the next day; his ankle was already screaming with protest. Perhaps ironically, Tony had found the best way to get around these types of injuries was to throw on a suit, which let him walk off whatever malady he was suffering. After all, the suit technically did all the work for him.

Tony was thankful Steve wasn't there. He felt pathetic, lying on the floor. There was another note on his clock.

He's a gym rat, thought Tony affectionately, climbing painfully to his feet. Half-limping, half-hopping, he threw on a plain black t-shirt and a pair of jeans, imagining how Steve would be fussing over him if he were here.

Tony practically fell down the stairs to the first floor, then to his shop. He made sure his armors were operational; paranoia came naturally to him these days. Three suits were primed and ready; Tony made JARVIS run another set of diagnostics on them anyway.

"Hello, Audrey," he cooed, picking up an old acoustic guitar. It was a Yamaha, the one he'd taught himself on. He gave her a few loving plucks before swapping her out for a Fender Stratocaster. He flopping onto the worn loveseat in the corner, dialed up the amp, and settled down with a bottle of whiskey for breakfast, plucking out the chords to "Welcome to the Jungle."

He made sure he'd had a few drinks, enough to settling his stomach and the shaking in his hands, before he called to JARVIS. "Hey, let Steve know I’m up and in the shop. Code's still 1009. Oh, and ask him to make me coffee?" hollered Tony over the guitar.

"Yes, sir," said JARVIS. He pinged through Steve's music. "Good morning, Captain Rogers. Mr. Stark has asked me to inform you he is in the shop and has not yet had his morning coffee, which he is, as you know, incapable of making himself," said JARVIS. If it was possible for a machine to sound amused, JARVIS was certainly managing it. As a learning program, JARVIS learned from every interaction; years of dealing with Pepper meant that, although JARVIS had Tony’s sarcasm, he had also picked up much of Pepper's disapproval toward Tony's helplessness. Tony never bothered programming it out of the AI because he liked Pepper and he felt it was probably grounding to have a program that occasionally knocked him down a few pegs.
"Thank you... JARVIS," Steve replied slowly. It was strange, talking to an AI. Maybe he would get used to it in time. He downed a bottle of water and quickly slipped into the gym shower before heading back to their room to change into his clothes—*their* bedroom. It made him feel giddy to think it.

Downstairs, Tony's sense of contentedness was short-lived; he plucked at the guitar for a while, then, itching for something to do, looked over some of the notes scattered over his desk. Tony was awful at note-taking. His father's careful, delicate lab notebooks were the exact opposite of Tony's style. Tony wrote notes on whatever was handy; he relied on JARVIS to help him digitize and organize it later. Notes were scrawled on scrap paper, napkins, sticky notes... anything handy.

Tony recognized a primary suit weakness was reliance on the gantry to get it on and off. He wanted a suit that could self-assemble, something like the Mark IV, but better, lighter, faster. The lesson he had learned from the fiasco with Vanko, and having to get the suit stripped off him afterward, was that gantry armor was impractical and that, when attacks came suddenly, without warning, he couldn't be properly prepared for them.

He'd settled down on the floor with a welding mask and was staring the construction of what would someday be the Mark VII but was currently only a conceptual heap of scrap metal. Nonetheless, Tony found the slow process of twisting metal to his will to be a calming process.

Upstairs, Steve cooked them bacon and pancakes for breakfast, or rather late lunch. He knew Tony needed food and he certainly did. Steve made them both coffee, put it all on a tray and then headed down the steps to Tony's workshop.

He found Tony with a mask over his face and a blowtorch in his hand, the odd spark flying as he moulded something to something else. Steve watched him for a moment, appreciating the curve of his bicep as he moved the torch alone. Steve felt a sudden need to draw him. He set the tray down and then grabbed a spare pencil and paper and started sketching before he knew it.

Tony carried on contentedly for a while, until he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched.

He turned off his acetylene torch and flipped up his mask, wiping the sweat off his forehead with his arm. He looked over.

Steve was perched on the edge of his desk chair, a pencil in his hand, staring unabashedly at him. He flushed when Tony looked at him.

The drawing wasn't quite finished, but it was good. "I...made breakfast," he said after a quiet pause and gestured to the tray of food and coffee

"...how long have you been there?" asked Tony. The smell of heat and metal and gas was powerful, but under it, Tony was suddenly aware of the presence of both coffee and bacon. He'd forgotten all about breakfast. He glanced down at the half-finished chest plate in front of him. "...sorry, I get hyper-focused sometimes," he explained. "...you, uh... already know that, though. ...from... spying on me." Tony gave an embarrassed shrug and pulled the mask off his head entirely, tossing it aside.

He tried to stand, remembered his foot, and instead stuck out an impatient hand. "Coffee," he commanded. "...are you *taking notes*, Rogers? Are you serious? ...what'd you write?" He strained to see what was on the pad of paper in Steve's lap.

"It's just a scribble," Steve insisted and dropped the pad down on the desk before moving to grab
the tray. Now it wasn't quite a scribble. The lines were well formed, the shading well on its way to being completed. Maybe it wasn't the neatness drawing in the world but the likeness of Tony was there- Steve had always been good at capturing faces.

He liked to draw people best when they didn't know they were being drawn. Steve used to draw Bucky and Peggy and the Howling commandos when they weren't looking. Steve hoped they found his old sketchbooks back at camp. He liked to think he left something personal behind. All the history around him so vague and often incorrect. Maybe he should email the Smithsonian or something.

He moved to set the tray down between him and Tony and then sat down opposite him too. Steve handed Tony a fork and then pushed forward his stronger cup of coffee. His cooking was hardly restaurant quality but Steve liked to think it was alright. His ma had taught him most of the things he knew- like how to get his pancakes all fluffy inside.

"What are you making?" Steve asked, curious and hopeful for an answer.

Tony took a long drink of coffee before answering; the liquid was already going cold.

"This? This will, someday, be the Mark VII," said Tony. "Before I have the parts printed, I like to get in there myself, build a prototype. The thing is, all the armors, except for the Mark IV, need a platform or framework to assemble. See-"

Tony stretched across the floor, found a gauntlet, and heaved it up with a grunt. Clearly it was heavy.

"...see, this arm piece- this is sort of a single piece. That's because all the circuitry inside is wired up together. You've got pistons in here that run the whole length of the arm. But what I'd like to do is have an armor made up of smaller pieces with fixed circuits in nodes or ports that basically click into each other and can self-assemble. It's like if Clark Kent didn't need a phone booth anymore... it's like... like, can you imagine, if I could just snap my fingers, have the suit at my beck and call?" Tony was getting a gooey-eyed look normally reserved for new parents talking about their babies. "...the gantry's always been the big weakness.." he said softly, sorting around the pieces of wire and metal in front of him like a rat rearranging its nest. "...that was what killed Yinsen." His voice had taken on a hard edge. "...it didn't power up fast enough... it was too heavy... it was locked into the platform..."

It had been two years since the incident. During Steve's weeks as Tony's PA, he'd grown used to seeing this, the sudden out-of-the-blue moods that gripped Tony. He almost definitely had PTSD; he had nightmares, flashbacks, and periodic moments of crippling guilt. Steve had heard Yinsen's name before but Tony had never clarified who he was. Steve gathered he was another prisoner and that was about it.

When Tony was in his right mind he didn't talk much about it and there were no files on him anywhere; he refused to see a shrink and tended to avoid even regular doctors, which was part of the reason SHIELD had assigned Steve to tail him, because Tony was, for all his outlandish, outgoing behavior, a remarkably private person.

One of his hands was slowly rolling a screw back and forth on the ground as Tony stared down at the mess in front of him.

Building and wearing suits made him feel safe, grounded in reality. But it wasn't just that. Tony was always improving them, trying to predict the next thing he'd need. When the suits failed him, he took it personally. He expected them to be invincible and all-purpose.
Steve found it hard to follow Tony's obvious need for improvement. He saw the suit as a powerful force to be reckoned with, something effective and strong. Tony had saved his life in it—flown god knows how far and had beaten Vanko into submission. Steve couldn't see the weaknesses and the faults like Tony did. Although, he did see the appeal of having it self-assemble. It was clunky and slow sometimes, Steve guessed, but that never stopped it being powerful.

"...Tony?" he whispered and brushed his fingertips against the Alpha's on the floor as he seemed quite entranced by his own thoughts. His excitement was suddenly gone in place of passiveness.

Tony blinked. He looked up at Steve. Steve's soft blue eyes were looking at him, his brow knitted in concern.

"I was drawing you," Steve admitted quietly. "I saw you working and I couldn't help myself. You were so lost in the moment. You can...see it, if you want," he offered, voice soft and expression gentle. "You should really try and eat some of the pancakes."

Tony forced a smile.

"I'm more of a waffle guy than a pancake guy, but sure. If my omega made it for me," said Tony, reaching for the food. He looked over at the desk. "You were drawing me?" he asked through a mouthful of pancakes. Tony didn't see the appeal of drawing him while he was sitting on the floor, sweating, arranging pieces of metal and banging out dents and welding joints together. But he felt oddly flattered.

A sudden memory. Steve's sketchbook, the one he'd flipped through back in Steve's apartment. There had been lots of pictures, doodles, cartoons, everything from landscapes to people. He'd seen himself in there quite a lot. But he'd also seen Bucky.

He chewed slowly, mulling it over. He hoped wherever Bucky was, he was looking at the photo of Tony holding Steve and felt fucking scared. Tony's next suit would be better than ever. He would never admit it to Steve but part of his desperation to get to work and to improve his design was that he now had something worth fighting for, worth defending. As surely as omegas in heat built nests, Tony, a newly-bonded Alpha, felt compelled to protect. But he wasn't going to waste his time whacking a punching bag. No, Tony knew his strength was his intelligence and his engineering ability, and he was going to milk that for all it was worth.

...the fact that Bucky was a ninety-year-old man didn't mean Tony didn't need a new suit of armor. Just in case.

"Why were you drawing me?" demanded Tony.

"I love drawing people," Steve breathed. "Especially people that matter. You draw things you thing you're afraid of losing, or at least, that's what Clint says. I just tell him he's being a soppy bastard," he said with a soft laugh, blue eyes glinting a little at the memory. Clint had thrown an arrow at him and Steve had ducked—the arrow then hitting Phil in the back of the head. He hadn't been impressed.

The most private pictures Steve had were of his mother. They were made up of wispy lines and faded memories. It had been so long since he'd seen her, heard her laugh...she felt like a lifetime ago. Steve had loved her more than anything else. When he drew her he could still remember her left dimple and the pinkish dresses she'd wear. But he couldn't remember her eyes. Not properly. It killed him sometimes. Steve hated Hydra for many reasons— but that one was the worst.

"Sometimes it feels like my hands are too big for it now," Steve murmured, his plate now empty. "I
Tony stripped off his gloves, set them aside, and took Steve's hands in his. "You're right. Clint's a soppy bastard," he agreed quietly. He looked down at Steve's hands. Surprisingly, they were softer than his. Or maybe not surprisingly at all. Tony's hands were rough and always had been; he worked them hard. He found himself stroking Steve's skin gently, tenderly. "I don't think they're too big. Maybe you just need a bigger pad. Bigger canvas," said Tony, still staring. Steve's hands were larger than his, yes. But all of Steve was bigger than Tony. "...maybe you're just out of practice. Drawing less now, because you're a soldier. We could turn one of the bedrooms into a studio for you, if you wanted. If you're into that. ...did you know that I once owned the largest private collection of modern, abstract art?" He looked up at Steve, smiling proudly. Another pause. "...I gave it away to the Boy Scouts," he admitted. He was pretty sure there'd been some sort of drunken logic there but he couldn't for the life of him remember what it was. He ducked his head, feeling stupid. Tony wasn't into art the way Steve was, didn't really get it. His shop's art included a poster of a cat "hanging in there" (and he'd drawn an Iron Man helmet on it at some point), a few pop pieces (a Warhol and an Iron Man portrait), a neon sign, and a nearly-naked woman hanging over the roof of a car, looking sultry. None of it was exactly museum-quality, except maybe the Warhol, which was an original but was by no means one of his better ones. Tony just liked it. It was a scribble of a heart, anatomically correct but also a bit warped, the lines not properly colored in. It made sense to Tony.

Steve's heart thudded loudly in his chest. Tony's fingers were rough as they trailed over his hands and arms and he shivered in response. Steve didn't agree with masculinity really being assigned to status or gender, to be honest. But he was often told he was feminine, especially before the serum. And even after- high cheekbones, long eyelashes, a narrow waist and long fingers. He was still strong, built like a soldier, but he retained some more typically non-Alpha qualities. In a strange way, Steve had appreciated it. And Tony...well. He was masculine in all the ways Steve wasn't. His hands were rough from making things with them, he always smelt of engine grease and oil from the workshop. He was an oddly perfect stereotype - the thinker, the inventor. All very masculine qualities back in Steve's day. Though all those stereotypes had been mostly torn down now...they still lingered at the back of Steve's mind.

"A...a studio?" He echoed in disbelief and was so overwhelmed with emotion he didn't know how to feel. "I would love that," Steve whispered and felt gratitude swell up in his chest. "Seriously, Tony... wait a second. Did you say The Scouts? Really? Didn't know they were into modern art."

"Turns out, they're not," said Tony, his face breaking into a grin. "Thinking you're dying... it kind of makes you go a little crazy." He squeezed Steve's hands. "Any room you want," he added, growing serious again. He hadn't expected such an intense response, but Steve looked shocked in a good way. "Seriously, I have five bedrooms, plus the master... just pick out one. We'll convert it into a studio. We'll stock it together, you can go crazy."

He brought Steve's hand up his mouth and kissed his knuckles lightly.

"...look at you, you're making me into a soppy bastard now..." he murmured, admiring Steve.

"Sir," said JARVIS suddenly.

Tony sighed at the interruption. "What, pal?"

"Miss Potts is on line 1."

Tony perked up a little. "Put her on. Yello?"
"Hi, Tony," called Pepper's voice through the shop. "I didn't see you yesterday at the hospital, are you okay?"

"I'm great. I've got a new ticker, and I'm bonded, and Hammer's been arrested; everything's great. It's like Christmas. Say hi to my mate, Pepper."

"Hi, Steve. Tony, we need to discuss--"

"Ew, work, no."

"-discuss the future of the company. I can't handle this anymore, I just can't. It's too much-"

"No, what? No! You're doing great, you're the best. Isn't she the best, Steve? ...you know I'm honeymooning right now, right? I don't want to diversify my portfolio or whatever."

"Are you not listening?" Pepper sounded frustrated. "I'm resigning! Tony, every day since I've become CEO, it's like- like you're going to kill yourself or wreck the company. I feel like I'm just putting out fires left and right, and-"

"But now I'm bonded and everything's fine! Things were only bad because I was dying but now-"

"What?!

"-I was being poisoned by the palladium but now I replaced it and I'm going to be fine!" said Tony.

"You were being poisoned by palladium?"

"Well, technically, it was rhodium. The degradation of palladium to rhodium. But I'm fine now! I'm not dying anymore! Well, in the cosmic sense, we all are, but... Steve, you were my last PA, can you handle this for me? Oh! And I need you to buy art supplies. For the studio."

"Anthony Edward Stark, did you just say you were dying?"

"Emphasis on was. Past tense! Now I'm more alive than I ever have been thanks to my bigger, blonder, better half. Didja see the cover of the Times, Pepper? Did you see how great I looked?"

"TONY!"

Steve winced. Pepper sounded pretty furious. He grimaced with a swallow and squeezed Tony's fingers. He didn't really feel like he should be here for this conversation- their relationship was old, it had history. Pepper resigning was maybe about a bit more than just the company, but Steve wouldn't say that out loud. He swallowed.

"It was a very complicated time," Steve tried to offer. "It's been a long week. I really think you should both try to calm down before you have this conversation..."

'Both' meaning, of course, Pepper, as she'd only just found out Tony had nearly kicked the bucket. She needed time to process and then time to decide if she was resigning.

"I also really don't think I should be here for this conversation," Steve added meekly. He heard Pepper sigh on the other end. It was a familiar sound. "This is between you two."

Tony's grip on Steve's hand tightened a little. "First of all, there's nothing to discuss. I was dying and now I'm not. No problem, okay? Don't worry, Pepper. You love running the company. Come on-"
"No, I don't want-"

"-and I can't take it back because I joined some government spy organization, very hush-hush. I'm doing that now-"

"Tony, my body can't take this. The stress-"

"-and Steve should absolutely be here. He's my mate, anything between me involves him, too."

"Tony, are you serious? You were dying? Why didn't you say anything?"

The silence that followed was thick and heavy. Tony looked down. He was still holding on to Steve's hand, but his thoughts had turned inward.

Why hadn't he told anyone? He didn't want to be seen as weak. Didn't want their pity. He wanted to die in peace, and dignity, without doctors prodding him, without Pepper looking at him like he was a delicate, wilting flower. He had been through all that when he'd come back from Afghanistan and it had been humiliating. Tony hid his wounds, both physical and emotion, like a wild animal. He could handle the pain himself but he was loathe to drag Pepper into it.

"I just... I didn't want anyone to worry," he said, one hand holding Steve's, the other reaching out to begin playing with the wires. "Look. Pep. Take a week for the dust to settle, maybe a few personal days... and then we can talk about Stark Industries, okay? ...how's our stock?"

"Only down sixteen, actually," said Pepper grumpily. "The Expo was a disaster. A complete disaster. But people like you, they like Iron Man, and now you've got Steve, so... it's not like it was two years ago. We're okay. Frankly, the Expo was a sinkhole for our money anyway. If it weren't such a public relations nightmare, it would've be awful, but we've got six confirmed causalities and obviously probably a dozen upcoming lawsuits, at least."

"See? No problem," said Tony enthusiastically. "Sounds like a walk in the park. Now can I please go back to my honeymoon? I only get to do this once, you know." He leaned forward to nuzzle Steve's jaw.

"...how is it?" asked Pepper, genuine curiosity in her voice.

"Terrifying!" said Tony with delight. "I wanna laugh and cry and punch someone in the face. My stomach keeps dropping, I keep getting choked up--"

"...it sounds like being in love."

"It's crazy. I'm horny like all the time and all the smells changed completely, people smell different now. You should try it-"

"Tony. You know I'm a beta."

"Oh. Right. Well, go fall in love, then, or sky-dive into an active volcano, or whatever betas do instead of bonding."

"How am I supposed to do anything with you and your company constantly blowing up in my face? I mean, literally, blowing up in my-"

"Take a personal day. I'm serious. I'm not accepting your resignation. You can resign in July, if you still feel like it, but you're doing a great job, and everything's gonna stabilize. Can you forward all of my fan mail and stuff? Oh! And call Rolling Stone. I'll let them interview us-
they've always been good to me. We're also willing to do Larry King, The Late Show, and Ellen."

"You want me to take a personal day and also schedule all your interviews for you?" repeated Pepper dryly.

"Yeah, thanks," said Tony, missing the irony completely. "Thanks, Pep, you're the best. Ciao! Come by sometime next week. Steve'll make you dinner- it'll be fun. Jarv, cut."

The line went dead; Tony looked up into Steve's eye with a tender smile. "...that's how you feel, too, right? ...I mean about... about bonding. It's about the same for omegas, right?"

"About the same," Steve whispered and nudged his nose against Tony's cheek in a fond gesture. He let his eyes slip. "I feel like...this weirdly incessant need to please you," he hummed, breath tickling against Tony's cheek. Steve smiled against his skin too, eyelashes fluttering down. He squeezed Tony's fingers gently.

Steve trailed his nose along the edge of Tony's jaw and then to his ear. "I can't stop thinking about you around twenty-four seven." He admitted in a murmur. "I think about how your hands feel on my waist, how hot breath your feels against my neck when you're inside me. I think about you inside me."

Steve pulled back a fraction, blue eyes mischievous. He almost looked proud of himself. "So yeah. That's how it is for me."

"A need to please me," repeated Tony back, heart pounding in his chest.

He stared at Steve for a moment, then pounced playfully on him, biting his ear and giving it a tug.

"...let me mate you," he murmured. "Let me mate you again, on the floor, on the hood of a car, I don't care... fuck, Steve... you smell so good... my omega, my beautiful omega.... I love you... I need to be inside you again..."

As usual, he was well aware that Steve was big and strong enough to push him off, but some emotional or psychological barrier prevented him from doing so, and Tony felt strong as he pushed Steve down and crawled on top of him. He ran his lips over Steve's jaw, recently shaved, soft and smooth; one of his hands reached up to cup Steve's cheek, and Steve's head turned automatically into the touch; Tony pressed his nose into the junction of his jaw and ear, his tongue flicking out to taste Steve's skin. He could feel Steve's body quivering under him, vibrant, longing; Steve's smells were nothing but pleasant, eager, willing, accepting. Tony couldn't quite describe Steve's flavor, only that it screamed comfort to him; it was the smell of his sheets when he came back from a long, hard business trip and he was exhausted and the promise of sleeping in was imminent; it was the smell of Christmas morning when he was eight years old and Jarvis woke him up and he ran into the front room and, inexplicably, Howard was there, even though everyone had warned him that his father was probably still going to be in Tokyo and he shouldn't get his hopes up much; it was the smell of Pepper's hair when she had just washed it and she was bending over an earnings report with high numbers, her breasts just barely concealed by her blouse, her green eyes sharp, intense, talking numbers to him, a recently sharpened pencil scratching over the page in front of him, the sun rising at his back from the thirty-second floor of their Manhattan office, a fresh cup of coffee within arm's reach. It brought back a million memories that Tony didn't even know he had but every one of them was a perfect moment, perfect and peaceful and intensely nostalgic, and every one of them missing this one thing, his omega; Steve was the missing puzzle piece to a perfect life.

If he was being logical, yes, Tony knew this was his hormones going wild, completely out of control, but of course, he wasn't being logical, not at all; Steve's smell was intoxicating and he
practically felt high and he was already hard and rubbing himself against Steve's leg, basking in the feelings of the new bond.

Later, he would feel annoyance and anger that the attack at the Expo had stolen a precious day from him. The honeymoon period was only a week, perhaps two, but was considered one of the most intense experiences of a person's life, up there with having your first born baby, or getting married, or graduating college. Historically, most cultures had a series of practices around it, but Tony had always shirked tradition, preferring to do things his own way. Besides, in America, most of the older practices had been abandoned. He sure as hell doubted Steve expected a collar, the forties' equivalent to a wedding band. Nowadays, seeing an omega in a collar was like seeing a woman in a corset. It was considered, at best, kinky and slightly tasteless. Some pair-bonds did exchange rings, or got matching tattoos, but Tony felt traditions like that were trendy and fleeting; his style had always been timeless, removed from current fads. (The one exception: he had gotten his ears pierced in the eighties. He was at MIT and had let some upperclassmen convince him it was a good idea. He'd worn the earrings for exactly one week, until coming home from spring break, when Obadiah had practically torn them out of his ears and informed him that, if Howard found out he was strutting around like a damn queer, he was in for a world of pain. Tony had let his ears grow back, secretly glad, because he wasn't really sure he'd been pulling off the look anyway.)

"Tony..." Steve whined his name on instinct, eyes rolling back in his head as he moved to where Tony lead him. He was pliant and responsive to his alpha's touch, cheeks flushed a pretty pink and lips parting. He gasped; a soft sound escaping his lips as Tony's tongue darted out and made him shiver. Made him feel so much. Steve already knew he was getting hard and wet and he could feel Tony's very own arousal rubbing against him. Steve wanted so much things at once. His fingernails scratched at the smooth surface of the floor uselessly as he arched up, letting drag down his jeans, his long legs exposed inch by inch. Sometimes they were so much of himself he wasn't quite what to do with himself.

"Please...I need you. I need you inside me already," he whispered, his body aching for it. Steve whimpered as they found themselves locked into a kiss, eyes slipping shut as noses and teeth nudged together in a messy and hard kiss that longed for something more. Steve panted as Tony pulled away, his body trembling with a need to please. A need to be full of his alpha. It was the only thing that would ground him, would make him feel whole.

Steve ran his fingers along the grooves of an exposed bicep, half aware of Tony's sweatpants before shrugged off...somewhere. He curled his legs around Tony's waist as his mate moved closer, basking and purring in content at the other's warmth. Steve nuzzled against his jaw.

He thought of the Winter Soldier biting into his neck, calling him dirty...

"Please Tony," Steve begged. "Make me yours again."

"Mine," repeated Tony eagerly, loving how readily Steve's body responded to his, arching into him. He'd peeled off his clothes quickly, easily; he threw them aside, his eyes never leaving Steve's, his whole body tense with anticipation. He practically attacked Steve's mouth; he reached down automatically to check if Steve was ready but he needn't have bothered; he could smell Steve, smell his arousal; it was also desperation.

Tony backed off just enough to flip Steve over, pulling down his pants to rub himself between Steve's legs, feeling Steve lubricate him, feeling Steve's hips buck under his. Steve let out a cry of protest when Tony untangled Steve's legs from his waist but almost immediately melted into submission at his touch, letting Tony rearrange him to his liking.
Tony leaned down to bite Steve's neck, his teeth sinking into the flesh, his tongue roaming over the ridges of the existing bite. He let out a muffled yell, grabbing Steve's hips, pushing his erection against Steve's entrance; Steve's body was singing to him, arching into him, practically begging Tony to fill him up, and Tony was happy to oblige; he worked himself into Steve without loosening his grip, fingers digging into Steve's hips, mouth gripping his neck, his mind blank, replaced with the intensity of his primal urge to mate his omega. Steve was making long, soft noises, mewls and purrs and gasps, and he was wiggling his ass up at Tony, finding Tony's rhythm, matching himself to his Alpha, and Tony was trying to growl praise at him but wasn't willing to let go of his neck, the result being that Tony was simply making muffled grunts into Steve's skin while rutting him, his knot pushing against Steve's hole, stretching it, begging to be pulled in.

Steve cried out as Tony pushed into him, squirming beneath him. His highs trembled and fell apart as Tony's cock squeezed inside of him and made him press his forehead to the floor. It burned a little because of there being no preparation but it still felt so fucking good. Steve liked it. He thrived in it. "Ohmygod...ohmygod," Steve whispered, mostly to himself. Tony was far too lost in the moment to really hear him. "Fuck- ah -Tony. You feel so good. So fucking good."

Steve moaned wantonly as Tony's teeth sink into his mark. Thank God. It felt like he was being truly reclaimed—especially after that dream. He was Tony's— the Winter Soldier couldn't touch him here. He was safe. He rocked up into Tony's thrust best he could, whining and whimpering loudly as his alpha stretched him open. Steve panted and his back arced up prettily, his cheeks flushing a darker shade of pink as he felt the edge of Tony's knot tease at his hole. Steve gasped, clawing at the floor uselessly. His own cock was furiously hard and leaking against his stomach and sometimes got dragged along the floor when Tony thrust in particularly hard. Steve let out desperate sounds as he felt himself getting closer, clenching around the base of his cock as he encouraged his knot inside. When his knot finally squeezed inside it was like all the air had been knocked out of Steve's lungs.

"Please- please...oh my God. Oh my-" And then Steve felt Tony's cock pulse inside of him and he shuddered and came over the floor, letting out a shaky groan as he was dragged over the edge.

Tony was too far gone to think of whether or not the poured concrete floor was an appropriate place to fuck Steve; it was like their first time all over again, rough and hard and fast and perfect. Tony was only passingly aware of Steve making sounds, maybe words; the tone was clear; Tony could smell his sweat, his slick, his precum, all of them mixing into a delicious bouquet of sexual delight, and when he felt his knot finally penetrate Steve he nearly came then and there. Steve was so tight yet so lovingly accepting; his body was hot, a million degrees, squirming under Tony's with unabashed pleasure. Tony still had a mouthful of skin and his face was buried his Steve's hair, and when he felt Steve's body shudder suddenly, Steve clenching around the base of his cock, he let out a strangled cry and followed Steve, pumping his seed into the omega, riding out his climax with sharp jerks of his hips, the tension slowly leaving his body.

Steve moaned quietly as Tony filled him up, his whole body shaking as he was filled up. Tony's spent was hot inside of him, a hot searing claim which made Steve feel so good. So claimed. His body practically sagged in relief, his arms falling down by his head. Steve belatedly realised his knees were probably pink and sore along with his elbows. His serum meant it would be gone within the day but it was there for right now.

His grip on Steve's neck loosened as both of them went limp. "Fuuuuuuuh," mumbled Tony inarticulately against Steve's neck. The ridges of the original bite brushed his lips and his whole body shivered; his flaccid penis twitched weakly inside of Steve. He had a brief, wonderful flashback of Steve kneeling, of himself circling, of that first wonderful bite and how he'd shoved himself into Steve and claimed him. His knot was still swollen, but he didn't care, he didn't want to
pull out anyway.

*I love you*, he thought.

"Fuh," he repeated, dazed.

"Tony...Tony..." Steve sighed, blinking as reality began to settle back in. Tony was still pulsing inside of him. He hummed and shut his eyes again. "We can't stay like this." He shivered pointedly and squirmed a little beneath him. "Mph...the floor is cold."

"...you're right," agreed Tony. Steve's words snapped him back into reality.

Sort of.

His omega was cold; Tony's whole world suddenly tilt-shifted and rearranged itself toward making Steve comfortable.

Tony tried to get up, but was yanked back. Hard.

"*Ow*, fuck, sorry, ow- sorry- oh, God, you broke my dick- no, it's fine--" Tony wiggled a little, accessing their situation, then wrapped his arms around Steve and rolled over so Steve was on top of him.

Steve was right- the floor was actually very cold. Tony hadn't noticed. Steve's body was heavy on his, very heavy. Tony tried to relax under him, feeling stupid, but there was no better solution; they were stuck and Tony wasn't going to get his omega freeze.

"I like cats more than dogs," said Tony quietly. "I think black licorice is great, gets a bad rap for no reason. My favorite actress is Salma Hayek. Or Amy Nuttall. Oh! Or Phoebe Cates. Hers were the first breasts I ever saw. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. My favorite operating system is Linux, specifically Red Hat, and I would rather face a single horse-sized duck than a hundred duck-sized horses. How 'bout you?"

Steve laughed incredulously. "What?"

Tony huffed a little, leaning up and forward to kiss Steve's shoulder softly. "Steve. Bonding. Thoughts on black licorice? ...I should've asked that before mating you. I'm really serious about black licorice being great. I eat those jellybeans last. Because they're the best. ...I'm kidding, by the way, I love you even if you hate black licorice. But you'd better not. Naw, seriously, it's fine if you do." Tony nosed the back of Steve's neck, running his hands up and down Steve's forearms.

The bite was sore again. Raw and fresh, sensitive and scarred skin stinging weakly at Tony's touch. Steve liked it. It took him a moment to process Tony's words. He found himself oddly distracted. "Black licorice...I dunno. It's alright I guess. I don't hate it, I enjoy eating it... but there's better licorice out there. Like raspberry. I love that. And I would definitely rather face the horses... you can run away from them 'em. Ducks can fly. They would follow you." Steve let out a soft huff when he felt Tony twitch inside of him.

"Sir," said JARVIS suddenly.

"I'm **bonding**, you asshat!" snapped Tony.

"Miss Potts is-"

"Tell her I'm balls-deep in my omega right now."
"Yes, sir."

"JARVIS isn't actually going to tell Pepper that, right?" Steve asked, sounding worried. He liked Pepper- he'd like her to respect him...and not think about Tony doing *that* to him. Some things were meant to be kept private, or mostly private...

Tony chuckled slightly under Steve. "Er... yeah, actually, JARVIS says what I tell him to say. Don't worry about it, Steve, seriously, Pepper is a bro, she's totally non-judgemental, I mean... she's caught me choking myself like, at least a half-dozen times probably."

"I'm sorry, sir, I already informed her," said JARVIS.

Tony cringed, hating the idea of Steve being uncomfortable. "Well, fix it, tell her... tell her I misspoke, tell her I meant something else."

"Perhaps that Captain Rogers is balls-deep in you?" recommended JARVIS.

"Goddammit, *no*. No, that's an awful idea, JARVIS! ...I'm really sorry, Steve, seriously. Pepper doesn't care, she's caught me doing all sorts of awful stuff, I mean, I'm kind of... renowned for being a pervert. It's not like everyone doesn't know. I mean... you're an omega... there's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's just sex. She's won't let anyone know. She's my best friend." Tony caressed Steve's arms soothingly. "And, Steve? I don't... I don't have a lot of friends- you know that, but... but the ones I have, they're your friends, too, now. I don't want you to feel... like you said, isolated. I mean, I don't want to get a dog, but... but you know, you can talk to me, or to any of my inner circle, Pepper, Happy, Rhodey, and... we're... well, we're not from the forties, obviously, but we're your family now, and if there's anything I can do to make you feel better, excluding getting a dog or telling JARVIS to tell Pepper our roles were reversed, y'know... I wanna do it for you. I want you to be happy... want you to be comfortable."

Steve listened to Tony quietly, his throat welling up a little. A family? Friends? Sure he had Natasha and Clint but that was where it stopped. The fact that Tony was being so sweet was a big comfort. The fact that Tony was being so sweet was a big comfort. His chest ached with some strange kind of relief. He wasn't alone. He wasn't in danger here. He had no war to fight. It was all okay. And Tony was okay. Better than that. He felt *good* inside of him... So fucking good...

He looked up at the ceiling, now patched up by the builders. It still looked good, the lights not quite too bright. Steve sighed softly and leaned his head back against Tony's shoulder. "You make me happy, Tony," he assured him and clenched around him a little for effect. Steve smiled when he felt his reaction beneath him.

Tony let out a sigh of satisfaction and arched slightly into Steve. Part of it was physical, but part of it was hearing Steve say that he made him happy. Tony was desperate to make Steve happy, just as much as Steve was desperate to make Tony happy. Their motivations were slightly different, of course. Steve wanted to please; Tony wanted to nurture. But fundamentally, it wasn't so different.

Steve knew that a part of him would always feel lonely. That was unavoidable. A part of him was stuck in a time passed with no one who understood it with him. Steve felt less alone in the 21st century however. Now he had Tony.

"They recommended I get a dog, actually," Steve whispered after a moment. "They were scared about me feeling isolated in the 21st century. And apparently they can help with PTSD."

"...we are *not* getting a dog. Dogs are gross. If I wanted someone to slobber all over my crotch I'd go to any club in America and yell, *Hey, ladies, look, it's me, Tony Stark!*"
Steve snorted. Tony patted his arms.

"If we went to do an interview together..." Steve murmured into the quiet. "What do you think it will be like? Sooner or later people will want to hear from us."

"It'd be just like giving an interview by ourselves, I guess. We'd just be shoulder-to-shoulder," said Tony, hands still running hypnotically over Steve's arms. "They'd ask you a question, then me, then you... then probably both of us and we'd try to answer at the same time and laugh and everyone would think it was cute. Just like any other pair-bond." Tony placed his lips on Steve's shoulder. Not quite a kiss. Just a loving, possessive gesture. "They'll probably start asking about kids soon. They always do, when someone famous bonds. 'When are you gonna knock up your omega?' Ask us about our plans for the future. Ugh."

Tony lapsed into silence. There were few famous omegas. Sure, there were some: the last vice-president, a singer here, an artist there. But by and far, there were more Alphas than omegas, and most pair-bonds focused on a famous Alpha bonding. This was different; Tony begrudgingly admitted that Steve might be even more famous than him. It was possible they wouldn't focus on the usual questions; Steve was a very unusual omega. He wasn't going to fade into the background of Tony's life, wasn't going to end up in a subservient role. Steve was a modern power-omega who expected to be treated like an equal. Maybe they'd forgo the usual questions about kids.

But then, Tony found himself worrying about the kinds of relationship questions they would ask. Tony's dating life was one that the media doted on; there was always a new girl and she was usually famous and pretty and Tony had had several blow-up break-ups, which the tabloids lapped up with glee. Tony was worried his famed promiscuity would come up. Especially in Hollywood, trios were still fairly common; you might see an Alpha and their partner on the red carpet, trailed by an omega. Sometimes, there would be two Alphas, coupled, trailed by two omegas. Becoming bonded was something lots of celebrities did, and after the initial media frenzy, that omega would usually fade into the background, loyally trailing their Alpha as they found other partners, other Alphas or beta, and maybe even got married. But Steve wasn't one of those omegas and he'd made his expectations clear to Tony.

Tony felt a stab of panic. The dreaded "c" word- commitment. God, he hoped that word didn't come up in an interview. He forced his worries out of his mind. They could deal with those tricky questions in the future; their bond was still so new and shiny. Tony didn't want anyone else at the moment, just Steve, and he wanted to enjoy their time together in these early days of their bond.

Tony seemed panicked for a moment but it sooner died down and Steve chose not to mention it. He was stressed, too, he guessed. Steve was more worried they'd get sexual questions. Like 'do you submit for him?' 'Are you a captain on the battlefield and an omega in the bedroom?' 'What's it like having sex with the infamous Tony Stark?' 'Did he take your virginity?' People in the 21st century were pretty ruthless when it came to that sort of bluntness, especially when it came to sex.

"Hey," said Tony softly. "I'm gonna pull out." He squirmed under Steve, rolling them over onto their sides and tugging; after a few seconds of slow strain, it managed to work out the knot. He didn't pull away any more, though; he stayed on the floor, holding Steve in his arms. "...we'll be fine. Whatever they ask," he said, a bit more confidently. "We're awesome, right? Our bond is awesome. You're awesome, I'm awesome... yeah. It'll be fine." He kissed Steve's shoulder again.

Steve let out a quiet sound as Tony's knot squeezed out. He shivered, feeling a little spent slip out down the curve of his thigh like a claim. "If anyone can handle this, it's us," he murmured in agreement. "We've got this. We really do."

Steve actually believed it, which was nice. He had faith in...all this. Tony was so good with people
and maybe he wasn't the best but he felt like his little speech before the shit went down at the Expo went okay, right? Even if no one reported on it.

Steve eventually pulled off of him and then rolled onto his front, half sprawled across Tony's chest like this. "We really need to make it to a bed next time," Steve mumbled, Brooklyn accent creeping back. "Do you wanna have a bath?"

Tony's face split into a grin. "...yeah. I do," he said softly. He gently moved Steve off him and stood.

Or rather, tried to stand. The moment he put weight on his bad ankle, he nearly fell, barely managing to catch himself. He gave a sharp, hissing intake of breath. "Okay... right... that.. Steve, can you..." Tony gave him an embarrassed look, reaching for him. He consoled himself mentally, knowing that this was between them. Besides, it's not like omegas weren't designed to help their Alphas. Being carried around was sort of like helping, right? Tony was almost positive he'd seen Jarvis drag Howard around drunk once or twice.

Steve's arms were powerful and Tony snuggled into his chest, feeling small.

Upstairs, the living room was finally looking more like a living room and less like a warzone; it had been cleaned and mostly patched, and the furniture had been righted or thrown away if it was broken. Tony's eyes wandered over to the new glass coffee table that had been purchased to replace the old one; it was nearly buried under boxes of envelopes.

"...oh, no," said Tony. Someone had swung by to drop off all the cards that were pouring into Stark Industries; the barrage of fanmail had begun. Tony was going to have to hire someone to respond to it all. He sure as hell had no intention of going through it; while he was glad people seemed to generally approve of he and Steve, he didn't have the time or patience to correspond with non-famous people. "This is how it starts... when I came back from Afghanistan and when I announced I was Iron Man, it was the same thing. People send the stupidest crap- you have no idea, Steve... I bet about half of us is addressed to you, too..." He groaned.

"It might be sweet to read through some of it," Steve said, although his eyes went wide when he saw just how huge the pile of letters was. There was a good few hundred of them. And it had been, what, a few days? Steve moved them through into the main bathroom with Tony in his arms. Gently he set him down on the edge of the tub before he moved to turn the taps on.

Steve ran the water hot, figuring it would help soothe Tony's ankle. And his ribs needed it too. They were a tiny bit sore, but mostly healed. The burns had left thin white scars but they weren't noticeable unless you were looking for them. Steve knew he would be.

Once the tub was full up he turned off the taps, filled the water with strawberry...something and eased Tony into the bath. The tub (of course) was huge but they still sat close, just far enough across that they could tangle their good legs together.

This was what a honeymoon was supposed to be. Serene and peaceful.

Tony stared unabashedly at Steve as he prepared the bath, running around the bathroom almost obsequiously, grabbing towels, salts, soaps, everything. Classic nesting behavior. It was weird to see Steve- Captain America- so intensely focused on such mundane tasks. Tony let Steve set him gently into the marble bathroom and he moaned luxuriantly, tilting back his head and spreading himself out. He felt one of Steve's legs touch his. He glanced up lazily.

Steve looked enormous. His chest and shoulders were broad, muscular; he looked like a damned
"You know you're gorgeous, right?" he said quietly. He played with some of the bubbles floating on the surface. "I know what you're thinking. That's just the serum. Yeah, you're built, you're jacked, you're well-proportioned. But that's not what I'm talking about." Tony closed his eyes again, head lolling back. "I'm talking about the way you smell. The way you move. Your inner artist, the... good-boy, scout's honor thing you've got going on. It's not your looks, Steve. It's... it's how you smell. You smell good. And I don't mean you smell like cardamon. I mean you smell like the kind of guy who would run into a burning building to save a dog. ...Erskine was an Alpha, wasn't he? That's why he, and my dad, chose you, I think. Because you just smell... I don't know... right. And that smell means a hell of a lot more than just your appearance. It's the sexiest thing I ever smelled. I mean, ever. It's just this... this hot, homey mess. If your smell were a painting, it'd be a Normal Rockwell. Seriously. You're so... wholesome."

Tony ran his good foot up Steve's leg. "Dunno why you ended up with me, I'm a mess... but I'm glad... you make me... better." Tony sighed a little, fingers trailing across the surface of the water. "JARVIS," he demanded suddenly. "Is there anyone other than me and Steve on the estate right now?"

"Yes, sir. Pool maintenance and two topiary artists."

"Tell whoever is closest to bring me a bottle of champagne." Tony cracked an eye open at Steve. "...you're a good omega," he murmured quietly. "...I love you, Steve. I'm proud of you. You... you please me." He closed the guy, a faint smile on his face. "...it's weird how bonding hijacks your brain. Makes you go crazy. I kinda like it, though."

Tony literally stole the words right out of Steve's mouth. The serum had had that effect on people. No one had noticed Steve before - no one except Bucky. He wanted to mother and care for him, sure, but he never looked at him. People glanced twice at post-serum Steve Rogers, sometimes even three times. People hit on him. People tried to kiss him - some of them did. At the time he'd been flattered by the attention, he hadn't known how to respond to it. But looking back now he was almost offended by it. They hadn't wanted him, they'd wanted his body.

But that wasn't what Tony was saying. He was saying Steve was... he shivered when his Alpha ran a foot up his leg, blue eyes darkening a fraction.

"I kinda wish you hadn't just called for someone else to walk into this room now. That's about the goddamn sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me," Steve murmured, voice thick and longing. His body wanted to respond to all that praise - and not through words. But he wasn't about to risk someone walking whilst he was riding Tony's-

Then Steve blinked and cocked his head. "And what the hell is a topiary artist?"

"Hm?" Tony had been huffing through his mouth, breathing, tasting Steve's scent. There was a longing to it, almost a desperation. "Oh! Topiary artist. Didn't you see my bushes out front? Geometric shapes. I hire a team to come in and trim them like that. You don't think the dogwoods are naturally dodecahedrons, right? Hell, dogwoods aren't even native to California." Tony glanced up. Steve was staring at him. Just... staring.

Tony cocked his head. "...no one's ever told you you were a good omega before?" he asked. "But... but your... your old Alpha..." It hurt to say those words. Hurt like a knife to the heart. But it wasn't just acknowledging that Steve had been bonded formerly. It was that no one had ever
bothered to acknowledge what a great guy Steve was. Steve's face was open and honest and expressive, his jaw and cheekbones prominent, his lashes long, his hair perfect. But that wasn't what Tony liked. It was the quality lurking just under the surface of that. Steve represented something Tony would never himself achieve. He'd seen it only once before, in Yinsen. A sort of Zen-like calm, a strong but silent, humble adherence to a set of moral guidelines.

A sudden memory. Yinsen, performing surgery on a young man, a young man probably no older than twenty or twenty-one. Tony didn't speak Farsi, which was what they were talking in, but he'd watched, silently, as the young man cried and pleaded and as Yinsen extracted a bullet from his shoulder and stroked his hair and reassured him. That same man had, less than forty-eight hours earlier, pointed a gun at them, and threatened them, but Yinsen treated him like he was his son. When Tony had asked, Yinsen had smiled at him patiently and recited, "Ἄκοψο, ἐνθεραπείῃ ἓν ἵκον ἔκειν, ἐνθεραπείς κατὰ βίον ἀνθρώπων, ἔξω, ἐκείνη ἡ γεύμενος εἶναι τὰ τοιαῦτα." Tony didn't speak Greek and he had no idea what it meant, but its meaning was clear enough to him. Months later, he had visited Gulmira, Yinsen's home village, and he'd seen the burning homes, the fleeing locals, and his own name- STARK, STARK, STARK- printed on all the weapons that were being used to burn it to the ground. In that moment, he'd truly appreciated Yinsen's character. Because he realized that he, in Yinsen's eyes, was probably no better than that young soldier who had threatened to shoot them and later fallen asleep crying in Yinsen's arms.

Tony gestured for Steve to come to him. "Steve," he said softly. "C'mere. Let me hold you. You're so good, you're such a good omega... you're a good person... someone should've told you... he should've told you... c'mere."

Steve curled against him instantly when the touch was offered, his head slotting into the crook of Tony's shoulder just right as an arm came around him. The touch was grounding. "I wasn't well enough to have children," he whispered, words muffled against Tony's skin. "That's all good was. That was all I was...made for." The words felt wrong in his mouth. Steve knew them to be inherently untrue but it was still...easy to say them. He'd heard it all his life. He was called a freak before and after the serum.

Before the serum Steve had been a runt. He was weak. No one thought he'd be wanted. Even after Bucky had bitten him it was like Alphas could smell how untouched he was. They still tried it on even then. He was something to use and then throw in the mud. Christ, Steve didn't have proper citizenship (something they rectified after the war, thank god). At least once he was a soldier, and the serum had made him big, he was useful. Sure people thought he was weird, intimidating...whatever. A freak still, but he didn't care. Steve had done good and no one could ignore him anymore. He was too big to be ignored.

"I know you don't believe it," Steve whispered. "But you're a good person too."

Tony pulled Steve to him happily, basking in the warmth of the bath and Steve's solid frame against his.

"Steve..." he murmured. "No... no, no, no..." Children? Psh. Tony didn't give a fuck about that. Hearing Steve admit it... it was a second knife to his heart, his gut. His mind automatically shifted back to Jarvis, the only other omega he'd known well. Jarvis had been married to another omega and they were childless, but Jarvis had been infinitely patient and nurturing and kind; he had been Tony's parent as much as Howard or Maria or either of his nannies. Tony had confided things in Jarvis he'd never admitted to Howard. He'd never wondered why Jarvis didn't have children, but now he knew: Howard had had one child, Tony, a legitimate heir by Maria.
Undoubtedly, Jarvis had been on suppressants, and, undoubtedly, that had been Howard's decision, not his.

"Fuck biology... fuck it, Steve, you were made for more than that. You were made to... to inspire people, and you do that every damn day. You're amazing, Steve. I love you."

Steve ignore him, nuzzling into his head. When he told Tony he was good person, Tony's heart seized a little in his chest. He wanted to refuse it, to deny it, but he didn't have the chance; there was a knock on the door.

"ENTER!" barked Tony. He was actually fairly used to commandeering household staff to cater to his needs.

One of the people from pool maintenance poked her head in. She was an omega. Dark-hair, pretty, a little over-weight, with highlights and carefully threaded eyebrows.

She held up a bottle of champagne nervously. "You... asked for...?"

"Open it," demanded Tony, hugging Steve to him. "I don't- I mean, I've never-"

"It's easy, you just pop the cork out."

She hesitated, then complied. There was a pop and she shrieked a little.

Tony put a lazy hand out over the edge of the marble bath. "Perfect, thank you," he said dismissively.

She turned red as she handed over the still-fizzing bottle. "Um... Mister- sorry- Captain America, I, um- you're- thanks."

With that, she turned and practically ran out of the room.

Steve leaned up a little to watch her go, not even having a chance to respond before the pink cheeked girl had disappeared out the door. He could hear in it her voice, though- the gratitude. His chest warmed a little.

Tony tilted back the bottle and took several long, deep, loud gulps. "...great. More omegas in your fan club," he said. Clearing, lying in a hot bath with one arm around a blond and another hand gripping the neck of a bottle of several-thousand-dollar champagne wasn't at all foreign to him. In fact, he almost sounded bored.

His fingertips, dangling just past Steve's collarbone, suddenly twitched; he reached down to brush Steve's nipple, tilting back the bottle again to take another swig.

"...see? See how you inspire people? She was an omega, too," murmured Tony into Steve's ear, his breath hot. He nuzzled against the side of Steve's face. "...so... proud..." he whispered, barely audible, his fingers ghosting along Steve's collarbone.

Steve shivered as Tony's fingers danced down lower. And then his Alpha's breath was trembling and steamy against his neck and Steve felt himself responding in every way, blue eyes darkening as he shifted against Tony a little. He hadn't known before mating it was possible to be this horny-and yes, the serum made that crazier too.
"Tony..." Steve tilted his head up, breath ghosting over the edge of Tony's jaw. He shifted, moving to sit in Tony's lap.

"Oh, hi," said Tony casually, his hips bucking up to press himself between Steve's legs. He tilted his head aside and tilted the bottle back. "...You, um, you're here now. Hi." He leaned forward suddenly to kiss Steve's nipple, drawing his tongue over it, feeling Steve's skin pebble in response. His back arched and his whole body moved in to Tony's touch.

"...round two?" asked Tony eagerly, one hand already on Steve's hips, his semi-erect penis pressed between Steve's legs. He'd already downed a third of the bottle of champagne but wasn't feeling it, yet; he wanted to shove himself into Steve and polish off the bottle before the effects of alcohol inhibited his ability to fuck. This was one of Tony's methods; he drank continuously, slowly, and right before fucking, went crazy. This had a dual benefit; it let him skip the detriments of whiskey dick and also helped him pass out immediately afterward, avoiding pillow talk.

He was pretty sure that Steve disliked his drinking and he was worried that Steve was going to make him cut back. He begrudgingly recognized that his fear of cutting back was almost definitely a result of an addiction.

But right now, at least, the prospect of sobriety paled in comparison to the immediate need to mate Steve again.

Steve sighed quietly as Tony's mouth moved over him, his hands moving up comfortably to curl over his alpha's shoulders. "Round two," he affirmed and whined low in his throat when he felt Tony thickening up between his thighs. It was the sweetest feeling there was.

"...you want to ride it?" asked Tony softly, playing with Steve's chest. "...oh... but you've never... it's easy... just treat me like your personal sex toy, your personal dildo... be selfish, for once. Just have fun." He squirmed a little under Steve, pushing his erection against him enticingly. "You're in control. Go hard or fast or soft or slow, whatever you want. Treat yourself. ...show me what you like, Steve." He set the bottle onto the floor of the bath so he could put his other hand on Steve's hip.

Steve was getting hot all over as Tony played with him, teased at him...he was getting wet down there again. He shifted closer and gasped as he felt the head of Tony's cock nudge against his entrance. Steve leaned in, their mouths almost touching and noses dragging together. He sucked in a breath as he lined himself up.

"Fuck." Steve whispered against his cheek as the head of Tony's cock squeezed inside of him. He slid down slowly, savouring the sensation until his cheeks were rosy and his ass was full. It was a foreign thing, being in charge of the pace for once. Steve wasn't sure how he wanted it, but he was about to find out.

He rolled his hips up and then his lips parted as he felt the drag of Tony inside of him. It was perfect.

Tony grinned up lazily at Steve, holding his hips. "Love ya," he said casually, tensing a little as he felt Steve sheath his cock. "Oh... oh, Steve..." He nuzzled Steve's cheek, moving his head aside to catch his lips in his teeth, growling softly, encouragingly. His tongue ran over Steve's lips, parting them; the feeling of Steve squeezing his knot left him breathless and desperate in the best of ways.

He wanted to give Steve control, let him set the pace, but it was agonizing not to buck his hips up into the omega, especially when they were kissing; Steve's soft, wet lips were on his, he was deliciously warm and wet inside, and something about the way Steve's hips and ass moved on top
of him drove him crazy. He was aware that he was gripping Steve's flesh, hard, his fingers digging into him, but Steve only seemed encouraged by it and Tony was thrilled that Steve was so solid. Tony had previously fucked a lot of delicate, wispy women and he loved being able to manhandle Steve without worrying about hurting him; he loved feeling Steve respond to his touches, loved being a little rough with him, loved knowing that his omega was not only good-looking but functionally strong and sturdy as an ox. It was weird, because he'd never had chosen those traits consciously, but now that he recognized them in Steve, he couldn't imagine ever going back to the way things had been. How many times had blonde ridden him in this very bath? Dozens, easily. But this was on a completely different order of magnitude; it was like they were doing something for the first time and Tony was quivering under Steve with the effort it took not to set the pace himself, fuck the omega stupid.

"...'mega...' he gasped softly, unable to formulate any other thoughts. The only mantra was pounding through his head again: My omega. My omega. His knot was already swollen and throbbing inside of Steve and Steve had barely even begun moving; just the thought of Steve riding him was getting him off. He was infatuated and he knew it and he didn't care, because, like he'd said to Pepper, the feeling was so thrilling and intense and wonderful that it was worth every vulnerability.

It turned out Steve liked it hard. He whimpered as Tony licked into his mouth and sighed as he squeezed at his waist tightly, leaving bruises that would only last a few hours but they would be there. Then he moved his hips again, snapping them down firmly and moaned, loving the feeling. *Fuck, yes.* He could feel everything, every tiny little movement and spark of pleasure inside of him. And Steve was strong, he could do this for hours without his thighs even quivering at the strain - though they might at the stretch.

He gasped when he felt Tony's knot nudging at his entrance already. Steve's blush darkened a fraction. He cried out softly as he sank down onto his knot, now that was stretch. Steve panted against Tony's cheek, giving his body a few minutes to adjust to it. And then he began to fuck himself in abandon on Tony's cock. Steve rose and fell at a thorough and steady pace, taking Tony's knot every time just to prove he could. Because he was strong and enduring and he would take whatever his alpha gave to him. Steve angled just right and the drag of Tony inside of him was perfect. He was hard again already but he would last it out- Steve wanted to savour this moment.

"F-fuck, Tony...oh...oh..." Steve's eyes rolled back and slipped shut and he squeezed Tony's shoulders lightly as he sank down again. It was such a perfect feeling. He wanted to stay like this forever.

Tony cried out with pleasure as Steve began riding him. He was hesitant at first, but within moments, he was riding Tony's cock like a porn star, working his knot, moaning lustfully, his erection dragging across Tony's stomach. Tony watched the omega eagerly impale himself, his face flushed, biting his lip, eyes rolling back. Tony found himself moaning, not just at how good it felt to have Steve in his lap, but at the obvious enjoyment Steve was getting from this. His body was quivering; there was a drop of precum glistening from his head.

"You're amazing... oh my God, yes..." moaned Tony as Steve took the knot, barely getting it in and out, panting and whimpering a little every time Tony stretched him out. Tony arched desperately, wanting to bury himself in deeper, wanting more of Steve; his calloused hands grasped Steve's hips instinctively even though it was clear that Steve didn't need any help. He was moving on top of Tony hard and fast and Tony's length was wonderfully slick with his fluids; feeling himself sliding in and out of Steve, watching Steve writhe and moan and tense on top of him was, in Tony's mind, easily the hottest thing he'd ever seen. Despite the scented bath he could smell Steve's arousal; his
body was tuned to it, wanting to give the omega everything he wanted and more, and Steve's body language and his pheromones were making it clear that what he wanted was to be fucked as much as possible.

It was perhaps a little interesting, Tony would contemplate, later, that everyone talked about pair-bonding with such flowery language, made it seem romantic and sweet and frilly. But there was also a lot of intense fucking, apparently, the dirty, primal kind of fucking where both parties lose control. Tony was perfectly fine with that, though.

The water sloshed around them every time Steve fucked himself down onto Tony. It felt so good. So fucking good. Steve's body trembled with pleasure, his insides singing as he sank down and rose up over Tony. Slowly, he moved his hands to grip the edge of the tub behind Tony- he didn't want to hurt him and he needed to get off now else he felt like he might explode. He needed to go faster, take more of Tony- he needed it. Needed him. His body ached for it.

Steve pressed an open mouthed kiss to the side of Tony's neck. And then he fucked himself with abandon, each thrust still thorough but faster now. His thighs were even beginning to tremble now and he hadn't thought that possible, but the stretch was something else. It felt more than it ever had been before and Steve thrived in it. It turned him on beyond belief. "Tony...oh...oh god...please..." His words were as coherent as the sounds that escaped the back of his throat. Steve's fingers dug into the back of the bath, possibly even leaving little dents in their wake- oops?

Steve's body was heavy on top of Tony, but Tony loved it, craved more; he wrapped his arms around Steve's waist, dragging him closer; Steve was grabbing the edge of the bath, anchoring himself to it, his entire body focused on the act of pushing himself down into Tony, burying Tony's length into himself.

Tony was moaning lustfully; he felt Steve's mouth on his neck and was vaguely aware of Steve making noises, mews and cries of desire, maybe the occasional cry of his name, but he was too focused on the physical sensations to really process or answer those noises; his knot was so swollen it was almost painful and even time he felt it slip back into Steve his hips jerked upward, involuntarily, seeking to fill up the omega, wanting to get more of himself inside him. He'd never had his knot worked like this, never, and it was so good, so tight... Steve's body was moving on top of his fast and hard, desperately milking him, and Tony was lost in wave after wave of pleasure.

"S... S..." he whimpered, clinging to the omega, fingers raking down his back. "Fuck... Steve!"

He practically shouted the other's name, hips stuttering as he came. He grabbed Steve's ass, pulling him down with a strength he didn't know he possessed, wiggling into the omega, needing to empty his seed as deep as possible into him.

His nails made Steve's back arch up as thin pink lines were left in their wake, the curve of his neck pretty as he curved into the sensation. He panted, knowing he was close himself. Steve cried out as Tony buried inside of him with a sense of finality, his alpha's fingers digging into the meat of his ass as he filled him with his seed. A warmth followed. Then Tony's cock pulsed and twitched inside of him as more come spilled out into him and Steve couldn't take it. He almost felt too full, if that were possible.

Steve reached down and stroked himself once and he became with a low moan, forehead pressed into the crook of Tony's neck as he came over his own chest and Tony's. "Fuck," he whispered, not moving from that position as he focused on the feeling of Tony's inside of him. He was perhaps a little sore now but he loved it. Steve shivered as he shifted a little, getting comfortable as he moved his hands back to brace against Tony's chest comfortably.
Steve nudged his nose against Tony's in an almost cute gesture. "There's...a small chance I damaged your bath tub, just a little bit."

Tony was panting softly; he nudged Steve's nose back.

"Fuck it," he said hoarsely. "I'll buy a new bath.. Steve... Steve, that was amazing..." Tony reached up shakily to touch Steve's cheek and suddenly he felt a weird lump in his throat and his eyes were brimming with tears. "...f-fuck... fuck, you really... you really spangled my stars, Captain, holy shit, that was good..."

He was pretty sure if Steve weren't pinning him against the edge of the bath he would slip down into the water, a happy, limp mess. Tony had had sex thousands of times but was certain that ranked in the top ten, at least. The rush of hormones that accompanied his orgasm felt unfamiliar and weird. He knew this was all part of the normal bonding process, probably, but that didn't make it any less weird.

He'd already scheduled a phone meeting with a professor of Alpha-omega relations studies from MIT, hoping to get a crash course in what was happening to him.

In the meantime, he and Steve were relaxing, melting together in the bath. Tony wanted to sleep, wanted to sleep for a million years with his omega in his arms like this; he was crashing hard from his climax and the warm water combined with Steve's smell was so relaxing.

Nothing was stopping him, actually. It was their honeymoon; they could do whatever they wanted, right?

"...g'night," whispered Tony, wearily kissing Steve's cheek. "Love you... my omega..."

"Good night?" Steve echoed in a bemused mumble. "It's like...four in the afternoon Tony." He kissed the side of his neck and leaned his head on Tony's shoulder, getting comfortable as he figured they'd be here for a while. His whole body tingled with the afterglow, his sense on fire and singing in pleasure.

"I love you, too," Steve murmured after a beat of quiet, nosing against Tony's shoulder as he let his own eyes slip shut for a brief moment. He hummed contently. This is what he'd always imagined a happy pair bond was like- maybe now he actually had it.

Then JARVIS's voice broke the quiet. "There's an incoming call, sir."

Neither Tony nor Steve responded.

"It's from the President's office, sir."

"Tell the president I'm balls-deep in-" began Tony, but Steve was already shushing him.

Tony's brain was moving sluggishly but it was able to come up with a half-dozen scenarios already. He was hoping they were going to get a hearty congratulations and then be left alone, but it was more likely that they needed Iron Man for some bullshit international conflict involving terrorists with rocket launchers; or they needed Captain America to come handle a hostage crisis; or they wanted an emergency briefing on what, exactly, had gone down at the Expo.

Tony wanted to protest and tell President Ellis to go shove it but one of the downsides to being bonded to Captain America was forfeiting that right. Besides, Ellis was a beta. He wouldn't understand what bonding felt like. Hell, Tony hadn't appreciated it until recently. Specifically, when Steve had been cracking his bathtub moments earlier.
Steve trailed a finger down the curve of Tony's neck, eyes glazed over as he watched it. He blinked. He huffed out a soft breath. Maybe he should care more but all he really cared about right now was Tony, the way he felt inside of him and the way his hands felt on his waist. He shifted a little and grunted when Tony's cock twitched inside of him.

"Tell him Tony's very busy helping me adjust to the 21st century and we'll call him back later..." Steve told JARVIS, letting his eyes slip shut again.

"...hee hee. Adjusting," repeated Tony groggily, wiggling his hips a little. He stifled a yawn, dipping his fingers in the warm water and trickling a few droplets over Steve's back.

"But Ms. Potts informed me to route official calls through," protested JARVIS. "In light of recent events at the Expo--"

"Welp, me and Tony aren't really moving from this position for about an hour. I believe the US has this great thing called the army? Tell him to call them, if he needs soldiers," commanded Steve.

"Very well, Captain," JARVIS said.

Even though they'd dismissed the call, it bugged Tony. He liked knowing things, hated being out of the loop. He was pretty sure it had to be about the Expo, something he really didn't want to handle for at least a week. Hadn't SHIELD said they'd taken over the investigation? Tony would call Pepper later, have her prep a statement for him. Right now Tony didn't want to relive the Expo; he was actively working to forget about it. Seeing Steve in danger had been one of the worst experiences of his life. Right now, he just wanted to focus on this, on their bodies slotted together like puzzle pieces, on the ride and fall of Steve's back as he breathed, his breath syncing automatically with Tony's.

It was paradise.

Tony could already feel himself slipping away, being lulled to sleep.

"...JARVIS... don't bug us with anymore calls when we're post-coital, okay?" mumbled Tony. "There. That ought to take care of things.

"But Ms. Potts and President Ellis insist that--"

"Can it, I, Robot."

"...yes, sir."

Tony sighed softly, happily, letting sleep catch up to him, focusing on the steady heartbeat of the omega in his arms instead of the nagging feeling of worry that had settled into his gut.
Honeymoon, part II

Chapter Notes

In the MCU, Steve was born in 1920; in the comics, however, he was born in 1918. We went with the comic canon birth year of 1918.

Enjoy this chapter, with more smut than ever, plus the answers to such questions as, "How long can Steve hold his breath?" and "Is Steve circumcised?" and "What does Tony think about #stony?"

Cuddled up in the bath together, they both dozed off into a gentle sleep. When Steve woke the water was getting cold and Tony was soft inside of him, his knot having gone down. Slowly, he pulled off and Tony stirred beneath him but didn't wake. Quietly Steve went to grab towels. He tied one around his waist and then picked Tony up before wrapping the second towel around him. His swollen ankle was looking better from the long soak in the warm bath.

Steve tucked Tony into bed; he half stirred. "It's okay," he whispered and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Sleep. You need it." But Steve didn't- the serum had changed that. To sleep for more than about eight hours, it had to have been an especially long day- the Expo being the perfect example of that.

Steve searched around for his phone. His agent had sent him a link to another article. He opened it.

CAP'S MOVING SPEECH ABOUT THE FUTURE AND CHANGE: THE REAL HEROISM AT THE EXPO

Underneath there was a picture of him on stage speaking into the microphone, his brow drawn together like he was saying something serious.

HIS SPEECH TACKLED REAL ISSUES ABOUT TODAY'S SOCIETY AND SHOULDN'T BE OVERSHADOWED BY GUNS AND GLORY.

Something tightened in Steve's chest.

Tony was only half-conscious of being lifted and dried and tucked into bed. He mumbled sleepily as he felt Steve fussing around with the blankets, making him comfortable. He cracked an eye open, looking for his omega. Steve was standing by the bed, naked, carved from marble, staring down at a phone that seemed too small in his hands. He was reading something. Tony felt a surge of pride and affection for Steve; reading an article on a cell phone. How quickly he was adapting.

"...so good..." mumbled Tony. He started to reach for Steve but his hand dropped and he went back under. Tony's sleep schedule was non-existent; he worked his body to the limit, then crashed hard, sleeping for long blocks of time. He'd always been fairly bipolar about rest, and since Afghanistan, that dichotomy had increased significantly, because crashing helped keep him from having dreams.

On the sidebar of the phone, there were a couple of recommended articles.

HONOR-BOUND, ALPHA-BONDED: CAPTAIN AMERICA REVEALS PAIR BOND TO
WEAPONS CONTRACTOR TONY STARK

STEVE ROGERS, NATIONAL SYMBOL AND 'SUPER SOLDIER,' CRITICIZES AMERICA’S CULTURE REGARDING STATUS CIVIL RIGHTS

STEVE ROGERS DECLARES MODERN OMEGA RIGHTS 'NOT ENOUGH,' CRUSADES FOR BETTER HEALTH AND SAFETY

ALPHA TRIED IN NEW MEXICO FOR BRUTAL SLAYING OF OMEGA INFANT

The last one probably only popped up because it mentioned Alphas and omegas, but it was a sharp, startling dent in the news flow about Tony and Steve. They two of them were so encapsulated in their own world that it was easy to forget, sometimes, there were other people going about their lives without them. Although the 21st century was clearly more hospitable to omegas than the forties, there were still plenty of instances of violence and discrimination, especially in the poorer, disenfranchised areas of America. Small, rural communities along with urban ghettos saw their fair share of Alpha-on-omega violence.

In the bed, Tony curled up on his side, tugging more sheets around himself. He'd grown up on Long Island, in the lap of luxury; he'd never witnessed the kind of discrimination Steve had, in Brooklyn. To Tony, omegas were servants, but they were generally treated well. Unlike Steve, Tony had no real concept of omegas facing any actual hardships. It simply wasn't part of his life experience.

Steve spent the rest of the afternoon drawing. He asked JARVIS what the least used room in the house was and picked a white wall. A biro would do for the drawing itself though he'd gone through about three pens in the space of four hours. He knew Tony wouldn't mind and the impact would be worth it when it was done. When he was a kid Steve would always draw on the walls...it would make his ma so mad, but so proud. Especially when they were the spitting image of her.

Around eight Steve woke Tony up with Thai take away, JARVIS having told him his usual order. He brought the food into the bedroom on trays and set the boxes full of noodles and fried vegetables on the bedside before he moved to wake Tony up.

He was dressed in his shirt and boxers now, but that was all. "Hey," Steve murmured as he sat down next to him, placing a hand on Tony's shoulder. "Time to wake up. I got dinner."

"Nuh," said Tony, rolling onto his back. He was vaguely away of the smell of stir-fry and omega.

He squinted at the clock next to the bed.

Outside, the sun was just starting to set over the horizon; the view out the west window was magnificent. The ocean was peaceful and sparkling pinks, purples, and golds.

He'd been asleep just over three hours.

"...Steve," he said, smiling groggily. He reached up to run a hand through his hair. His hair was a mess, and jaw had a faint five o'clock shadow. He yawned widely and reached up to scratch the scars around the arc reactor. He glanced down at his hands; they were trembling a little.

He swung out of bed, unconcerned with his nudity, and stumbled over to the bar to grab himself a drink. "Why'd you let me sleep so late?" he asked as he pulled out a decanter full of whiskey. "I wanna be with you, Steve. You should've woken me up. What have you been up to for the last three hours? ...did you call President Ellis back? What did I miss? I'm serious, I don't want to sleep through my whole honeymoon period..."

He threw back a glass of liquor and then poured
himself a second one.

Steve sighed and walked up behind him, curling a hand over Tony's before he could pour himself a third. "You need sleep, Tony," he murmured and nuzzled against the back of his neck. "Honeymoon period is about indulging ourselves in lots of ways- sleep is important too." Steve let eyes slip shut for a moment.

"I was drawing," he murmured. "Inspiration struck me, I guess. And I suppose I wanted to make a point."

Steve thought about the articles and his heart swelled in his chest. He hoped Tony would proud of it too. "There's more stuff out in the news. Also an omega hate crime I should probably comment on, but that can wait for the morning."

"Ellis didn't call back so it couldn't have been that important," Steve assured him.

Tony leaned back against Steve's broad chest, tilting his head back onto Steve's shoulder. "I could sleep next to you while you're drawing," he pointed out crankily. "Is there coffee? I need a cup of- Steve, if you comment on every omega hate crime, you're gonna be swamped. It's not like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. commented on every single racial hate crime, or... or... who's a famous feminist? I'm blanking. ...wow, Pepper would be so mad. Anyways, my point is, Steve... don't over-stretch yourself. I wanna be able to have some time with you, too." He turned his head to kiss Steve's neck, inhale his scent. His body quivered with warmth, a combination of love and alcohol.

"JARVIS, what's new?" he called.

"Your and Captain Rogers's announcement has been reported by all major news outlets. Internet commentary indicates roughly two-thirds approval by the public. Expo casualties have been confirmed to be six. Names have not yet been released to the public, but I took the liberty of looking them up for you, sir."

"Yeah... yeah, we should probably send flowers..." said Tony grudgingly, eyeing the bar's contents. "Well, lay 'em on me, Jarv, who died?"

"Magda Gutierrez, 56, of the Bronx, New York... Marcus Sinclair, 23, of St. Louis, Missouri... Monique Cutlass, 19, of Brooklyn, New York... Daniel Prescott, 35, of Ithaca, New York... Leonard Rothstein, 20, of Los Angeles, California... and Lorraine Babbitt, 59, of Baltimore, Maryland."

Something hit Tony in the gut, hard. "...who was the second-to-last one?"

"Leonard Rothstein. 20. Of Los Angeles, California."

"...status?"

"Omega."

Tony's turned to look at Steve.

No. Had to be a coincidence. Surely there were other Leos from California.

"...JARVIS... JARVIS, did Rothstein have special tickets, by any chance?"

"A VIP pass, sir."
Tony reached for the decanter of whiskey. His heart had dropped. His fault. Those six names had been nobodies to him. Except that one wasn't a nobody, one of them was a person Tony had talked to, a real person, not just a name on a list, and he was dead because of Tony. The guilt he'd felt about the Expo was suddenly personal, too loud and incredibly close and painfully real. Steve's hand was still on his but Steve was, at least temporarily, not holding him back from getting another drink, and Tony needed it. Badly.

"Coffee. Come on," Steve murmured and squeezed Tony's hand, gently pulling his hands away from the bottle in hope that he would stop drinking. He couldn't just watch this all the time-watching Tony poison him. It would slowly kill him. "It's not your fault, Tony, I promise."

Steve squeezed his hands again and lead him back to bed. It would be hard to get Tony to try and eat now no doubt. "I'm just gonna grab you a coffee," he said and kissed his forehead before disappearing for a moment.

Tony let Steve drop him into the bed, only because he was turning inward, letting the information sink in.

When Steve returned to the bedroom with a cup in hand Tony hadn't moved from his spot. He swallowed, something tugging in his gut. "Hey," he held out the cup. "Why don't I show you what I drew?"

He was barely aware of Steve leaving and barely aware of him returning. He looked up as Steve pushed a mug of coffee into his hands.

"It was my fault, Steve. I gave him the tickets. I got him to that Expo. I led him there like a lamb to the slaughter."

Tony tried to sip the coffee. There was no alcohol in it. Tony felt a stab of annoyance at Steve. He held out the coffee. "I don't want this," he snapped. He flopped down onto the pillows. "...I'm sorry, Steve. I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at... myself, I guess. I dunno." Tony reached out for Steve's hand, finding it, lacing their fingers together. He gave Steve's hand a squeeze, feeling even more guilty for snapping at his omega.

"...show me what you drew," he said quietly. He didn't really care but he knew this was important to Steve. If he was alone he would have liked to drink himself stupid but he wasn't alone anymore and probably never would be again. "Can you put a shot in this? Please? I need it, Steve. ...please."

The effort to get out of bed was monumental but Tony forced himself to. His ankle throbbed when he stood but he was almost glad for it. He felt like he deserved it; his Expo had killed six people and knowing who one of those people had been had thrown the whole mess into his face, up close, on display. It was Gulmira all over again. Tony had to admit, grudgingly, that as much fun as Iron Man was, he seemed to face a lot of death in it. Never his own, only people he didn't want to see die.

"Steve," said Tony suddenly. "You wanted to start a charity. Let's do it together. We can name it after him. That... that would be a good thing, right? ...right?" Tony looked up into Steve's eyes, seeking some absolution there. "He was an omega, he wanted... he was behind you. He believed in you. In the future and omega rights and stuff. We should do that, in his name..." He trailed off, searching Steve's face for approval, for forgiveness.

"I would love to name it after him," Steve murmured and ran his fingers through Tony's hair before kissing his forehead. He leaned their heads together for a brief moment and sighed, feeling a chunk
of Tony's anxiety float away at the touch.

"Come on," Steve whispered and took Tony's hand. He threatens their fingers together and gently tugged him along towards the upstairs bedroom. He squeezed his hand gently, running his fingers over the bumps of Tony's knuckles. He helped him walk up the stairs but didn't carry him. He didn't think Tony could take that right now.

The drawing was sketched from the small scribble from earlier. It was all in Biro, black and blue lines drawn across the wall in cross hatches creating soft shadows and defined outlines. The old arc reactor was pressed into the wall in the centre instead of it being drawn. It was detailed and captured a true sense of reality. It was enigmatic, beautiful perhaps and it offered a good likeness. It was an honest drawing.

"Just in case you ever need reminding that you have a heart," Steve murmured and turned around to run his hands down Tony's arms. "Sorry, I er... ruined your wall."

"...Maxwell's Equations," exclaimed Tony quietly. "This is... this is something else, Steve." He turned and looked into Steve's eyes. "...you didn't ruin it," he said. "I like it. Thank you. It's... cheesy. But modern. I like it; I like installation pieces."

He wrapped his arms around Steve's waist and lay his head on his shoulder, closing his eyes. He wasn't great with words, not words that expressed gratitude or humility, anyway. Instead he enfolded Steve in a hug and swayed with him, the old palladium-model RT node glowing from the wall, the long, precise ink strokes enhancing the shadows it threw across the room.

It was gorgeous and Tony liked it; liked it a lot. But it meant more coming from Steve. Steve had actual talent. Steve was an artist as much as he was a soldier and Tony felt like he had exclusive access to this innermost part of Steve's life, something most people probably had no idea even existed. It made him feel warm... honored.

Steve wrapped his arms around Tony and leaned his head on top of his. He sighed softly. He stared at the ghoulish blue glow thrown across the room and the way it made shadows stretch across the walls. He kissed Tony's hair. "Installation piece?" He echoed in a murmur, smile evident in his tone. "I thought it seemed a bit more like vandalism..."

"After our honeymoon is over we'll work out that charity," Steve said. "But like you said- this time is for each other. And I know what's going on outside doesn't make that the easiest thing right now but...but I think we should try. This time is about each other and assholes like Vanko and Hammer won't take that from us, okay?"

Steve nuzzled against the side of his neck. "Tell me what I can do to distract you, Tony."

Tony sighed softly. What Steve was saying was true, but the guilt was eating him alive. Steve had found a way to make the arc reactor beautiful, but that was, at least in part, because it was installed in a wall and surrounded by geometric pen marks, not embedded in a human chest and surrounded by scars.

"I dunno. Just... be with me, I guess. Let me drink, maybe. I could really use more than one drink at a time, y'know?" He sighed a little, trying to shake off the guilt unsuccessfully.

He looked up at the wall piece again. Was that how Steve saw him? It was beautiful. A good way to preserve the old arc reactor.

"C'mon. Maybe I'll feel better if I read some fanmail. Have my ego stroked a little." Tony cleared
his throat loudly. "Ego," he repeated, looking pointedly at Steve.

He gave his hand a tiny tug.

"Drinks make depressed feelings worse Tony," Steve pointed out gently as he let himself be lead downstairs. He squeezed his hand back, helping Tony walk down the stairs again but not picking him up. "It's not my business to tell you how to live your life," he added. "But if I drank like you do...I don't think you'd let me."

Tony wanted to protest, tell Steve he would totally support Steve if he wanted to drink a bunch, but his words died on his lips as the two of them walked down to the living room.

The pile of mail had more than doubled. There were letters, packages, cards, manila folders, plus dozens of flower arrangements (myrtle, lavender, honeysuckle-- all of them obnoxiously fragrant) and several live orchids, the traditional bonding symbol.

At the sight of the first white orchid, Tony was hit with two memories.

One was following Jarvis as a child, watching him clipping the flowerless stem from an orchid in his father's study. He'd been curious as to why his father, who was not bonded, would have an orchid and had assumed it was simply because it was pretty. The second was a memory of a vase with a half-dozen white tulips sitting on a small round dining table in the middle of an unfamiliar room.

"...he got you tulips once," muttered Tony. Steve didn't respond; he was too busy arranging the couch cushions under Tony's leg.

Steve didn't know how Tony knew that. Sometimes people used to say that a bond was a physic connection. Until experiencing it Steve could have never believed them. But if Tony knew that, then... there must be something.

Steve remembered the day like yesterday. Bucky brought them home and Steve was delighted. He drew them all day and all night. And then Bucky brought home a girl and Steve sat out on the fire escape in the muggy summer air to avoid listening to them. He'd accidentally fallen asleep and when the sun went down he'd started to shiver. Bucky had been furious when he'd found him and dragged him inside.... Steve had had a cold for weeks after that.

Steve went back to moving cushions around so that Tony could prop his bad ankle up.

"...it's not made of glass you know," added Tony, but didn't try to stop him. He could tell Steve was enjoying pampering him.

Steve finally determined Tony was comfortable enough and he took a stack of mail, handing Tony another stack. He settled next to Tony and Tony leaned in to him, pressing their shoulders together.

They both ripped open an envelope together.

Steve held the envelope at arms length, eyes wide. "Why the hell is there hair in there?"

Tony laughed at Steve's horror. "Oh, that's nothing. I bet at least half of this stuff is from total whackos. It always is. ...look, the Kennedys sent us an orchid, that's nice... Dear Captain America, Please reconsider your bond, as this is a devil's trick to distract you from... oh, boy... yep, I got a weird one, too... this guy's capitalization is all over the place..." Tony tossed the letter aside. 

"...don't worry, people send all sorts of shit... I mean I have literally been sent actual shit before..."
Steve opened a letter and began to read, his heart in his throat. He ran a hand over his face. "I think...I think I know what kind of charity I want to create," he whispered.

"It's not a hair donation charity, is it?" asked Tony, tearing open another card. He skimmed it and placed it in the "normal" pile. The next letter, addressed to Captain America, was a plea not to trust the government, pointing out that jet fuel couldn't melt steel beams. Tony put that in the "crazy" pile.

The door opened and Tony's topiary artists walked in, each of them carrying an orchid in each arm.

Tony looked up sharply. "...Steve. I think we have a problem," he said. "How many more--"

"Seven more outside and two more bags of mail," said one of the landscapers. "Where do you want these?"

Tony hoped Steve's charity involved giving away orchids because at a glance, there were already two dozen in the living room.

"Just... just put 'em on the floor, we'll sort through them later," said Tony, his hand snaking out to touch Steve's thigh lightly. He looked over at Steve, who was absorbed in a letter. "What's it say? ...what's the charity, Steve?"

Steve didn't even glance up from the letter to see the flowers, finishing it to the end. "He's called Mark. He's eighteen. He says he was assaulted about three months ago, the police didn't believe his story. Now he's pregnant and he can't afford an abortion and his boyfriend's left him." He murmured, voice a little thick. Steve lowered the letter and looked up into Tony's eyes as the topiary artists disappeared having set the flowers down.

"I want to provide money for legal representation and terminations if omegas need it. I want to provide something to protect omegas for when the system fails them," Steve said, letter shaking a little in his hand. There was nothing like that for them back in the forties- nothing. But it was the 21st century now and things were supposed to be better. He swallowed. "Can we do that? Is it possible, Tony?"

"...woo boy. Yeah, it's possible. It'll piss a lot of people off. But it's possible," said Tony, watching the landscapers drag in more orchids. "The press will eat you alive. But, yeah, we can do it. You can do anything if you have enough money."

He reached over to touch Steve's hair lightly. He was proud of Steve, so proud; Steve was everything good in the world that Tony wanted to be and always seemed to fall short of.

Tony already knew the fallout would be enormous; he donated regularly to Planned Parenthood, which mostly catered to beta women, and he'd gotten death threats over it. Happily, though, he was pretty sure if he and Steve formed a charity together, then he would take most of the flak. After all, people thought of Steve as a wholesome, all-America goodie-two-shoes, and Tony as a troublemaker. And being the Alpha, people would think Tony was the mastermind behind it and Steve was just along for the ride.

"...forming a non-profit takes, like, a while," said Tony, trying to remember. "I think it's a one or two month minimum, but it can take longer... six, eight months, even." He took Steve's hand. "$...so we'll have to get Mark the lawyers and the money personally, if he's already three months along. Is what I'm saying," he finished. The only thing Tony hated more than getting involved in
personal affairs was doing nothing. He intended to get the kid help, anonymously, and leave it at that.

He picked up another letter with his free hand and tore it open with his teeth. "Dear Captain America, I think you’re an inspiration to omegas everywhere -- aww-- which is why I don’t understand how come you bonded to Tony Stark -- uh-oh-- who seems like kind of a jerk-- true-- you could definitely do better-- admitted also probably true-- when you come to your senses please call me-- yep, nope, another crazy, damn it..."

Tony dropped the letter into the growing pile in front of him.

Steve leaned into Tony's touch, fingertips nudging against his scalp. "I don't care if it'll piss people off...I almost think that's half the point," he murmured. "So many people are being failed, falling off the edges...someone's gotta catch 'em or they'll just keep falling."

Steve stare down at the letter in his hand and then carefully set it down on the table next to one of the first bunches of orchids. "We need to get someone to search through all these. I imagine that Mark isn't the only one writing to us for help..."

A sad quiet filled the room until JARVIS broke it.

"I thought Sir would be interested to know that Taylor Swift just tweeted at you asking when she can borrow 'your boi' for the weekend as she has a world opinion to change overnight."

Steve's eyes narrowed. "Tweeted?" he echoed. "Is that the bird thing?" He couldn't help but blush at the way Tony looked at him for asking.

Tony's face split into a grin. "Oh, so now she's tweeting back at me? I see how it is. JARVIS, post a new tweet, @taylorswift13, my boi is his #ownmega, ask him, not me. Yes, Steve, tweeting is the bird thing. God, I hope ownmega starts trending, that's a great hashtag."

Steve looked lost. As Tony's PA, he hadn't actually needed to do much with Twitter; Tony thoroughly enjoyed Twitter and ran his own account, much to the chagrin of his PR team.

Tony squeezed his hand. "Don't worry, I'll set you up with an account. For our hashtag, I was thinking, StarkSpangled, what do you think?"

"Starkspangled doesn't sound like a real name," Steve said, still confused but he figured Tony knew what he was doing. He'd been debriefed on things like Twitter before going undercover but his job had had nothing to do with it, and in the course of the last few months, he'd forgotten almost everything and learned nothing new. The deluge of information about the 21st century meant he had to pick and choose what was important, and Twitter didn't seem like an important thing.

"Right now, sir, you and Captain Rogers are trending as #stony," reported JARVIS.

Tony made a face. "...stony? That's stupid." Tony picked up a card and opened it; several dried flower petals fell out. "Don't worry, Steve, we'll set up a thing for all the omegas asking for help... just... don't over-stretch yourself, okay, buddy?" said Tony gently, brushing the flower petals off his lap. "We can't save them all. Dear Captain Rogers, please find enclosed the petals of the orchid I got when I was bonded in 1938-- oh, shit, I just crushed them, they're all over the floor-- enjoy this wonderful time with your Alpha, I'm so happy you have finally found love -- well, that's nice--"

"1938? On my God," Steve whispered and gently picked a few up. "They're as old as me," he joked
weakly and smiled as he picked up a petal whole. Steve gently set it down on top of Mark's letter.

"Hey, is that..." Steve's eyes narrowed as he spotted something big and got up. He ripped off a corner of paper wrapping. "It's a canvas!" exclaimed in surprise and excitement. He dragged the paper back, revealing the painting.

Steve nearly choked. "Oh God...is that us naked? Is that supposed to be...?"

"I love it!" exclaimed Tony with glee.

He grabbed the painting out of Steve's hands and climbed onto the nearest table, knocking over a decorative vase. "I always hated this Rothko, this'll look way better--" he said to himself, trying to pull down an abstract painting off the wall.

The front door beeped and Rhodes walked in carrying a bottle of champagne and an orchid.

"Hey, Tones, I brought-- oh my God, is that you guys naked?"

"It's a masterpiece," said Tony, trying to get the painting to hang straight. "Please tell me you didn't bring us another damned orchid."

"It's tradition," said Rhodes, setting the white orchid next to another one with faint red streaks. "I thought they told you not to stand on that foot? I came over to see how you and Steve were doing."

"Great!" grunted Tony, stretching dangerously, wobbling a little. "I need a boost. Steve! Pick me and this cabinet up, I can't reach the hook. How about you, Rhodey, you took a few hits in the suit-""

Rhodes waved a hand dismissively. "I'm fine, I'm totally fine, I'm on administrative leave until the investigation is over." He took a few steps toward the table Tony was standing on, clearly ready for Tony to fall over.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, eyes narrowing as he picked out the paintings details. It was good, objectively, but also ridiculous and over the top. No wonder Tony loved it...

"I'm not helping you put that painting up and if you put it up on that wall, where all the house stuff can see, I will burn it," Steve promised him, raising a brow. "And thank you, for the flowers," Steve breathed and glanced over at Rhodey. "They're very nice. Thank you."

"The house staff has all already seen me naked, and you've got nothing to be ashamed of, Rogers," said Tony, throwing a grin over his shoulder. He widened his stance a little, trying to stand on tip-toe and knocking over a small bowl of potpourri. "Oops, dammit... CORRINE!" he shouted suddenly.

Rhodes jumped.

A woman walked in to the room, a short, heavy, dark-haired omega who was polishing a silver candlestick. "Yes, Mr. Stark?"

"Have you seen me naked?"

She paused, then answered, "Yes, Mr. Stark."

"See?" said Tony. He turned back to Corrine. "Thanks, Corrine."

"That doesn't mean I want all your staff to see me naked...and something tells me you don't want
that either," Steve said, sounding thoroughly amused as the painting was thankfully abandoned for now.

She glanced over at the growing stack of mail and live plants, then caught Steve's eyes. She smiled, one omega to another, then disappeared again.

Steve smiled back at Corrie, something tugging in his gut. The omega solidarity from the forties had stuck- they were always on the look out for each other. They still had each other's back at an unspoken word. It feel good to have not lost that even if it was sad that it was necessary.

Tony stretched, wobbling on the toes of his good foot. Rhodes was looking at the white orchid with the red streaks on it. "Oh, hey, this one's from Virginia..."

At the sound of Pepper's real name, Tony lost his footing and fell off the table. Fortunately, Rhodes had been expecting it, and he managed to snag Tony and break his fall; he dragged Tony away from the painting and practically pushed him into a chair. "Haven't you taken enough hits? Captain, how's the shoulder doing?"

"My shoulder's healed, thanks," Steve breathed, honestly having forgotten he'd dislocated it in the first place.

"CORRINE!" barked Tony again.

"Mr. Stark?"

"...get Rhodey a beer." Tony cast a longing look over his shoulder at the painting, then turned his attention back to Steve. He grinned at him, remembering fondly the arc reactor set into the wall, the elaborate shadows sketched around it. It was bold and sharp, ghostly but warm. It was in some ways a sort of modern portrait and Tony felt a pang of affection; he felt the suddenly and overwhelming need to touch Steve.

He got up and limped over to the couch, practically crawling into Steve's lap, wrapping his arms around him. "All these stupid flowers," he said quietly, his tone affectionate.

Rhodes watched with silent interest; Corrine brought him a beer and he took a long drink from it, watching Tony. He'd know Tony for twenty-five years and he had never heard that tone from Tony before. Not while he was sober, anyway. He'd heard Tony come close when he was drunk and talking about Pepper, or drunk and talking about cars. Seeing Tony sober and unabashedly sappy was... weird. Rhodes had seen Tony act weird a lot of times; he'd seen him high on ecstasy and high on cocaine, too drunk to stand and too sleep-deprived to string together a coherent sentence; he'd seen Tony in the hours immediately following his escape from Afghanistan, seen him after violent break-ups and after Obadiah's death. But seeing Tony like this, seeing him happy, watching all the little sappy glances he kept giving Steve, the way he kept reaching for his hand and touching the hem of his shirt... yeah, it was weird. Tony normally reserved affection of this level for alcohol or engines.

"...is it really as intense as everyone says?" asked Rhodes.

"What?" asked Tony, clearly not paying attention, cuddling up to Steve, playing with the sleeve of his t-shirt.

"Bonding. It seems really intense."

"No, it's great, it's the best thing in the world," said Tony, setting his head on Steve's shoulder. "Wanna help us answer fan mail until I get horny and take Steve out back to plow him again?"
Rhodes choked on his beer and sputtered, getting ale all over the place. "I came to make sure you were okay," he coughed. "How's all of it been going then? The honeymoon stuff...is that...okay?" Rhodes asked, sounding a little awkward now Tony was half licking at Steve's neck. Steve would never have the heart to push Tony away, though.

Steve turned a pretty pink at Tony's rude comment. Obviously...that's what they were going to be doing. But Rhodes didn't need the gaps filling in for him. It also didn't help that was literally just in a boxers and shirt. He was hardly properly dressed himself.

"We're great. I got a sprained ankle, Steve got a couple bruises... but we've got each other. So we're fine," said Tony, nuzzling his lips against Steve's neck.

"You're creeping me out, Tony."

"I'm in love."

Rhodes shook his head, smiling. He hadn't bonded, himself, and didn't really expect to because of his career. But if he'd ever been asked, he would have thought that he would bond before Tony would. Tony had always said bonding was stupid and out-dated and for weak-minded fools. Maybe he was just quoting Obadiah, who said the same thing. But he'd never shown the slightest bit of interest in even hanging out around omegas, and now, he seemed laser-focused on Steve. It was cute in a very slightly unsettling way.

One of the orchids had green steaks through it. It looked pretty. Steve flipped over the label.

Wir werden kommen

Steve suddenly stood and emptied the orchids and water, not caring about the mess as he stuck his fingers inside. Nothing.

"Whoa-- hey! Steve!" protested Tony as Steve began dumping flowers all over the floor. "What the hell, that's a hybrid gemstone orchid, are you cra--"

Steve smashed the little ceramic pot that the orchid had been in. He picked up a chip and crushed it like it was a beetle; Tony let out another noise of protest and grabbed his hand.

"Steve, was that a chip?? Why the hell did you crush it, I could've traced it!" Tony grabbed the remains of the chip from Steve's hand and held it up between his thumb and finger, closing one eye, trying to ID it. Impossible. No serial number, and most of the components that would have been identifiable were destroyed.

Rhodes grabbed the tag and looked at it. ".. we will come .. who sent this?" He flipped the label over as if there might be more information on it, but of course, there wasn't.

Tony was bristling. "Neo-Nazis? I don't know. It's in German, the only reason anyone would send that would be to fuck with Steve, right?"

"Could be a threat. ..or a warning," said Rhodes, studying the label. "Could just be a shitty prank, people messing with Steve because he's an omega."

"Since when did people use orchids to send threats? That's fucked up," said Tony, paranoia bubbling up inside of him. He wanted to tackle Steve to the ground and lay on top of him until the threat had passed, except the threat was only a vague sentence written on a small slip of paper and wasn't anything tangible he could actually bare his teeth at.
He kicked a small piece of ceramic, feeling on edge again; his hand reached out automatically and groped for Steve's. Finding it, he squeezed, hard.

"We need to get this to the base," said Rhodes, standing, still holding the label delicately. "It could have prints, DNA... do you guys have a security detail on you right now?"

"Um, I'm Iron Man, and he's Captain America," said Tony. "We're our own security. Also, there's no one who's out to get us. I mean, Vanko's dead, and he's Russian, not German and--"

"What about the Winter Soldier?" asked Rhodes point-blank.

Tony's eyes narrowed. "You read Steve's files?"

"The ones I had access to, yes. Tony. You had a complete and total break-down when you found out about Steve's old Alpha. Of course I read Steve's files. You're my best friend and you bonded to an omega with a long history. I worry about you," said Rhodes.

"That was none of your business."

"I had clearance to read the files so it kind of was," shot back Rhodes. "And according to those files, the Winter Soldier has been shadowing SHIELD for a long time. Steve is one of SHIELD's most valued agents. Use your brain, Tony."

"Thought he was Russian, though, not German."

"No one knows what he is. He speaks both," said Rhodes.

Tony sulked. "Why would they chip it? Who's trying to spy on us? I mean, we're honeymooning, it's not like we're going to be talking about top-secret SHIELD plans. We're just going to be screwing like weasels."

"I don't know, but if I were you, I'd beef up my security protocols," said Rhodes. "I'm gonna take this tag to Edwards and see if they can get any information from it."

"JARVIS, I need you to scan anything that comes into this house for EM signals," called Tony. "If anyone's trying to bug this place, I want to know about it."

"Maybe they just wanted to see how far the chip would get before it got destroyed. Wanted to see how paranoid we already were," Steve suggested quietly and Rhodey sighed.

"Well, now I figure you are," he said. "And the fact that it got all the way into the house makes you guys seem like easy pickings. And even if they just got recordings of you doing...that, it could definitely damage Steve's reputation."

After all, Steve was America's golden boy. Their sweetheart. Logically, after bonding (ha, someone should have told Bucky that) it was normal for the couple to copulate a lot in the first week. It was no real secret that Captain America was having sex right now but that didn't mean the public wanted to think about it, or be given proof of it. The media turmoil if Steve was probably just recorded swearing would be unimaginable.

"It's definitely a threat," Steve murmured, sinking back down onto the sofa and tugging Tony down with him. "But we can't let them intimidate us. I figure that if HYDRA actually wanted me dead then I would be already."

Tony let Steve drag him onto the couch; he was feeling irritated that Steve had destroyed the chip
because he could have probably traced it back to its source. But he was also irritated at himself; Rhodes was right. A bug getting into the house was a huge security no-no. Tony's mail was always checked before it came in, but of course no one would think of checking the orchids; who would be evil enough to bug a congratulatory bonding symbol? That was like putting anthrax in baby formula. It was unthinkable.

"Steve's reputation is fine," said Tony dismissively. "I literally told everyone we would release a sex tape like, two days ago. People are probably expecting me to corrupt him. After all, I'm... me. Rhodes, go see if you can get any info off the card. I'll try to salvage the chip later. I want to know who the fuck sent it." He paused. "It's a hybrid gemstone orchid. Westerlay Nursery is the only place that sells green orchids. Have SHIELD check their records."

"...I had no idea you knew so much about orchids," said Rhodes with a small smirk.

"I don't," said Tony quickly. "It's just that--" He looked uncharacteristically embarrassed. "--uh, Pepper likes flowers and last year, I dunno, I might have... gotten her, y'know, gotten her some flowers from there. And I remember they have green orchids because, seriously, man, when was the last time you saw a green orchid?"

Rhodes smirked a little more but didn't comment. "I'll call if we find anything out," he said, rising, waving the card at them. "Thanks for the beer. Have fun, lovebirds."

Tony growled softly, but it was a friendly noise. He and Rhodes went back far enough that Tony didn't feel especially threatened by him; Rhodey was like an older brother. It helped that Rhodes had maintained a respectful distance from Steve the entire time he'd been there. It was a conscious effort.

"Just because everyone knows you're corrupting me doesn't mean people want to think about it," Steve pointed out quietly. "It's like the queen of England - everyone knows she must take a dump now and then but by god no one ever talks about it. It's my job to embody virtue - or at least it was before. But then...thinking back I kind of hated that stereotype if I'm honest."

Steve watched Rhodey's figure disappear out of sight and sighed.

"What the hell do HYDRA even want from me?" Steve whispered into the quiet of the room and felt Tony's fingers squeeze around his own. He squeezed back. "Don't you think they've already taken enough? Feels that way to me."

Steve leaned his head on Tony's shoulder. "If they hurt you because of me I don't think..." He trailed off, not wanting to finish that sentence.

"We don't know it's HYDRA. It could be anyone," said Tony quickly. "Could be some stupid prank. Could be nothing. Don't worry, Steve, this place is a fortress. I've got three suits downstairs and a ton of security measures in place, and JARVIS, and-- hey, don't worry, we're great, we're golden. No one can touch me; I'm the invincible Iron Man. And I'm your Alpha. It's my job to worry about you. " Tony nuzzled Steve's hair, one hand coming up to stroke his back. "...even if they got into the house, they'd never find us in all these orchids," he whispered.

Almost prophetically, there was a beep from the front door and another member of the house staff walked in, two orchids in each arm. She set them down and then went back for more.

Tony wondered how worried he should be. He'd always lived life in the spotlight, unconcerned with his own safety. But now he had an omega to think of. Suddenly, he wasn't merely personally vulnerable. Anyone who wanted to hurt either of them only had to hurt the other. Their
vulnerability had doubled in bonding.

Tony's brain reminded him, vividly, of watching Vanko throw Steve's body against the wall. It was like Tony himself had been impacted; he'd sworn his heart had stopped for a split-second. Seeing Steve's mortality so up close and personal scared the hell out of him. Steve looked so young and healthy and fit; even imagining him hurt or sick was paralyzing.

Tony realized he was clinging to Steve rather aggressively. He loosened his grip. "Steve," he murmured softly. He leaned in to bite Steve's ear gently, giving it a playful little tug. Steve was the best thing that had happened to him in a long time, even though he was dragging Tony into this mess with SHIELD and HYDRA and all the other alphabet-soup agencies of the world. It wasn't like Tony really had anything else going on, anyway. He'd thought he was a goner. If not for Steve, he would probably just be kicking around the house, pestering Pepper with phone calls and building new suits.

Steve leaned into Tony's touch, not noticing if he was gripping him a little tight. The presence of his alpha and touch was comforting and grounding. He sighed softly and let his eyes slip shut. Then they flew open again as Tony bit at his ear and he involuntarily shivered.

He waited for the servants to leave again before he moved. Steve sank down onto his knees in front of Tony on instinct and leant his cheek against the alpha's knee as his eyes slipped shut. Steve needed the reassurance right now. HYDRA wouldn't be in control of his emotions, he wouldn't let them be. Tony was...yes. His alpha.

"My Alpha," he repeated in a murmur, the phrase strangely novel as it left his lips. Bucky had never been his Alpha- never out loud. Only in technicality.

Tony shivered as Steve knelt for him. He reached out automatically to brush Steve's hair through his fingers, stroking him, silently praising him for his submission. Steve's face looked peaceful; Tony felt his own body relaxing a little, the panic subsiding. They were alone and yet they were with each other. When it was like this, just the two of them, it was hard to think of any imminent threats, because everything seemed so perfect.

Before he was even aware of it, Tony was standing up, keeping Steve's cheek pressed to his knee. He stood there for a few moments, basking in it, then broke away to circle Steve, check his posture. It was perfect, but that wasn't the point. Tony had to make sure. He couldn't approve of it without checking and it would be insulting not to check it, because Steve was giving him this and he wasn't going to just throw it away. His fingertips trailed over Steve's back and shoulders, never breaking contact as he circled, wanting Steve to know he was here and he was giving him his full attention.

"Beautiful," said Tony after a moment. "...perfect." He came to a stop in front of Steve and set his head on Steve's head, gently guiding his face back to Tony's knee.

It was weird how this all felt normal. Tony understood why Steve hadn't wanted to kneel at the Expo; this was clearly and undeniably a submissive posture. It was very un-Captain America. But between them it felt right, intimate, and Tony didn't feel like they were in any sort of power dynamic. It was just a set of roles that happened to work for them. He didn't think of Steve as less than him, just different.

Steve's breath hitched as Tony paced around him. He felt another shiver run down his spine as Tony encircled his omega. His back was soldier-straight, as always and when Tony called him perfect he felt a little colour rise to his cheeks. He shouldn't have crushed the chip, he screwed up but like this...he was perfect.
Steve sighed as Tony came back and leaned his head against his knee. He nuzzled against his him gently. Eventually, Steve opened his eyes. His blue eyes were glazed over, expression serene and lips parted a fraction.

He met Tony's gaze almost timidly. "Please," Steve murmured. He didn't want to think about HYDRA, or the winter soldier. Just Tony. "Tell me how to be good for you."

Tony started to reassure Steve that he was already good, but he stopped. That wasn't the right answer. Steve wanted to be given a task to comply with.

Tony's fingertips brushed Steve's cheek. "Clothes off. Lay down for me," he demanded. Vaguely, in the back of his head, he remembered how Steve had joked they never fucked in the bed. But there was no time for that. He had to mate Steve, right here, right now. If they went upstairs to the master bedroom, then Steve would have to kneel all over again and that would just take too much time.

(Logically, Tony knew that he was being ridiculous, but instinct was a powerful thing, especially during this particular period, immediately following their bonding; it wasn't worth the effort and discomfort it would take to go against it. There was no rule that Steve had to kneel and be circled before mating, but it felt great to do it and Tony was nothing if not a hedonist.)

Steve nodded with a shudder and moved. He unbuttoned his shirt with deft fingers and then moved to pull down his boxer shorts without any shame. Tony had seen everything and made it very clear that he liked it. The unwavering nature of Tony's tone only made it hotter.

Steve moved to lay down on the sofa as Tony nodded to do it, crawling up onto it (not standing.) He swallowed as he moved to lay on his back, head tilted back too his gaze was fixed up on Tony.

He didn't say anything more. There was nothing more he needed to. The way his back arced up and his body language said it all. Steve was completely compliant and pliant to Tony's touch and command.

Tony waited for Steve to obey before pulling off his sweatpants. "Over," he commanded, climbing onto the sofa, a knee on either side of Steve. He grabbed Steve's wrists and leaned down to lick the back of his neck. Steve's body healed ridiculously quickly, but Tony's bite mark had left a raised scar. The texture of Steve's skin on his tongue was incredible; Tony growled possessively, happily, lapping at his mark, his omega, the two pink crescents on Steve's neck a physical sign of their bond.

He bit down on it after a few moments, his teeth fitting in to it perfectly. He'd seen pictures and videos of omegas were deep, deep marks made from years of being bitten in the same place over and over, and always found them sort of gross. In particular, omegas in porn would have prominently scars, and Tony had never seen the appeal of that. Now he understood. He clenched Steve's skin between his teeth, savoring the taste and the closeness; it felt even better the second time, feeling how his mouth fit, how the scar was shaped for him and only him.

He nudged the tip of his cock against Steve's entrance. There had been no foreplay, but Steve's body was responding automatically; he was already wet and Tony sank his length in, shuddering, the back of Steve's neck still in his mouth, muffling a groan.

Steve cried out at the low burn as Tony sank right into him. His back arced up in response, his forehead pressed to the sofa fabric as he focused on the sharp and thrilling pain of Tony's teeth stuck into his neck. Steve whined low in his throat and whimpered as Tony began to move.
His hips ended up being pulled up a little so Tony could thrust into him properly, his eyes rolling back and lips parting as his Alpha's cock dragged in and out of him perfectly.

"F-fuck..." Steve groaned, hands clenching into the fabric of the sofa.

The door was opened a crack and then quickly slammed shut but Steve didn't even notice. He didn't even care that someone had almost walked in. All that mattered was that was Tony inside of him, claiming him...exactly where he was supposed to be.

Tony dug his fingers into Steve's wrists, thrusting into his wet, silky body lovingly; each twitch of his hips was heaven and he hadn't even sunk the knot in yet. His eyes were closed and Steve's smell was surrounding him; it was pure bliss.

His tongue dragged over Steve's skin and he pressed his chest to Steve's back, oblivious about any mark the arc reactor might make on him; he just wanted as much contact with his omega as possible. Steve was bucking under him, reacting to ever little movement with joy. Tony was desperate to find that spot inside Steve that would make him writhe in pleasure and scream Tony's name; he had hit it once before; Steve was warm and slick and Tony wanted to find the perfect angle, wanted to give Steve as much pleasure as he was receiving. He heard himself moan, muffled, into Steve's neck; he tensed up, pressing down on his knot, wanting to give Steve more, easing in the rest of his swollen member with only a little difficulty. The moment it was in he resumed thrusting; he loved the way Steve's body tugged on it, massaging it; he'd never had as tight a fit as this with any beta.

Steve shuddered in delight as Tony's hands curled over his wrists and pinned him down. He could have thrown him off, technically. He was stronger. But Steve would never have dared and he delighted in the way his alpha moved and held him down.

He whined as Tony licked over the bite on the back of his neck. And then he cried out as his alpha's knot squeezed into him and let out a strangled sound at the stretch and...and...Steve gasped as Tony hit a spot inside of him that made him see stars as he angled his cold just right. "Oh...oh...oh-ah...Tony...T-Tony please..." he begged, trembling around his cock as Tony teased and pleasured at him just right. His whole body sang with pleasure and his thighs quivered. Steve was panting with each thrust, his hips moving pliantly with it. Little, soft breathless and desperate sounds escaped too, his pleasure totally at Tony's mercy. Steve's cock was hard and curved against his abdomen, smearing precum over smooth, pale skin.

Tony felt Steve's body shudder suddenly under him and he clenched around Tony, and Tony arched into him, knowing he'd found Steve's sweet spot. He tasted a hint of blood; he was digging his teeth into Steve, his whole body tense and shaking, aching for release. Tony was whimpering, his noises mixing with Steve's, their bodies pressed together deliciously. "Ssshhffff," growled Tony into Steve's neck. He wanted to say Steve's name, but he wasn't willing to let go of Steve's neck yet.

Steve's fists were balled up around the couch's fabric, threatening to tear it. Tony let go of one of Steve's wrists and slipped his hand under Steve's stomach, finding his erection and wrapping a hand around it, jerking Steve in rhythm to his thrusts, Steve's precum warm and slippery on his skin.

Steve cried out when Tony reached down and began to stroke him. He rocked into his hand and shivered, eyes rolling back under his eyelids, his whole body vibrating in pleasure. Tony felt so fucking good inside of him, so good...Steve wished they could stay like this forever.

"Tony. Tony I'm gonna- I'm gonna..." Steve clenched around, his insides squeezing at Tony's cock, trying to milk it. And then he came, crying out Tony's name as he came over his hand and the sofa
beneath them. He shuddered in pleasure, lips parting and hips rolling back as he rode out his orgasm just right.

Tony had been waiting for Steve; the moment he felt Steve's body twitching under his, the moment he felt the warm semen gushing over his hand and felt Steve's body tighten around his length, he gave Steve a few quick, short, eager thrusts and then buried himself into him, his cock twitching with release, his body shuddering as he spilled himself into his omega.

He let out a long, shaky groan of pleasure, melting into Steve's body, the tension slowly easing itself from his muscles. The world came back to him slowly, in pieces; his hand was still gripping Steve's length; he had let go of Steve's neck, which was bleeding a little; body of them were drenched in sweat; the whole room was filled with orchids.

Steve slumped down on the sofa with Tony laid on top of him, still feeling dazed and light-headed as his vision settled on the smashed vase on the table. They were safe here, he reminded himself. Rhodey was on top of it. They had suits...they were safe. Steve sighed and let his eyes slip shut. He was warm and full of Tony's spent and Tony himself. Right now Steve couldn't think of any feeling that was better.

"Sometimes I wish I could feel this all the time," Steve whispered, voice thick was the aftermath of arousal and all the panting and moaning he'd just done. "It's the calmest feeling there is." He arranged his arms under his head so he was more comfortable and huffed out a soft puff of air when he felt Tony shift inside of him.

Tony slowly moved his arms, wrapping them around Steve's waist. He licked the back of Steve's neck lightly, cleaning it off, then set his chin on Steve's shoulder.

"It's nice," he agreed hoarsely. He cleared his throat. "...we gotta start using protection." It was mostly a joke; Tony pretty sure he couldn't have kids. As sure as a 3,000 peso vasectomy, anyway. He wondered if he should get snipped again just to be sure. They had time, though, months before Steve's next heat.

Tony stared at the forest of orchids, thinking about the lone white orchid in his father's study that he'd never questioned.

There had been a picture of Steve and his father in the study, too. Weird that Tony had stared into the face of his mate since childhood without knowing. It was like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Fate was a funny thing.

"We can't keep all these orchids," said Tony after a moment, still staring at them. He had no idea what they would do with all of them. You couldn't just dump a thing like that in the trash. Tony wasn't sentimental but he had to admit, there was a reason he couldn't stand the idea of letting any of the flowers die. Tony's father's orchid had died shortly after Jarvis had, because Tony had no idea how to care for an orchid. It had been in his father's study, which Tony hadn't peeked into until over a year after his death; when he finally checked the dusty, mausoleum-like room, the orchid had been shriveled up in its pot and had crumbled to dust when he'd touched the crisp black leaves. Tony had felt horrified; Jarvis had been tending the damn thing for decades and he'd completely forgotten about it. At the time, he had consoled himself by thinking that at least it was only a houseplant and not a fish or a cat or something. But now, knowing what it had meant, he felt guilty all over again.

"...Steve, light bulb! *What if we had a charity auction?* Y'know, for your charity? People are stupid, they'd probably pay a ton of money for these, since they were owned by us. Think about it. On our one-year anniversary... yeah, people would go crazy, we could probably sell them for like
ten thousand a pop. Seriously. They're historically significant. Y'know, since it's us. Tony propped his elbows up on Steve's back and scanned over the room, trying to count the flowers. "If we auctioned them off for, say, seven thousand a pop, and then combined that with a charity dinner, a couple thousand bucks a plate...we could probably make one to two million."

"That's a good idea," Steve affirmed. "But Jesus...that means we have a lot of orchids. I thought maybe the old tradition would have died out by now...or maybe it's because I'm old. I don't know," he mused, turning his head as his gaze flitted around the room. "Rich people really will buy anything, won't they?"

Someone had offered to buy Steve. Once. His ma was struggling and he'd just turned sixteen. A gentleman came round. He looked smart, wore a pressed suit with pin stripes and had his hair slicked back. He was a beta- Steve thought so anyway. The memory was hazy and unimportant. His mother had been outraged and pushed him out of the house, hitting at his coat with a flour coated rolling pin. It had been a beautiful sight but a chilling thought. Steve knew his mother would have never done it - but how many omegas had been sold and what happened to them? Did they want a mate or just something to screw with and then toss away? Or would he have been kept like a pet?

Steve's gaze flitted to the floor. "I think maybe I'll do the music video thing...I dunno. It sounds fun. I don't want people to think I'm too serious. Then they won't listen to me."

Tony frowned. Steve's words, about doing something fun, didn't match his tone or his smell. His tone and smell had a vague sense of discomfort to them, an edge Tony didn't like.

"...what's wrong? What are you thinking?" asked Tony softly. He ran his tongue over the back of Steve's neck again.

Deep down, he was hoping this wouldn't affect Steve wanting to meet Taylor Swift, who had been on Tony's "To-Screw" list for a while. The list was ever-changing, moving people up and down according to desirability (i.e., how hot they were), how hard to get they were, and how big of a scandal it would cause. Currently, Pepper had occupied slot #1 for close to a decade. Swift ranked relatively low in desirability (7 out of 10) but high in the other two categories (8.5 in hard-to-get and a delicious, tantalizing 9 in scandal; she was a goodie-goodie female omega who was half his age), putting her average at 8.2, which put her rank just below Salma Hayek (a 9.2 ever since she'd slapped him at a charity gala) and Amy Adams (whose desirability was already at a 9.5, matched with Pepper, and whose hard-to-get and scandal score had been recently both been knocked up to 10s because she was in a monogamous relationship and had had a kid the month prior; she was now just below Pepper with a score of 9.6).

(Tony liked math.) (And fucking.) (He had the grace not to explain his complicated "To-Screw" List scoring system to Steve at the moment.)

"Just thinking about all the stuff people want me to do now. All the shows they want me to appear on. I don't know which ones are good, though..." muttered Steve worriedly.

"You should go on SNL... hey! This year, Fourth of July's on a Sunday. Go on SNL the night before your birthday, it can be a big show, it'll be fun, but also serious... lots of celebrities go on there, politicians too, so it won't be too serious. And maybe you could get Swift to be the musical guest. Oh my God, it'll look great, you and her, two blonde kick-ass omegas just jamming out with the band, you know, you can do a couple of skits but also give a little speech, or whatever... oh, and you can announce the charity then, yeah! It's live so no one will be able to stop you! JARVIS, tell Don Roy King Steve wants to do SNL! Get Hammond on the phone! And contact Swift, too!"
"Yes, sir. ...there are several packages for you outside."

"Are they orchids?"

"Yes, sir."

Tony groaned. Beneath him, Steve was still lost in thought; Tony nosed his neck. "Steve? You okay? ...penny for your thoughts?"

Steve was quiet for a while. Memories were dancing around in his head and dragging him in and out of reality. None of them really especially good. Steve had been so lucky to end up here, to have made it this far. He almost felt guilty. No other omega from the forties got this chance.

"I met the president twice, you know. Back in the day. Not now, obviously," Steve murmured. "The first time was before I went to overseas. I was so honored and excited. Not a lot of omegas got to meet the goddamn president... I was like a child. But then when we got there, they just wanted to show me off. What the serum had done to me. And he barely talked to me at all. And when he did... he told me I'd make a brilliant Alpha. I didn't really know what he meant. I just told him that it wasn't really my style. He laughed, thought it was funny...and then he slapped my ass and went on his way. I didn't really know how to feel. But the second time was different. I'd killed people, seen people die...I realised war wasn't what I thought it was. I'd learned that my status didn't mean shit out on the field," Steve whispered. "Mr. Roosevelt asked me how it was all going, and I told him. And then he tried to touch me again and I caught his wrist and just said: 'Don't.' And then I walked away. I was shaking, I was so hyper. I couldn't believe I'd just done that."

Tony listened to the vibrations of Steve's chest, the deepness of his voice, and was so absorbed in the sound he almost missed the meaning of the words. He blinked, processing the words.

It was common knowledge that omegas in the forties hadn't been treated much better than livestock. For Steve, growing up during the Depression, having a single mother... he was damned lucky he hadn't ended up being sold. Sure, owning omegas had been outlawed shortly after 1900; before that, it was common practice to keep them as housestaff. But arranged bonding had lingered until 1983, and when it was finally banned, a lot of people pointed out it was de facto slavery. Omegas and money were exchanged, after all, and the omega never had any say in it; the Alpha chose. As a result, many Alphas had more than one omega and most Alphas had an omega much younger than them. This accounted for the statistic that, while more than 90% of omegas bonded in 2010, only about 55% of Alphas did.

"...I'm sorry," said Tony. FDR was a national hero and Tony wasn't sure how to process the idea of him treating omegas like that. But everyone did. Hell, even Tony had, as recently as a few months ago. He didn't think about it. Why would he? He'd always been taught that omegas were beneath him. He slapped tons of asses, casually ordered them around. It was easy.

He was lucky to have been born an Alpha. Even a low-dominance one.

"Was FDR a... a real dominant Alpha?"

"Oh, yeah," said Steve, nodding. "Super dominant. About the same as Buck--" He stopped. Too late. Tony's hackles were up at the mention of Steve's other Alpha.

"Sorry," said Steve quickly.

The two lapsed into silence again for a moment.

"...so when I went to Phillips-- that was my boarding school-- it was all Alphas. Also all men back
that. Sons of businessmen and politicians and stuff. Well, there was one omega there, a guy named Ty? He was actually my friend. I didn't really have friends because, um, you know... well, I was a lot younger than everyone there and frankly smarter and no one would really talk to me.

Ty and me were just friends because we both felt like outsiders, I guess. Anyway, he was bullied like crazy. And one day, after Christmas break, I went back to school and Ty was gone. Turns out he'd been sent to, like, some private conversion camp. This was in the early 1980s. I dunno if it was before or after they banned arranged bonding. And I remember thinking, thank God that's not me. Can you imagine? I dunno what ever happened to him."

Tony shifted a little on top of Steve. Nothing killed a good knot like talking about this stuff. Tony pulled out of Steve but remained lying on top of him. He felt shame and guilt at how he'd never recognized how fucked up everything was. It didn't affect him. He had a vague notion that Ana, Jarvis's wife, had been in an arranged bond during the war, but either she had escaped or it had fallen through because of the war. Details were sketchy. Another history lost because Tony hadn't thought it necessary to actually talk to an omega.

"I try not to judge people on their attitudes and opinions but rather their willingness to change them," Steve murmured. Tony certainly had; he'd taken a complete U-turn. Steve couldn't be prouder of him, actually. Tony had been treating him like shit only weeks ago. Now he was on Steve's side. I

t was scary to think they had so far to go but... Steve knew that with Tony by his side things would be much easier. And the 21st century was already a hell of a lot better than the 20th.

"What...what actual day is it?" Steve asked, suddenly realising he'd lost track. They were how many days into their honeymoon? And how many days would be left? Steve sighed. "These days have just been a blur of sex and sleep and not much else."

Tony frowned, his brain backpedaling. Everything had been a blur. And when did a honeymoon period really "start?" He had fucked Steve before really properly mating him. There were a few days before they were officially mated that were sketchy.

After mating, they'd gone on a disastrous date, then Steve had had his psych eval, then had a follow-up eval, then they'd had another blow-up fight when Tony learned about Bucky, then they'd gone to the Expo the day before yesterday, where Vanko had tried to kill them.

"It's been about a week," said Tony, contemplating that this was perhaps the most historically awful honeymoon of all time. "JARVIS! How long does the honeymoon period last?"

"Seven to ten days, sir."

Tony felt disappointed. It was almost over. On the other hand, he was feeling more stable. He didn't want to kill every other Alpha he saw, which was nice.

He rolled off of Steve and grabbed his sweatpants. "I'm gonna go get the orchids that are outside." He brushed Steve's hair softly as he passed by him. The fact that his couch was probably ruined was unimportant to him.

He flung over the front door and nearly smashed into a florist, who was trying to figure out how to operate the keypad. (Tony thought traditional bells were for suckers.)

"Sorry. I have a delivery for Captain Rogers?" she said, holding up two orchids in one arm and a vase of white tulips in the other.
"I'll sign," said Tony, casting a look around his front steps. There were dozens more orchids. He scrawled a signature on a piece of paper ("MARIAH CAREY" - Tony only ever signed his actual name on important paperwork and photos of himself) and took the two orchids and the tulips.

"Steve, I'm gonna need help!" he called, leaving the door open and hauling in the flowers. "There's, like, probably thirty or forty more fucking orchids on our porch, it's starting to look like the Amazon out there, help me bring them in. Here, these three are all for you, apparently..."

Steve smiled as Tony passed him and ran his fingers through his hair. He watched his Alpha walked to the door, admiring the curve and dip of his back before he rolled off the sofa. He tugged on his boxers and shirt and then wobbled to the door. He felt a little tender down there after...everything. Steve sighed and ran a hand through his hair himself, dragging it out of his eyes. He blinked at the sight.

"This is insane," he breathed. Steve took the flowers off of Tony and went to set them down on the table. If their honeymoon period was nearly over that meant Steve's first interview was...what? A few days? He suddenly felt nervous. After the expo and his Tony's reveal there would be so many more questions. He hoped he could hold his cool. It was time for him to really make a stand, after all. Steve wouldn't be timid about his civil rights agenda. He was anything but timid.

Steve went back to take another armful of flowers off of Tony. "There aren't any other honeymoon traditions in this century, are there?" He asked. "If there are we only have a day or so to get them done and I know we're not really doing it like that but..." He shrugged.

"How the hell would I know?" asked Tony. "You know I think traditions are stupid. I didn't expect two hundred orchids, but here we are." He checked the tag on one of the new ones: it was from the Secretary of Defense. He checked over the vase of tulips but there was no tag. Something was bothering him, a lot, but he wasn't sure what. Maybe it was just that the tulips looked weirdly out of place. Tony expected orchids, not tulips. Who sent tulips? Even Tony, who operated well above normal society, knew that orchids were the go-to flower for bonding.

He looked up at Steve, moving the flowers around. "...is there anything you want to do?" he asked tentatively. The only other tradition he could think of was a collaring ceremony, which, aside from being more than a century old and hopelessly outdated, was possibly the most offensive thing he could think of.

He picked up a couple of the orchids. He hated to be sentimental or materialistic, but he had to keep at least a few of them. He liked the one Pepper had sent them, white with red streaks. He found the one Rhodey had brought, and picked out a random white one that reminded him of his father's, the one he'd let die. Three was enough. He could pop one in the kitchen, one in the shop, and one in his room. The rest would have to go; the house was starting to smell cloying. Tony hadn't even realized orchids had a smell, but apparently if you crammed hundreds of them together, they did.

While Tony had no real interest in doing anything other than limping around the house and fucking Steve as much as possible, he wanted Steve to get what he wanted. He was willing to bend over backwards for him; he had expected that Steve, who was only a couple of weeks away from turning 93, would have all sorts of weird old-timey traditions he wanted to do. So far, they'd been so busy bickering and trying not to get killed, they'd barely had time for anything else.

Tony made a mental note to call Clint discreetly and ask him, as an omega, if there was anything Steve expected that Tony was missing. He only got one shot at this and he'd already messed up a bunch of times; he wanted to make sure that the rest of it, at least, was perfect for his mate.

"I don't really think so," Steve breathed, voice whimsical as he actually took a moment to think
about it. He sank down onto the sofa again, watching Tony flit about the flowers as he folded his legs underneath himself. Steve leaned back and watched him moving around, frowning at the Tulips. Did they mean something else, maybe? Apparently Tony wasn't a fan of them but honestly Steve appreciated the variety. There was orchids everywhere.

Steve reached for Tony's hand and tugged him down next to him. He leaned his head on his shoulder, sliding down on the sofa little so they slotted together better. "This might be our last evening like this," he pointed out softly. "We should make the most of it. Do something...special, I guess," he suggested tentatively, not quite sure how Tony would take it.

Tony let Steve pull him down; his ankle was throbbing again. An arm instinctively went around Steve's waist; the two of them sat there on the couch, staring at the jungle of flowers in front of them.

"Our last evening like what?" asked Tony. "In love? No, sorry, buddy, you're stuck with me. That's how bonding works. Honestly, I'm looking forward to being less... emotional. This is really intense." He remembered how he'd growled at Steve's neighbor from across the balcony, how he'd had a massive meltdown in front of Pepper when he'd found out about Bucky.

"...what sort of special thing did you have in mind?" he asked, nosing Steve's hair as he stared at the--

_Tulips_.

Now he remembered. Steve's old fling had gotten him tulips. Tony stared at the flowers. ...surely those weren't from...?

Impossible. Even if the guy was alive, he must have dementia or something; he had not come forward, yet. He was probably in a nursing home somewhere, unaware of their bond. He couldn't have sent them.

Tony rose, nearly falling over because of his injured leg, and limped over to the vase to move it. He didn't want to have to look at them. He would get rid of them as soon as possible.

In the meantime, he wanted to act casual. Make sure the final day or two was perfect for Steve.

"Anything you want, just name it," said Tony, shuffling around some of the larger orchids to block the tulips from sight. "As long as it's not work, I don't want to deal with SHIELD or the expo fallout or anything involving your civil rights crusade... no offense... I just really wanna have a few days that are just us, you know?"

He took a look at his handiwork. The tulips were properly obscured by a wall of enormous orchids. He gave a little nod to the flowers and then flopped back onto the couch with a wince.

Steve didn't question why Tony suddenly wanted to hide the odd flowers. He just accepted it and leaned into the touch as Tony returned to nosing at his neck. Steve sighed and ran his fingers through his mate's hair.

"Just us sounds good," he whispered. "You could show me some of your favourite films, catch me up with this century when we're not, you know..." His cheeks flushed a little, skin blushing pink as he inferred at all the constant fucking they'd been doing. Even with the serum he was beginning to get a little tender down there. But he also kind of liked it...

He turned his head to kiss Tony's temple. "We could just stay in bed? Ignore the jungle down here?"
Okay,” said Tony, his goatee twitching with a smile as Steve kissed his temple. "...you can carry me upstairs, if you want," he added, slightly begrudgingly. He would normally jump at the chance to lie around in bed lazily, but he had a suit to build downstairs, and an omega to protect. Maybe he could sneak down there later.

When his arc reactor had been palladium-core, he'd come to terms with the reality that he was dying and he hadn't thought much about the future. He slept a lot and drank a lot more, and he enjoyed being reckless, hoping he'd eventually die in a blaze of glory. Tony was scared to die; he didn't believe in an afterlife, and that infinite abyss, that eternal state of not-being, was a nightmare to him; he didn't have the guts to kill himself. Eventually, when it got bad, he probably would have. Or at least, he hoped he would have. In any case, he had not expected to live to Christmas, and now he suddenly did, and all the things he had to prepare for in the future seemed to loomed huge over him.

There was the newest suit to be built, and there was SHIELD... he had the same battery of tests to face as Steve (something he wasn't looking forward to), and he wanted to hack into their database and see what dirty little secrets they were hiding. Tony had done enough business with the government to know that you couldn't trust it. Also he needed to start planning and preparing for Steve's birthday. What the hell did you do for a guy who was simultaneously turning 93 and 27?

Lying in bed was only appealing because it involved contact with Steve, but that was enough to win Tony over. He could do some of his work from a tablet anyway.

He wrapped his arms around Steve's neck and gave his collarbone a nip. "Mush," he commanded.

Steve laughed gently. "I'm not a reindeer," he reminded him, a playful glint in his eyes as he moved to hoist Tony up into his arms, one arm under his back and the other under his knees. He smiled and kissed his alpha's forehead before he moved them up the steps, taking them two at a time like it was nothing.

He set Tony down on the bed, being mindful of his sore ankle, before he moved to lay down next to him. Tony seemed a little distracted but Steve imagined that was just the mind of a creator. Now Tony wasn't dying surely he'd always be working on the next project? It was just like Steve having his time in the gym- Tony needed his time in the workshop. But he'd already got some work-time in this morning. Steve figured he could have his Alpha all to himself now.

"So...your favourite movie?" Steve asked, tilting his head at him. "And nothing scary this time," he added. "Your movies still look way too real for my liking."

"Scarface," said Tony. "An absolutely classic. It's a... action-drama, I guess? The main character's name is also Tony. ...hey, wait here real quick, okay?" He rolled out of bed, hissed in pain, and limped into the bathroom.

Steve watched Tony retreat to the bathroom with a sigh. He really shouldn't be putting weight on his foot, it would only make it heal slower but Steve knew that Tony's pride played a part in his stubbornness more than anything else did. He slumped back on the sheets as he waited, gaze fixed on the pure white ceiling above. "JARVIS... can you order me some clothes and bill it from my account?" he asked the air. It would take him a while to get used to that.

"Certainly, Captain," the AI replied.

"Thanks," Steve mumbled and then closed his eyes.

In the bathroom, Tony was talking to the AI as well.
"JARVIS!" he hissed

"Sir?"

"I need to talk to Barton. Can you look him up?"

"His current location is classified, sir."

Tony contemplated this. Classified? His mind wandered to Project PEGASUS. "...any weird stories out of New Mexico?"

"There was a meteor crash that left a sizeable meteorite with very high density," said JARVIS.

"I said weird news stories, Jarv, not boring ones. Y'know, something the government would care about. ...I wanna start keeping tabs on SHIELD. They've already been keeping tabs on me, for months, apparently. We've got a lot of catching up to do. And I need to find Barton."

JARVIS considered, then said, "A small town recently experienced a gas leak causing a mass hallucination that involved some sort of rampaging automaton."

"See? Now that sounds like a cover-up. ...are they trying to reverse-engineer the suit? JARVIS, start checking government records for large purchases of palladium and see if any of it is being sent to New Mexico. Also pull Coulson's and Barton's records. Let's see where SHIELD sends its omegas."

"Yes, sir. ...the files are encrypted."

"Brute force 'em."

"That could take days, sir."

"Great. I have days. Do it," demanded Tony. "Just be subtle, okay? I don't want to get Steve in trouble."

"How selfless of you."

"I'm bonded, JARVIS. I'm a new man," said Tony.

"Ah. Congratulations, sir."

"...thanks, buddy."

Tony washed his hands for good measure before coming back out. What Steve didn't know wouldn't hurt him; Tony wanted him to have believable deniability if SHIELD caught him snooping. Besides, if he was going to surprise Steve with something wonderful, he had to contact Barton on the down-low.

He crawled into bed with Steve and settled back against the pillows, sinking into the bed with a sigh of satisfaction. "So. Which are we doing first... blowjob or Scarface? " he asked, putting an arm around Steve's shoulders, keeping his face straight. He loved how easily Steve blushed when he said things like that.

Steve cracked an eye open and then sat up as Tony pushed himself back up onto the bed.

Steve poked his side. "We had sex like twenty minutes ago... you can wait. In fact, I'd be impressed if you could get it up already, old man," he said fondly, only half joking. About the
being impressed part- not Tony being old. Steve was really in no position to be calling other people old.

JARVIS summoned the film up on the giant screen on the opposite wall for them without having to be asked, the credits playing out as Steve settled his head against Tony's chest. It was becoming an automatic position. It was comfortable and cozy and for some reason he liked the gentle glow and thrum of the arc reactor. It was oddly calming. It was a reminder that Tony was alive, he was here and he was strong and he was staying that way.

Tony smiled when Steve called him old. Steve may have born in 1918, but he was physiologically half Tony's age, and he looked it. Tony didn't mind. He generally dated people much younger than him anyway. He had a rule against dating anyone older than him ever since he'd been with an incredibly hot MILF who had called out Howard's name.

Steve's mention of age had Tony thinking about Steve's birthday again. What the hell did you get a guy who needed nothing? Steve was baffled by most technology, so that was out. Would it be weird to get him something patriotic, or cheesy? Steve's birthday was the 4th, after all. He surely liked patriotic things; he was Captain America, for crying out loud. And he had that silly patriotic mug in his old apartment...

Tony wondered how hard it would be to get his hands on a bald eagle.

Even though he was only half-paying attention to the movie, he was still able to quote lengthy passages of it. Tony had been, like most teenage boys in the eighties, obsessed with Scarface. While Alphas and omegas were linking arms and marching around trying to get arranged bonding to be outlawed, Tony was rewatching the movie over and over, oblivious to history happening all around him.

It had been years since he'd seen it, though. He'd forgotten how violent the chainsaw scene was. Steve was tense, pressing into his chest.

"...it's all faked," he whispered to Steve as blood splattered everywhere. "They dye corn syrup red... it's just special effects." He made a mental note not to show Steve Saw anytime soon.

"Our special effects were shit so you knew they weren't real. I don't like yours." Steve honestly didn't get how it was entertainment. He'd seen plenty of men die and it was never entertaining. In movies in the forties it had been cheesy and over the top; that was what made it entertaining. It would take Steve a while to get used to the 21st century sense of humor. He just didn't get it.

Sure, severing Johann Schmidt's spine had felt good...but for bad reasons. They weren't the kind of 'good' feelings Steve ever wanted to indulge.

It was cute seeing Tony so absorbed by it though. Steve didn't think he'd seen him this interested in something outside of his workshop before. When he quoted off whole speeches it made Steve smile and he knew he'd chosen the right thing to do. His alpha was unwinding beneath him and it made Steve feel good too.

Steve's phone started ringing on the bedside table. He reached over. He picked it up. And then he promptly threw it against the wall and the ringing stopped. Steve didn't say a word, he just curled up back against Tony's side contently.

Tony glanced over as Steve threw his phone against the wall. "That wasn't nice," he said lazily before turning back to the movie.
The last time he had seen *Scarface* was with Pepper in the early 2000s. She had never seen it and Tony had informed her, politely but firmly, that he could not have an assistant who had never seen *Scarface*. At the end, she'd said it was poetic. "He always wanted more. He couldn't be happy with what he had," she'd said.

Tony had never gotten that from the movie. He related strongly to the other Tony and, as such, had spent a large portion of the 90s doing cocaine, which Obadiah had turned a blind eye to because for every coke orgy scandal, Tony made them hundreds of millions of dollars. He churned out the entire Stark "Delegate" missile line in less than a year and the company had reported its first annual profit of over a billion the following year.

Re-watching it, he could see it from Pepper's point of view. It was a sad movie, a modern tragedy. It occurred to Tony how close he had come to being that character. Until his experience in Afghanistan, he had operated amorally, obsessed with making bombs that were bigger and better and had more stopping power; he cared about money and how many women he could bag at a single conference. Afghanistan had radically shifted his world view. In a way, he supposed he was glad. It had been the worst experience of his life but it had opened a million doors for him, broadened his world view, changed him for the better. And now that he had Steve, he felt like he might finally be able to achieve the kind of fulfillment that Tony Montana never could.

The shattered phone was forgotten in the corner. Tony planned to get Steve something better, something Stark Tech that SHIELD couldn't listen in on, anyway. Currently, he was happy to be unplugged, alone in his bedroom with his omega.

Steve actually fell asleep on Tony shortly after throwing his phone against the wall. He'd been up for over twelve hours after the dream having woken him and his session in the gym. Tony had slept far more through out the day and it was about time Steve played catch up. Fortunately, he didn't dream. His mind was merciful for the few stray hours. Steve shifted a little in his sleep, let out a few mumbles and quiet sounds but he still didn't dream.

He woke as the movie credits dragged down the screen and blinked slowly. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Mph," he mumbled and then turned his head to look up at Tony. "Sorry. I meant to watch it. Honestly," he mumbled, smiling a little sleepily as he rested his chin on Tony's chest. "I guess I was more tired than I realized, I'm not used to so much...exercise," he said, obviously meaning something else entirely as he raised a brow at Tony, the manner of the gesture playful.

It was almost nine in the evening now and night time was creeping up on them. Steve was kinda hungry and horny and couldn't really decide which he wanted to tackle first.

Steve cocked his head at Tony when he didn't say anything immediately. "Are you...okay?"

Tony watched the credits roll. This was the first time he appreciated that *Scarface* was a tragedy, not a stupid action flick.

"Yeah, just... just... emotional, I guess. Hormones," said Tony, shaking his head a little. "...you missed the part where he introduces us to his little friend. So. How 'bout that blowjob?" He gave Steve a little squeeze. One of the things he liked about Steve was how much of them there was to hold. A lot of the women Tony slept with were skeletal and Tony would never squeeze them for fear for cracking a rib. Steve was solid.

...he was solid *now*, anyway. It had already occurred to Tony that, back in the 1930s, when Steve was only 95 pounds, he would have felt a lot like those women. And Tony had to admit, he understood why Steve hadn't been mated. He would have been terrified to mate Steve if he were little and sick. Mating was rough and raw and it would be easy to hurt-- hell, even to kill-- him.
Fortunately, Tony had only ever known Steve like this. His natural fury toward Steve's old Alpha prevented him from feeling too much sympathy for him.

Steve rolled his eyes. "You're terrible," he said fondly, not really meaning it. He took a moment to watch Tony and to focus on the feeling of his arm around his waist, the engineer's hand squeezing at him in a silent sort of command. He shivered involuntarily but didn't move just yet, as if he was holding his ground as he held Tony's gaze too. There was a glint in his blue eyes of a mischievous kind.

He raised a hand and traced the rime of the arc reactor with his fingertips before his long fingers dipped lower into the definition of Tony's abdomen muscles. Steve smiled when he felt his Alpha respond to the touch. "You know..." His blue eyes flickered down and then back up to his Alpha's face again. "I can hold my breath for over two minutes," Steve told him, tone wickedly innocent as his fingertips continued to draw small, teasing circles on Tony's lower stomach. "Comfortably."

"...you don't say," said Tony, trying to play it cool. His body was betraying him; he was shivering with anticipation. Steve's fingertips were roaming over his skin and Steve was staring at him with those sharp blue eyes and Tony was melting into the bed. He liked how Steve teased him, how Steve sometimes paused before responding, as if he was considering whether or not he really would. He always did but seeing Steve think about it, knowing he was his own person... Tony liked it.

Perhaps one reason he'd always steered clear of omegas and of bonding was because he found the obsequious behavior of omegas to be a massive turn-off. But Steve acted perfectly normal. Steve was a person first and an omega second, and Tony liked people with a bit of spark to them. (Case in point: Pepper.) He knew that, if he ever asked Steve to do something awful, Steve would have no trouble saying no to him.

"...I think you're lying," said Tony suddenly, smirking at Steve. "I don't believe that at all. I don't believe things unless I have evidence. I'm a scientist, Steve. Can you demonstrate this outrageous claim? Because, if not, I'm going to have to assume you're just trying to impress me."

"Are you saying I don't impress you anyway?" Steve asked and had the audacity to pretend to be offended, puppy eyes and all. But he couldn't hold it up for long, his face soon breaking out into a mischievous smile. His tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip briefly, almost...deliberately. And then he moved his fingers down and hooked his forefinger into the waist band of Tony's sweatpants where, underneath, a bulge was gradually forming. "I don't need to lie to impress you, Tony... I just need to be myself," Steve murmured, a smirk tugging at the edges of his lips before he ducked his head down and mouthed at the bulge in Tony's pants. He teased him for a few moments before he lifted his head up and pulled Tony's pants down, letting his erection spring free. Steve leaned forward, tongue darting out to catch the precum beading at the head. He would never get used to that heady taste and the way his body just reacted to it on instinct. It was biology and a combination of his own arousal but Steve was getting wet already.

Then Steve really got down to business. He sucked the head into his mouth and swirled his tongue experimentally. Tony's sigh telling him all he needed to know before he sunk down lower and the head was nudging the back of his mouth. Steve moved at a steady, slow pace, teasing at Tony as he let his jaw go slack and take him all in. It was a lot easier a second time around now he knew what to expect. He kept going until he'd taken all of Tony's cock into his mouth and the head squeezed into his throat. He wanted to gag around it but he forced the urge down, focusing on taking all that Tony had to offer. Steve's eyes flickered up and he had a challenging look in his gaze as if to say: 

start counting.
Tony let out a breathy gasp, fighting the urge to talk back or rush. He let Steve tease him, running his lips and tongue over him, his fingers gripping the sheets. When Steve finally pulled the waistband of his pants down he groaned, relaxing back onto the pillows, reaching down with one hand to touch Steve's hair. Steve's tongue was velvety and warm; he was smiling, rolling his hips slightly, enjoying himself. When Steve suddenly dipped down, Tony's breath caught; he looked down just in time to see his knot disappear into Steve's mouth. "St-teve," he murmured lustfully.

Steve's eyes darted up, meeting Tony's, and there was a look of defiance in them.

Tony laughed breathlessly. "J-JARVIS... start a timer..." he demanded languidly, throwing his head back and closing his eyes, feeling his cock twitch inside the tight, silky contours of Steve's throat. He was pretty sure Steve would last longer than him, not because of Steve's breath-holding ability, but because being deep-throated by Captain America was pushing Tony to the edge, and knotting someone's throat was so deliciously perverse and felt so wickedly good that there was no way he was going to last long. At the very base of his cock he could feel Steve's tongue; he gritted his teeth, wanting to win this weird little contest, but also desperate to cum. It's not really fair, he thought vaguely, Steve doesn't know what having a knot feels like.

...oh yes he does, thought another part of Tony's mind, and he laughed out loud, his hand tangling into Steve's hair, his hips bucking up, seeking more of Steve's mouth.

The first thirty seconds passed without event, Steve just lazily teasing his tongue around the rim of Tony's knot just because he could. It was a strange sensation but undeniably hot. Before the serum Steve could never have been stretched like this - but he could be. His blue eyes were glazed with arousal and wicked and his cheeks were flushed. A minute in and Steve was beginning to feel the fact that he was, in fact, not breathing. His throat fluttered around Tony's cock but he didn't budge.

Steve's gaze locked with Tony's again and his blue eyes were fiery - he was going to win this if it was the last thing he did.

He arced up as fingers tugged at his hair and whimpered as Tony thrust up into his mouth. But Steve held his ground, although he came close to choking again. He pointedly didn't.

"Two minutes," JARVIS announced monotonously.

When JARVIS announced two minutes, Tony had to admit, he was impressed. He was clinging to the sheets, shivering; he could feel his knot pulsing. He was pretty sure denying himself hadn't been worth it. He was so hard it was painful. But he had to give credit where credit was due: Steve could indeed hold his breath for a pretty impressive length of time. ...with nearly seven inches of rock-hard dick shoved down his throat, no less. He was damned if he was going to cum before the two minute mark, no matter how sensitive he was or how hot this was or how deep Steve took him.

It was another thirty seconds before Steve's lungs were beginning to tug in chest in protest. He licked at the swell of Tony's knot one last time before pulling off with a gasp, eyes left watering a little.

When Steve pulled away, he gave Tony a small lick, and that was what undid him. Tony's hips jerked involuntarily and he came with a breathy moan of relief, reaching down to wrap a hand around himself, riding out his climax with unparalleled bliss.

Steve gasped in surprise when Tony came all over his face. He was surprised by the immediacy of it, the sensation...but also how hot strangely turned on it left him. His own cock was hard and trapped beneath the sheets, his thighs shiny and wet. Steve swallowed.
"...fuck..." sighed Tony happily, glancing down. Steve was staring up at him, frozen, his face splattered with semen. Tony stared back. "...shit. Sorry. I'll get you a towel. My bad." Tony rolled out of bed, stood, forgot his ankle wasn't weight-bearing, and fell with a loud curse.

For some reason, Tony contemplated, pornos never showed moments like this.

Steve tried and failed not to laugh at the sight- "Sorry. I just....you look so unimpressed down there." He tucked his head over the edge of the bed and winked when Tony glared up at him before laughing again. "It's cute. Really."

Tony hopped to the bathroom to get Steve a towel and hopped back; he lovingly, tenderly wiped off Steve's face, looking into his eyes.

Steve let Tony get the towel himself, not wanting to emasculate him in any way, and tilted his face up for his Alpha to clean up when he returned from the bathroom. Steve blinked up at him as he wiped the last of his spent away, blue eyes shiny. "Tony." He nuzzled against his Alpha's thigh, hands curling into the sheets as he resisted the urge to grind against the them like a frustrated teenager.

"I...I need something inside me, please, Alpha," Steve whispered, voice soft but sincere and needy.

Tony melted a little when Steve called him "Alpha."

"Come here," he murmured, pulling Steve against him, into his lap. Steve moved with him fluidly, responding to every little touch, eager to please, eager to obey. Tony made sure Steve was settled against him before reaching down, wrapping one hand around his length, groping Steve's entrance with the other. Steve was wet; Tony gently worked two fingers into him, feeling his body twitching around his digits. "...good boy..." he whispered into Steve's ear. This felt... right. Intimate.

Intimacy was something Tony abhorred, generally. But with Steve things were... different. Tony began working his length, slowly, sensuously; Steve was already melting into him.

Admittedly, Tony was about as inexperienced as Steve in this department. He wasn't used to pleasuring men, or omegas. Steve's body was new terrain, unexplored, but Steve was responding positively, so Tony kept stroking him, his fingers examining Steve slowly; he was familiarizing himself with his omega's body. He rolled his thumb over Steve's head, brushing over the foreskin (so weird-- but of course he wasn't circumcised, having been born in 1918-- but fun, different; Tony liked it).

Steve shuddered as Tony's hot breath ghosted over his neck and whined as two fingers pressed inside of him, his body accepting them easily and eagerly. This was the first time Tony had done this, Steve realised slowly as he rocked his hips down in small circles encouraging him in deeper.

Of course, Steve had done this himself many times and he knew what he liked. Tony's fingers still felt different to his own however and the way he toyed with him felt good. Steve let out a quiet but desperate sound as Tony's fingers found that sweet spot inside of him and he ground his hips down again, seeking more relief. "Please," he whispered, not entirely sure what he was asking for.

Steve gasped and squirmed against his alpha as he got close. "Please, Tony...ah...oh--" And then he tensed and came over Tony's hand, his ass clenching around Tony's fingers as he rode out his orgasm with slow rocks of his hips.

"There it is... there you go," murmured Tony, both hands caressing Steve's body as he came. He
nuzzled the back of Steve's neck, peppering his skin with kisses. "Good omega... good boy... yes..."

Steve was wiggling into his touch, begging softly; Tony let him come down slowly, still holding his shift, his fingers still inside him, grazing his prostate. It occurred to him that, at least in this moment, they'd cross some sort of weird barrier. Steve was calling him "Alpha" and Tony was telling him he was a good boy, and it all would have been insulting and out-dated in anywhere but the bedroom. If anyone else were to see or hear this, it would be political suicide for Steve, but it was just the two of them and it felt romantic and deeply personal. Again, that dreaded "i" word: intimate.

Tony understood, though, Steve's paranoia of being seen as submissive. Right now, he was a malleable little puddle of pleased omega, squirming himself onto Tony's fingers, soft whimpers still falling from his lips. Somewhere deep in his mind, he made a note to put up some more security measures around the house. It wasn't only HYDRA who would probably love to discredit him; any tabloid in the world would cream their pants at an opportunity to see Steve like this, helpless in Tony's lap.

Good boy. That kind of praise made Steve feel hot all over and squirm in Tony's lap, whimpering as those fingers still inside of him teased at his sensitive insides in consequence. He was panting as he came down, his chest rising and falling a little quickly with each breath as if he was still catching up from those two minutes stretched around Tony's knot.

Tony set his chin on Steve's shoulder and kissed his earlobe lightly. He didn't say anything because he had nothing witty to say. His hand was still around Steve and he was sticky with the other one's fluids but he didn't move. Holding Steve to him felt amazing; he wanted to savor it for a few minutes.

Steve felt like he was floating, half aware of his physicality and Tony's touch and half lost in his own mind. His body buzzed with bliss and a low thrum of contentment. He could stay like this forever, he figured. And Steve didn't think this feeling was uniquely 'honeymoon' either. It was just loving and safe and secure. No one else had ever seen Steve like this before and they never would. He was in pieces, broken up and exposed by pleasure until the very barest of instincts were put on display for just Tony to see.

He leaned his head back. "That felt good," he whispered, a smile in his voice. "We should do that again sometime." Steve resisted the urge to squirm against Tony again just wind him up some more.

"Oh, I dunno... I wouldn't want it to get boring," said Tony casually. He kissed Steve's neck again before slowly withdrawing his fingers.

He lay back, pulling Steve down with him, feeling thoroughly content. He was hungry and he really wanted to go work in the shop, but the warmth of the bed was calling to him. His room had always smelled familiar, like himself; now it smelled familiar but in a different way. He and Steve's scents were mingled and Tony felt like he'd known that smell all his life; it was more comforting, more relaxing than his own smell along. Tony had spent years trying to deny all of his instincts, feeling smugly superior that he was more than merely his status. And now it was all undone and he didn't really care; he and Steve, alone like this, could be themselves, could let go and be a little bit feral with each other and not worry about being judged for it.

"Love you. G'night," mumbled Tony, curling up against Steve's body. The shop would be there in the morning, he figured. It was past nine. Normally, Tony was a night owl; his dusk was other people's dawn, and he'd spent a lot of mornings watching the sun come up from his balcony, a cup
of coffee in his hand, before crashing into bed, hard. With Steve around, he'd noticed his sleep schedule was starting to resemble a normal person's.

"Love you too," Steve whispered, turning his head to press a kiss into Tony's hair before he let his own eyes slip shut.

Great... his wholesomeness is rubbing off on me... thought Tony, smiling faintly. Even the thought of going to bed at nine and waking up to a normal breakfast wasn't really a bothersome thought. It felt like a natural evolution in Tony's life. He sighed with contentment, slipping away into sleep, his last thought before he passed out a practical one: *How many more fucking orchids are we going to get?*
Steve woke with a start, rubbing a hand over his face. It was 6 am as per usual; Tony was sleeping heavily beside him. He sighed softly. He didn't think he needed to leave a note this time; he slipped out of bed without waking Tony. The sun hadn't quite risen yet and there was a soft, grey light filling up the glassy-walled house as Steve headed down the curved steps towards the gym.

Steve paused at the bottom, gaze dragging over the ocean of flowers in the living room. Before he knew what he was doing he was pushing aside some of the orchids to pick up the tulips. He gently turned the flowers over in his hands; he smelt them and closed his eyes. They'd made Tony so uneasy but to Steve they were the least imposing - far more affordable and far less pretentious than the orchids. They were flowers that he recognised from the fields and roadsides of muddy, war-trodden France. He sighed softly and set them back down.

Then he heard it. A scuffle behind him. Steve whipped around. Nothing. "Tony?" He called out and then frowned when he got no response.

Steve slowly stepped towards a huge window at the front of the room, peering outside for an answer. For someone. He saw nothing, not even one of Tony's elusive staff members, a 'garden artist' or whatever they were called. Perhaps he'd imagined it.

And then he saw him. He was a glimmer of movement, a dark shape in the distance. He wasn't in combat gear; he was not wearing an uniform or insiginia, but the glint of a metal hand was unmistakable. Steve's breath hitched. He pressed a hand against the glass, the heat of his touch making it steam up around the edges.

He was walking closer. He looked unarmed. He was wearing a red sweatshirt with the hood pulled up; that, combined with his ragged hair, meant Steve couldn't see his face. A part of Steve wanted to run, but he didn't. He just... stood there, his hand pressed to the glass. And in a blink the Winter Soldier was right in front of him, on the other side of the glass window, staring in at him.

Most of his face was concealed by goggles and a mask (a muzzle?) over his mouth. What few features were visible were blurry, as if Steve was seeing them from underwater.

Steve was shaking. Maybe in fear or awe. He wasn't sure. Slowly, the soldier raised his human hand and pressed it against Steve's on the other side of the glass.

"Who are you?" Steve asked. The soldier's reply was muffled by the glass; it was hard to make out. But Steve was pretty sure he got the gist of it.

I don't know.

Steve woke up with a start. He was sitting in the living room in Happy's gym gear, his back against the glass window behind him. The tulips were on the table on their side. He got up quickly, his hands shaking. "JARVIS? JARVIS, who's on the property?" he asked, words heavy in his mouth.
He needed some water.

He did not know how he'd gotten here, what had happened, whether he'd just had a dream or some sort of strange flashback or what, but he was shaken and paranoid.

"Just a gardener right now, Captain," said JARVIS.

"Right. Okay..." Steve slumped against the window in a strange kind of relief. It must have been a strange kind of dream. Had he been sleep walking? Or was he hallucinating now? Still, he found himself turning around to stare back outside. There was no one in sight. No one at all. But Steve still couldn't shake the creepy notion that someone was... watching. That somehow, there was a lingering connection between reality and his dream. It made him feel tainted, somehow, and he found himself grateful that Tony had not been present to witness him zoning out.

Upstairs, Tony rolled into a warm spot in the bed, an indent left by Steve. He took a deep breath of the sheets, basking in Steve; he opened his eyes groggily.

No Steve.

He checked the clock by the bed automatically, but there was no note. Tony felt oddly disappointed. He didn't consider himself sentimental, not in the slightest. But he'd tucked the previous two notes into his wallet, unable to discard them.

"Jarv?" he called thickly. "Update me on SHIELD."

"I'm still attempting to decrypt their files, sir."

"Any news on New Mexico?"

"There have been no noticeable increase in the import of palladium, sir."

Tony frowned. A town full of people "hallucinating" that they had seen a suit-like entity... that sounded like a cover-up if Tony had ever heard one. Gas leaks were second only to "training exercise" in terms of cover stories.

"Is that town receiving any government money by any chance?"

"Yes, sir. Quite a bit. Supposedly, the gas leak caused quite a bit of damage."

"Right. The 'gas leak,'" said Tony. "Aside from the Hammer program to reverse-engineer the suit, is there any other agency that's working anything?"

"There is an Air Force division with a mechanical flight suit that might qualify."

"...find out if that division has any ties to New Mexico. How's the press treating us today?"

"You and Captain Rogers are generally approved of, but Stark Industries' stocks have dropped another six points due to the coverage of the expo. The names of the victims were released today. Miss Potts has your lawyers on standby."

Tony sighed. At least people were happy about their bond. At least people still liked Steve.

He rolled out of bed, wincing on his bad ankle. It was a lot less swollen; a night of having no weight put on it had done it good. Tony threw on a t-shirt and a pair of board shorts; outside it was a dazzlingly sunshiney day and he was thinking he might float around in the pool for a bit.
"JARVIS, I know you're already doing a whole bunch of stuff, but if you happen to have any free
time, could you also start compiling a list of all the people who sent us flowers so I can make Pepper send out thank-you cards?"

Tony limped slowly out of the room and down the hall. Steve was probably in the gym, which would give Tony time to toss out the tulips before he noticed. Tulips were a cheap flower, anyway. They wouldn't be missed.

As he descended the stairs, however, he spotted Steve through the indoor waterfall. About half of Tony's vast living room was covered in a rainbow of orchids, predominantly white but also pinks and yellows, and a few odd ones, a blue one here and a purple one there. Steve was standing by the window, staring out of it; the vase of tulips that Tony had moved behind a couple of orchids had been pulled out (damn it, he thought) and knocked over (yay, he thought).

"Hey, lover," called Tony, climbing heavily down the last few stairs and crossing the room slowly. He wrapped his arms around Steve's waist. "...what are you looking at?" He peeked over Steve's shoulder. He was in a good mood, maybe because of what a gorgeous day it was, or maybe because he had a good excuse to toss out the tulips now that they'd been dropped.

Steve seemed distant.


Steve's gaze darted over the garden and driveway, his throat tight with worry and doubt. There was nothing. There was no one. But it had felt so real. Steve could have sworn it was. He'd gotten dressed, gone downstairs, and moved the flowers, hadn't he? How could that be real, and the sight of the Winter Soldier not be? Steve let out a slow, long breath. He kept his gaze fixed on the window, barely aware of Tony's touch until he kissed his neck.

"Sorry, I..." Steve's voice sounded lost, too quiet. He pulled his hand back from the window; he had pressed it there, half-hoping and half-dreading that another hand would come up, as it had in his dream. "Do you ever have a dream that you're not sure is a dream?" Steve asked in a murmur and then finally turned around to face Tony, his blue eyes glazed over with doubt.

"Sure. Flashbacks, sometimes," said Tony uncomfortable, drawing away a little, his hands still on Steve's waist. Steve looked confused and unsettled. Tony hadn't yet seen Steve like this but he wasn't surprised; the guy was a WWII vet, after all.

"No one's... no one's been on the grounds, have they? Not in the past...hang on, what time is it?"

"It's about eight-thirty. There's probably been a ton of people all over the place, Steve. Gardeners, delivery drivers, laundry, mail... but no one that's not supposed to be here. ...no Axis powers," he joked lightly, reaching up to card his fingers through Steve's hair. "Don't worry... this place has state-of-the-art security measures in place. No one gets through those gates who isn't supposed to."

Tony didn't mention that, somehow, at least once a year, both Girl Scouts and Mormons found their way in. He didn't mind the Girl Scouts but he found the Mormons infuriating. The last time they'd come by, he'd demanded to know how they had made it to the front door, to which they'd calmly explained that they'd ridden their bikes, which didn't actually answer Tony's question at all.

"Eight thirty?" Steve echoed and his eyes flew open wide. Two and a half hours had passed?! What?! He'd just been...sleeping on the floor against the window, for two and a half hours? He swallowed thickly, nervously, gaze still darting around like a cornered fox's. He was still shaking a little. Was it a flashback? If so, it was not like one he'd ever experienced before. And the
"Steve," said Tony quietly. "I know they feel really real. But they're not. I have them, too. You're okay." He pulled Steve to him and hugged him.

"It wasn't real. It couldn't have been," Steve agreed with a sense of finality, shaking his head to himself. He finally looked up and met Tony's gaze. "Sorry, I just- bad morning." He tried for a smile but it didn't meet his eyes. "I think I'm gonna run for a while, is that okay?"

Tony could tell Steve was trying to brush it off. He always did the same thing with Pepper, once he started coming to his senses, trying to downplay the seriousness. He wanted to smother Steve with affection, but he knew how awful it was to feel helpless after a flashback. He forced himself to back off.

"Sure... sure, go run, go sweat to the oldies or whatever it is you do for like six hours a day. I'll be in the shop. If you need anything just holler at JARVIS, okay?" Tony ran a hand down Steve's arm. He couldn't help but worry, but he knew the only real cure for a flashback was to shake it off, move forward. Maybe later in the day, Steve would feel better; he seemed to love working out. Maybe he just needed some time alone.

More time to work on the suit, at least.

Tony waited for Steve to wander away before he scooped up the mess on the floor, the vase (now cracked) and the tulips. He knew there was no card, but looked for one anyway.

Maybe they had been sent in error. Maybe they weren't even for him and Steve. Without a card, there was no way to know, really.

Tony dumped them in the trash before climbing heavily down the steps to the basement. "JARVIS, play some shop music for me. I'm feeling motivated," called Tony. He cracked his knuckles, surveying his space; with a few flicks of his fingers, he woke up his computer and pulled up the files for the suit, dragging out a 3D holographic model of the circuitry.

"...the new Mark VII's gonna make the Mark V look like the Mark II," he informed JARVIS, eyes darting over the circuit diagram.

"Naturally." agreed JARVIS, throwing up the Mark V's suit diagnostics before Tony could ask. He overlaid the two holograms and closed one eye, examining them, looking for ways to improve them. One of Tony's mantras was, "There's always room for improvement." He'd broken the sound barrier with the second suit, but he was still trying to find ways to make it accelerate faster, stop shorter, be more energy efficient. With the new arc reactor, he felt like the suits were about to undergo a renaissance; they were no longer operating with a limited power supply. If he could miniaturize the new arc reactor and slap RT nodes into the palms of the suit, he could probably create one that could theoretically be worn indefinitely. The thought was like a warm blanket to his brain; he basked in his designs, feeling smug, feeling... invincible.

He hoped Steve's day got better. Hoped that running had the same effect on Steve as looking over computer code did for Tony.

Steve ran or about an hour solid on god knows how many miles an hour. At one point he was pretty sure JARVIS just told him he broke a world record but he wasn't really listening. He phased out the tinny pop music and just focused on a spot on the wall ahead. He'd broken out into a sweat
and his biceps and legs thrummed with the low burn that came from the constant sprint.

"Call from Natasha Romanov," JARVIS announced.

"Answer," Steve called back, setting the running machine to a lower pace so he could speak to her properly without sounding breathless. He kept it at a fast pace walk but nothing more.

"Hey, so, how's your honeymoon-"

"Nat. I keep seeing him."

She went quiet. "Bad or good? Or...?"

"Yesterday he bit me. It felt like I was dying. And then I saw him through the window."

"Today?"

"I thought it was real. I thought I was him in the drive. I asked him who he was and he said he didn't know. And there's tulips- everyone else has sent orchids. But he bought me tulips before and now they're here and-"

"Wait, wait. The Winter Soldier sent you tulips?"

Steve let out a noise of frustration. "No. Bucky got me tulips, back in the thirties. And now someone else sent me tulips. What if it's HYDRA, mess with me? Or the Winter Soldier, trying to mess up my head so I'll be an easier target?"

"Who do you think sent them?" Natasha asked, tone cool and composed and calm.

Steve swallowed and stared down at the black carpet that lined the gym floor. "I think that whoever did... wants me to know they're coming. Not necessarily HYDRA. I don't know. I don't think I'm safe, though. Or Tony is. This isn't good. I'm scared. And I think he is too."

"Tony?"

"No, the soldier. I can feel it, you know? In the dreams. I can feel how scared he is. You know how in dreams you sort of know how everyone feels or what their motivations are?"

"Steve..." Natasha sighed. "Maybe you're right, about the Winter Soldier trying to get under your skin. Maybe he's manipulating you. He's HYDRA. You can't trust him. He shot you in the simulation."

"He didn't want to shoot me. I could feel that too."

Natasha groaned in frustration. "The HYDRA assassin didn't want to shoot you? Whatever you say, Steve..."

Steve frowned. "You don't believe me."

"...believing in people really isn't my thing. It's yours," said Natasha bluntly. "But in this case, Steve, it's not a strength. It's a weakness. You can't let a tulip delivery make you sympathetic to a HYDRA agent. The Winter Soldier isn't a sympathetic person. Hell. He's not even truly a person at all. Don't forget that."

Downstairs, Tony was singing along to his music as he put the finishing touches on one of the
gauntlets.

"I like my coffee black, just like my metal--" he yelled along with the music. "--can't wait for you to fuck me up in a minute, minute--" Despite the screaming, his hands were steady (thanks to a few shots of scotch).

He had an idea for self-assembling armor but he wasn't sure yet whether or not it was possible. He didn't just want armor that could build itself without scaffolding. He wanted armor that could come to him, that could assemble around him from individual pieces.

Only one way to find out if it was possible.

He pulled the sleeve of wires and magnets down over his arm, then picked up a garbage can lid. He should probably ask to borrow Steve's shield, but he didn't have time; he was too excited to try this out.

"MUTE! JARVIS, please record this, this is gamma test 1 of the Mark VII self-assembling armor. We're using a miniature model 2 palladium-core RT in the node, electromagnetic lures on a low frequency, uh, what, 300 Hertz... ready when you are, Jarv."

"You're live, sir," reported JARVIS.

Tony limped across the shop, passing by the rows of cars parked silently against the concrete walls.

He crouched on the other end of the garage and held up the garbage can lid, planting his feet firmly. Best case scenario was that the gauntlet would fly over when he tripped the sleeve he was wearing. Worst case scenario is that it would blow up. Only one way to really know for sure.

"Okay... three... two... one!"

Tony flipped a switch on his forearm and waited. Nothing happened.

He stood, dropping the garbage can lid with disappointment. "Fuck," he said.

Suddenly the gauntlet on the other side of the room lit up and shot over to him; it smashed into his stomach, forty pounds of metal, and slammed him against the wall. He dropped with a whine, grabbing his ribs. "Fuck!" he repeated, this time with excitement.

It was nowhere near complete, but it was a start.

"Sir. Agent Romanov is on line 1."

"Oh?"

"She's talking to Agent Rogers."

"Oo. Let's eavesdrop," said Tony immediately, curious. He climbed to his feet painfully, stripping off the sleeve of wires, looking down at the metal glove twitching on the floor. The casing of the RT node in the palm had broken on impact. He'd need to find a way to secure that.

JARVIS put on line 1, keeping his end muted so Tony could listen.

"--this isn't good. I'm scared. And I think he is too."

Tony frowned. He wasn't scared. What the hell was Steve talking about?
Then Natasha clarified and they began talking about HYDRA and the Winter Soldier. Ugh. That guy again. Steve's personal Vanko.

"JARVIS, can you start compiling everything you can find on the Winter Soldier?" asked Tony.

"I already have, sir."

"Thanks, buddy," said Tony, heaving up the broken pieces of the armor and dragging them across the garage. He tossed them inelegantly on a work bench, glancing down at the broken casing of the miniature arc reactor. He reached up and rubbed his chest subconsciously, still listening in to Steve and Natasha.

"--it's not that I don't believe you, Steve," she was saying. "I mean, I believe you're having these flashbacks... but not that they themselves are based in reality. I'm sure they feel real. But let's face it, you're hormonally and emotionally compromised right now. The psych eval was rough for you. You've recently bonded, for the second time. It wouldn't be hard for them to get into your head right now. How do we know they're not trying to engender sympathy by mixing up your memories of Bucky with the Winter Soldier? By getting you to associate the two of them? I've been thinking about this a lot, and I think that, somehow, that's what's happening. Maybe they found a way to... I don't know... make the Winter Soldier smell like Bucky so that when he comes for you, you'll be incapable of defending against him. Psychological warfare, Steve. I've seen a hell of a lot of it in my life and it's just as effective as bombs and guns and tasers."

"JARVIS? Can you look up any info on Bucky, too?" called Tony. He hated the idea of learning about Steve's other mate, but he also believed in keeping his enemies close.

"You mean James Buchanan Barnes of the 107th Infantry Regiment and the Howling Commandos?"

"Yeah, that douchebag. ...do you think he could be related to the Winter Soldier? Was he from a big family?"

"He was the eldest of four children."

"Did he have kids or anything?"

"No, sir. He was declared dead in 1944."

"If he had siblings, though, they would all be like... in their eighties, at least. ...maybe his brothers had kids?"

"He had two brothers that died in the war, and one sister."

"...is she alive?"

"Yes."

"Look her up. Is she an Alpha?"

"An omega, sir."

"Find out if she has children."

"Two, sir."

Ah-ha, thought Tony. He bet the Barnes brats were behind this whole Winter Soldier thing. Of
course HYDRA would recruit them; if they smelled at all like Bucky, then--

"--also both omegas."

"Wait, what?"

Damn it. Tony had expected Alphas. Or at least betas jacked up on a ton of hormones. But if they were both omegas, then they couldn't be the Winter Soldier. You couldn't mistake an omega for an Alpha. It was an unfortunate reality that a lot of omegas would take dangerous amounts of suppressants, trying to pass as betas (it was rumored that this was what had killed Janis Joplin), but no amount of hormonal supplementation could turn an omega Alpha, or vice versa. Tony thought back to his childhood friend, Ty, and a shudder passed through him.

Steve and Natasha were still talking; Tony was flicking through files on his computer as quickly as JARVIS could provide them, trying to get more information. The Barnes brats, as Tony thought of them, were named George and Susan. Boring, common names for boring, common people. Probably not HYDRA plants. Tony was disappointed; he'd thought for a moment that he had single-handedly solved the mystery of Steve's strange feeling of connection to the Winter Soldier, an assassin he'd never even met, and the reason why Steve associated his smell with that of his first mate's.

"If they think making him smell like Bucky is going to stop me from hitting him then they've got another thing coming," Steve said lowly, ramping the speed up on his treadmill to two stages higher. He started jogging again. He'd begun to feel better but now, with what Natasha was saying, he wasn't so sure. Maybe it was just HYDRA fucking with his head. But that thought alone with chilling. How dare they desecrate the memory of Bucky by doing this. Now that made Steve feel angry.

"Also... HYDRA never knew we were mated," he pointed out. "My bite mark was gone on the surface, after the serum."

"Maybe they found out from Barnes, somehow. Wasn't he a POW in Azzano in '43?"

"Sure, he might have said my name a few times on an operating table in Azzano, but that didn't mean much."

"I'm just saying. Worst case scenario. If HYDRA was experimenting on your mate and found out he was your mate... maybe they found a way to recreate parts of him, simulate his smell or something."

"They thought we were just friends," insisted Steve. "After all, he never showed any physical affection towards me that a friend wouldn't show and before Cap I was nobody. They would never have seen pictures of me with the bite mark."

"They could've found out from a third party," said Natasha.

"Naw. Even the other Howlies didn't know we were bonded."

Listening in from the basement, Tony felt a mean, vicious sort of satisfaction in hearing from Steve how terrible his first mate was. He twirled idly around in his desk chair, feeling a lot calmer than he had a week ago, a lot more secure. Hearing Steve say Bucky's name still made his hackles rise, but he didn't mind Steve and Natasha chatting, even knowing what a dominant Alpha she was. It was only when Steve talked openly about his old bite mark... it hurt. It hurt so much to know Steve had been claimed before.
"JARVIS... tell me again what happened to Barnes."

"He was declared dead in 1944, sir."

Tony knew he shouldn't relish that, but he did.

He continued to listen in, mentally tucking away information.

"What if HYDRA isn't behind this at all? What if the Winter Soldier is operating alone? What if something is driving him away from them and towards me? If that's the case, I think that, in the end...he isn't going to choose HYDRA's side. I can be very persuasive you know."

"So you're just going to persuade a world class and criminally insane assassin to betray everything he's ever known?" Natasha asked. "That simple, huh?"

"I don't see why it can't be," Steve shrugged and Natasha laughed. It was a fond sound.

But it quickly evaporated. "You know if you're having any treasonous ideas I've got to report them to Fury, right?"

"I know," said Steve hastily. "And trust me, Nat, I'm not saying I'm sympathetic to the Winter Soldier, at all. Just that... that if I could bring someone over from the other side, I would. People deserve second chances, y'know?"

"...I know," said Natasha, her tone softer, and more gentle. "...you sap," she added, with a brittle laugh.

Then Steve laughed too but there was uneasiness that lingered in his bones. He couldn't shake the feeling. It was a strange sensation that- no matter where - the Winter Soldier was headed straight for him. And that there was nothing he could do about it. That they were on a collision course.

But that could also just be paranoia, or shell-shock. Steve knew all about shell-shock. Or PTSD, as it was now called. He might just be getting worked up over nothing.

Downstairs, Tony could feel his mate's unease. Even if he weren't listening to him on the phone, Tony's gut was heavy with Steve's worry. He liked Steve's attitude, but it concerned him. Steve seemed confident that he could just talk down the Winter Soldier. Tony was more inclined to agree with Natasha. Even if the Winter Soldier was having doubts about HYDRA, why would he spare Steve? Steve may have been "persuasive," but Tony didn't think that would stop the guy from shooting him if he got the chance.

All the more reason to get the Mark VII in working order.

"JARVIS, can you put me through to Steve and Romanov?"

"Mr. Stark has joined line 1," JARVIS informed them.

"Hi, guys," called Tony. "Natasha! How's my second-favorite redhead? ...didja send us an orchid yet?"

Natasha snorted a little. "Are you joking? I didn't realize you were such a romantic, Stark. How many orchids have you gotten so far?"

"Two hundred and ninety-nine," announced JARVIS. "Excuse me-- three hundred and four."

Tony flipped his screen to check the camera by the front door. Sure enough, someone was
delivering more flowers.

"Yeah, so, where's the one from you and Clint?"

"Clint sent you guys one. I told him not to but he insisted," said Natasha.

"Seriously? What a loser."

"Careful, Stark," she warned.

"Did I say loser? I meant remarkable specimen of a human being."

Natasha snorted again. Despite her earlier warnings to Steve that Tony seemed like a jerk, she clearly had a soft spot for him. Maybe just because he made Steve happy.

"What are you going to do with all of them? Have an elaborate game of hide and seek?" she asked.

"Tony wants to auction them," Steve supplied. "For charity."

Natasha made a huh sound. "That's actually not a bad idea," she conceded. That was high praise from Natasha, especially for someone she didn't know all that well. When something wasn't 'bad' it was probably actually decent at the very least. Like when she first saw Steve in sparring. Her comment was I've seen better.' Two weeks in and he was 'not bad.' A month in and he just got a high-pitched humming sound which he usually took to mean great.

There was some rustling on the end of Natasha's line as she got herself comfortable on a sofa. "So it's all going well for you two? You enjoying your honeymoon? You guys did get protection like I told you to?"

"Yes..." Steve said with an awkward groan. In his day, no Alpha would dare ask an omega that wasn't theirs such a personal question. "But it's like a 3% chance, right? Not a big deal."

Natasha let out an awkward laugh. "Yeah, on a normal day. But not in your honeymoon period."

Steve frowned. "What?"

"It's like a semi-heat Steve. It's like a good 60% chance. You know that... right?"

Steve froze; on the phone line, Natasha and Tony cringed at a loud whump as Steve was flung off of the treadmill and against the wall. He groaned loudly and let his head fall back against the wall. "Aw, raspberries."

"Sixteen?" repeated Tony, stopping his chair mid-spin. "...you said sixteen, right?"

"Sixty," said Natasha.

Tony felt a lump in his throat. "But I had a vasectomy."

"You mean the one in Tijuana in the eighties? Do you trust that, 100%?"

"...how do you know about that?" demanded Tony, avoiding the question.

"Oh, please. SHIELD knows all your dirty little secrets."

"Didja know Steve can hold his breath for like two and a half minutes?"
Natasha didn't take the bait. "You guys better start praying."

Tony frowned. "To who, Odin?" he said with a roll of his eyes. He thought religion was for fools. "We'll just pick up some Plan B or something. JARVIS!"

Natasha's silence spoke volumes.

Tony was silently reassuring himself. He'd had seventeen bullshit paternity suits; surely he had nothing to worry about. He was already back to researching the Barnes brats. According to public record, Barnes was, in fact, a grandfather. Weird to think about that. Steve and him, they had nothing to worry about; was Steve even fertile? Doubtful. They were surely fine.

"Pills don't work on Steve. If you had a problem that needed getting rid of you would probably need surgery. Which SHIELD would provide, by the way."

Steve groaned, half in protest. "Surgery? No, no, I don't wanna get surgery. I'll do what Tony said, I'll take a pill. You guys have pills for that nowadays, right?"

"You think one tiny pill is going to stop a super-serum baby?"

"Then I'll take fifty. I don't care," Steve grunted as he pushed himself off the wall and stood up. He rubbed at the back of his head as he moved to turn off the treadmill. It was sore to touch. "I do not want a baby Natasha."

"Well, it's okay if you do, you know..."

"I literally can't think of anything worse right now."

And Steve really couldn't. He was a soldier, a fighter. His work was his body and he wasn't prepared to give up his work yet. Maybe ever. He couldn't deal with the consequences of being out of action during and after pregnancy. Steve couldn't deal with the responsibility of having to protect a baby from the world. He was having enough trouble looking after himself right now.

"Tony?" Natasha sighed. "Do you have any pregnancy tests in the house?"

"In the second guest bedroom's ensuite," JARVIS filled in and she sighed again.

"Of course you do... Steve. Pee on one of them-"

"Sorry, did you just say pee-"

"Yes pee. That's how they work. Get the results and let me know if I have to get in touch with SHIELD doctors or not. And you don't have to make the decision straight away."

"I made my decision a very long time ago, Nat," Steve breathed and then made his way out of the gym.

"If SHIELD knows all my dirty little secrets, then it knows that I've slept with over a thousand women and I have, to date, zero children," said Tony, refusing to be upset.

"Zero that we know about."

"How come you and Clint don't have kids?"

"I'm just asking!"

JARVIS muted her for a moment. "Sir. I have gained access to SHIELD intercoms."

"All right!" said Tony. "Start transcribing. I wanna know everything. I'll read the records later."

Even though Tony wasn't worried— he definitely wasn't, not at all, not in the slightest— he felt like he should probably go make sure Steve was okay.

He slipped out of his chair and limped over to the stairs, exiting the shop and climbing heavily up the stairs. "Unmute. So, seriously, how's it work, can you guys knock each other up? Female Alpha and male omega... who sticks what where, exactly?"

"You never turn it off, do you? Everything's a big joke to you, isn't it?"

"Pretty much, yeah," said Tony, leaning on the handrail and wincing as he climbed up the stairs. "They say tragedy plus time equals comedy."

"Well, you're certainly a tragedy." There was a bitter tone to Natasha's voice; she didn't really sound like she was kidding around with him. Had he hit a nerve? Or was it that she didn't entirely approve of him? She was Steve's friend and Tony was fully aware that he wasn't endearing himself to anyone by pointing out he'd slept with over a thousand women.

"You're avoiding the question. Can female Alphas get knocked up? Can you knock up male Alphas? Can you guys have kids? Dish."

"You seriously don't know, do you?"

"My sex ed was severely lacking, yes. I've been trying to make up for it ever since. Hence the hundreds of women--"

"Steve, I'm going to go. Tell me if you need anything. Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon."

Natasha still sounded bitter; she hung up. Tony noted that she still hadn't answered the question. Interesting. He was looking forward to reading her and Barton's files. He felt like everyone in SHIELD was a thoroughly complex person, and Tony's insatiable curiosity was matched by his sense of satisfaction that came with accessing information he wasn't supposed to have access to in the first place. They were all hiding things, secrets, and Tony was going to dig up every last one of them. If it was stored on a database, it would be his. SHIELD's system were actually pretty well guarded. Hackable, but challenging, which is exactly what Tony liked best.

He walked down the hall and poked his head into the second guest bedroom. "Knock knock. What's up, omega?"

Steve was sitting with his back against the bath tub. He'd peed on the weird stick thing (and a little bit on his hand. Ew.) and was waiting impatiently for the thing to give him an answer. But it took ten whole minutes for a result to be displayed. His mind was racing at a hundred miles per hour with fifty different possibilities rushing through his head.

He'd tried to read the box to distract himself but had given up. It promised accurate results before a missed period or heat, that it was the best, fastest, most accurate test for both women and omegas, but Steve was doubtful that the little plastic stick could truly tell him anything.

But what if it did? What if it gave him a positive result? He could get rid of a child, right? ...Steve wasn't actually sure he could. No, he didn't want kids. Not at all. Not now. He was a soldier. But could he kill one? Steve was pro-choice but he wasn't sure his forties conscience was leaving him with much of one, himself. It was easy to say people should have the right to do it, but
could he do it? Back in his own century, every omega wanted to bear whelps for their Alpha. Steve had, too. Throwing away a baby seemed wrong to him. But how the hell could he have a baby in this day and age, when he didn't know a damn thing? When he barely understood how the world around him worked?

Shit. He hated being uneducated. He wished they'd used protection. Shit.

He hesitated when Tony knocked on the door.

"Come in!" he called out and then sat up a little at Tony's arrival. Steve made a conscious effort to look less panicked. "Hey." He tried for a smile. "I, er, peed on the stick thing. Should know any minute now."

Tony sat down next to Steve and put an arm around him "Hey," he said firmly, "you have nothing to worry about. ...Natasha's just being paranoid."

Despite his protests, anxiety was coursing through him. To answer Natasha's question, no, he wasn't 100% sure that a 3,000 peso vasectomy was 100% effective. Over the years, he'd done a lot of women, but nearly all were on birth control, or said they were, and he tried to use a condom as often as he remembered it, and there had been plenty of times Pepper had swooped in and made sure a suspicious partner took the morning after pill.

Maybe the anxiety wasn't his. Maybe it was Steve's. Steve looked genuinely worried and also a little incredulous that modern pregnancy tests worked. Tony stroked his thumb on Steve's shoulder, waiting with him.

"...if you want, I'll pee on it, too," said Tony. "Y'know, equality and all that." He forced a grin. He didn't know how the fuck to even read one of these things. Yet another thing that he didn't know. He and Steve lapsed into silence, staring at it. Tony was waiting fro a negative result so they could have a big laugh over how dumb they'd been.

Steve laughed weakly at that, warmed at Tony's attempt at humor. He slid down into his touch and leaned his head on his Alpha's shoulder. "It's actually pretty hard to pee on. The stick's so little. No goddamn clue how girls manage it." He fell quiet after that. Steve just focused on keeping his breathing even and steady whilst his gaze remained fixed on tiny stick in his hand.

Eventually a symbol popped up and Steve stilled.

Then he let out a sigh of relief and dropped the stick, head falling into his hands.

Tony grabbed the stick from Steve and looked at it; he hadn't realized how much he'd tensed up over the course of a few minutes.

"Oh, thank Tesla..." he breathed, wrapping his arms around Steve and hugging him. He let out a chuckle. All that stress for nothing. Natasha's fault, getting them all worked up like that. "I told you, didn't I? ...the media would kill me if I knocked up Captain America... I told you... geez..." Tony pulled away to give his arc reactor a few whacks. His heart was running. He couldn't believe how convinced he'd been, for a split second, that they might actually be pregnant.

Steve laughed again, in relief this time, his shoulders shaking. He almost wanted to cry, he was so relieved. Steve peeked over at Tony between his forearms and shook his head. "I was real scared for a second there. Jiminy Christmas. Let's never do that again."

Sure having sex without protection felt good but Steve was pretty sure having a baby felt significantly worse.
"We should frame it," said Tony, looking down at the negative test. "...I should get snipped again, just to be sure, Nat's right... don't you dare tell her I said that... but that Tijuana vasectomy was pretty sketchy..." He lapsed into silence. He'd been 19, and drunk, and had gotten it with encouragement from Obadiah. It occurred to him, later in life, what a clever move it had been. Tony's lifestyle was hopelessly reckless and if he died, Obadiah was poised to take over the company; the concern was that Tony would have an heir. It was a ruthlessly calculating move and later, in his late twenties, Tony had found himself regretting the decision.

But life was too short for regrets and so Tony didn't dwell on it much. It was just as well that he couldn't have children; he was terrified he might end up like his father, treat them the way he had been treated.

Before he could stop himself, he blurted, "I looked up Barnes's family. He had a sister. She had... she had two kids. They're alive. And one of them has kids, too."

Steve blinked in surprise when Tony suddenly mentioned Bucky, the test forgotten on the floor and its meaning now negligible. "Really?" He whispered and something strange seized in his chest. He swallowed down a lump in his throat at the memory. "Why did you look up his family?"

"What if the Winter Soldier is like, one of his kids? And that's why you think the smell is familiar?"

Steve shook his head. "I know Bucky's scent. I wouldn't mistake it for something else's. Not even a relative, Tony. It's like how...I'd always recognise yours," he pointed out awkwardly. "I would never get you and Howard mixed up."

"You already have mistaken his smell for someone else's. The Winter Soldier," pointed out Tony. "Maybe they found a way to make their assassins smell like other people. Like Natasha said. Psychological warfare." He climbed to his feet and offered Steve a hand. "Come on, Cap," he said, gently. "Not worth worrying about. We're good. Forget it."

Forget it. Easier said than done. Tony wasn't someone who let things go easily. He couldn't forget. But he could certainly distract. He had a psych eval to prepare for, and Steve's birthday, and the Mark VII.

"Hey, wait a second. How did you know what Natasha said? Were you eavesdropping?" asked Steve indignantly.

"...I need to use your shield," said Tony quickly, ignoring the question. "I have stuff flying around the shop, and, y'know." He lifted his shirt, displaying the growing bruise on his ribs. "You wanna come down and hang out? We can talk about your next interview. Since there's no baby to announce, you're going to have to talk about something else." He held on to Steve's hand even after he'd gotten up. He'd had no idea that honeymooning meant such a high risk of pregnancy and he made a mental note to chew out Pepper for not telling him.

Steve took Tony's hand and stood. Although he frowned when he showed him the bruise. "Jesus Tony," he muttered and kissed his forehead. "You're still limping from the last fight. Don't start another one with yourself," he sighed and followed Tony down to the workshop, thinking he'd probably doodle some more whilst Tony worked. He liked drawing his Alpha and the way his brow knotted when he worked, he found.

"Hang on." Steve stopped at the bottom of the stairway and made Tony pull on his hand. "Seriously. Natasha mentioned the psychological warfare stuff before. Were you listening in on our conversation? Answer the question, Stark."
Tony swore mentally at himself for the slip. "...I only heard a little bit when I first tuned in," he lied. "Hey, speaking of eavesdropping, guess who got ahold of SHIELD's intercom records? Wanna see what Clint is up to in New Mexico?" He gave Steve another tug. "Or we can go have a celebratory fuck in the pool." He turned around and wrapped his arms around Steve's waist, resting his head on Steve's chest to listen to his heartbeat.

For just a split second, he'd been worried, worried they were going to end up with a kid and a hard decision to make. Tony didn't need anyone to tell him that Steve, despite his progressive stance on omega rights, would probably think about it long and hard before he terminated an embryo.

Tony's mind wandered back to Natasha and Clint. They were bonded, but didn't have children. A result of their weird biology or a conscious, deliberate choice? Female Alphas occupied a strange place in society and few ended up with children. But Tony had noted the subtle shift in Natasha's tone, her words... it was yet another piece of SHIELD's vast network of secrets that Tony filed away for later use. He didn't trust Fury and he didn't trust SHIELD. He was happy to join, if only to protect Steve and spend more time punching stuff in the suit, but he wasn't going to let them hide things from him. No. He wanted his hands on every dossier they had. He wanted to know everyone's secrets.

It occurred to him, with a start, that that would include Steve. But Steve couldn't possibly hide anything from Tony that would be worst or more traumatizing than finding out about his previous bond, right? Tony dismissed the thought. He'd read through Steve's files along with everyone's else, once he got his hands on them.

"You got SHIELD's intercom records? Seriously?" Steve asked, not even knowing how Tony could do that. He was more than a little impressed. The eavesdropping was forgotten almost immediately; this was more than Steve had ever been allowed access to in SHIELD. "How do you even..." He shook his head and paused in thought for a very brief moment. "Yeah. I wanna know what's happening in New Mexico."

Maybe spying on his friends was wrong. But spying on SHIELD itself felt alright. He didn't like the way they kept secrets and the way Fury sat at the top, like some sort of puppet master, tugging their strings. Steve wanted to be able to challenge them. He respected Fury and he knew part of the reason they clashed was that they were actually quite similar people (not that Steve would ever admit that out loud.) But Fury was always willing to go that one step further that Steve just wasn't. And that was what set them apart so very clearly, and that was also why he couldn't trust him.

"Come on," said Tony, giving Steve's hand another tug. This time, Steve let Tony lead him down to the basement shop.

Tony plopped down into his office chair; he had an impressively large desk with a vast array of monitors that looked like alien technology to Steve. "JARVIS? The records," he called, and on cue, JARVIS brought them up. Over a hundred recordings popped up on screen.

"Gee. Okay. That's a lot," said Steve.

Tony beamed. He loved showing off, and hacking into SHIELD hadn't been easy. Also, bringing up the records had the desired effect; Steve had forgotten all about Tony's eavesdropping.

"Let's see here," said Tony, cracking his knuckles and feeling very much like the captain of a spaceship. He reached forward and began scrolling. Everything that could be made into a touchscreen was, because Tony was a tactile person and he found interacting with information was the best way to absorb it. "Oh, look, they're live!"
He pulled the transcripts to the bottom; new words were appearing onscreen before them. Steve leaned in to read; it was Clint and Fury who were talking. JARVIS labeled the names: B for Barton, F for Fury. Steve knew Clint well enough to tell, immediately, that Clint wasn't happy. Unlike Natasha, the man wasn't actually a big fan of taking risks. Steve knew that Clint was uneasy if he wasn't cracking jokes, even if it was Fury he was talking to. Or maybe he was less professional with Steve and around him on regular basis to try and make him feel more welcome and at ease; the archer was more considerate than he let on. Or, maybe Clint was just friendlier with other omegas. Still. The uncharacteristic seriousness of the conversation made Steve worried.

> Selvig doubts it.

> Read between the lines, Barton. You think Selvig would have spent a bunch of time researching Thor if he didn't have suspicions?

"I've heard of a guy named Selvig," said Tony, tenting his fingers and swivelin...
"And it's only going to get crazier if we don't figure out how to control and stabilize it.

"This is so juicy," said Tony, staring hungrily at the screen. His mind was already spinning with possibilities. If he had to guess, he figured Project Thor was probably some sort of attempt to reverse-engineer the suits. After all, who else better fit the title "God of Thunder" than him, Iron Man? It was cute how everyone was struggling to catch up with him. Without the arc reactor to power it, no suit in the world was even comparable to Tony's, and the secrets of making the arc reactor an efficient source of energy had died with Vanko, making Tony the sole keeper of that knowledge.

*Good luck, SHIELD,* he thought smugly.

He wasn't sure what the Tesseract was, but based on context, it was probably some sort of top-secret facility or some type of top-secret equipment. Tony was idly sketching a tesseract on a spare sticky note while he watched the screen. He thought hypercubes were pretty cool; tesseracts tessellated Euclidean space, and in the same way a person could fold out a cube into squares, a four-dimensional hypercube could be folded out into eight squares. Tony was already scribbling the proof out, just for fun. Eight hyperplanes, with four of the cubes meeting at each vertex... Tony wondered if whoever had named "Tesseract" had appreciated what an awesome mathematical principle they were referencing, or whether the code name had just been pulled out of a hat.

"Tesseract?" repeated Steve. That rang a bell. Not a good one, either.

Tony shoved a pile of papers at Steve; there was a drawing and lines and lines of math. "That's a tesseract. It's a geometric shape... a 4D cube, basically. Maybe 'Tesseract' is a new coding language or something... I don't know." He looked over at Steve, and added, "Don't worry about Clint. If he couldn't handle himself I'm sure they would call you or Natasha in."

He patted Steve's arm, then stood. "I'm gonna go take a nap by the pool. You can keep reading, if you want. I've got JARVIS transcribing everything for us. You know what they say... keep your friends close and your enemies closer. ...not that I'm saying SHIELD is my enemy, just that I like to know what's going on behind the scenes. I never do business with anyone unless I've hacked into their e-mails first. You ever notice how the only scandals Stark Industries ever has are ones I create?" Tony tapped his nose with a smirk.

He didn't mention the one, large mark on his perfect record. Finding out Stane had been selling weapons under the table for years and laundering the money to artificially inflate profits had been like waking up to a nightmare. Stane was one of the only people Tony actually trusted; he'd never hacked into his business partner's files, because why would he? He also hadn't snooped around in Pepper's phone or computer for over five years. Tony had limits.

Steve took the papers from Tony but he was still reading the transcripts on the screen. It was a full five or ten minutes before his eyes glanced down at the drawing of the tesseract.

His eyes widened.

"That's not... oh no..."

Steve would never forget it. The hellish blue light, its unnatural, monstrous hue, the way its power eliminated men from existence in mere seconds. The tesseract was an abomination. An item straight from hell whose power could only be used for evil. A thing that, in the wrong hands, could probably destroy the world.

"They didn't. Oh my God, they didn't!" Steve fisted a hand in his hair and groaned. "JARVIS! Call
Tony down here!"

Steve needn't have bothered asking JARVIS to call for Tony; Tony was already hurrying down the streets, alerted to the drop in Steve's stomach. "Steve? What happened?" he asked.

"It's not code. It's a weapon," said Steve, holding up the picture of the cube. "It's a weapon that Johann Schmidt was going to use to destroy the world, and he nearly succeeded. SHIELD shouldn't be messing with it. They must have found it when they found me. This really isn't good, Tony. They have no idea what they're dealing with. JARVIS? Can you get me Fury on the phone?"

Tony's eyes lit up. "What? What are they dealing with?" he demanded excitedly. Tony knew all about weapons; they were his specialty. So far, he felt like he was fitting in nicely with SHIELD. He felt right at home. Now there was another weapon? Tony wanted to be worried, but mostly he was just excited. To Tony, all weapons were tools and all tools, if wielded correctly, were safe. Of course, Tony's definition of "safe" was, as Pepper pointed out, rather different than most people's.

"The tesseract is bad Tony. This isn't something to be excited over," Steve said, his eyes dark with the memory. He remembered death. The manic gleam in Johann's eyes as he fantasized about it, the greedy excitement about getting his hands on the cube. There was nothing good that could come of that glowing cube. That much Steve was sure of.

Steve's hands flexed by his sides tensely, almost like he was getting ready for a fight. In a way, he was.

JARVIS placed the call; Fury's voice filled Tony's garage.

"...Stark?"

"Steve, calling from Stark's. Hi again, Cyclops," said Tony pleasantly.

"Aren't you two supposed to be honeymooning?"

"I wore him out," butted in Tony with a devilish grin.

Fury didn't respond, and Tony didn't expect him to. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" asked Fury cautiously. All of them, suspected Tony, were aware that their last interaction together had been in Steve's kitchen, immediately after Steve's interview and with Tony in his underwear. None of them were mentioning it; Fury seemed like a ruthlessly practical person and with Tony and Steve bonded, he was probably aware that he was stuck with accepting both of them if he wanted to recruit one.

"What are you doing with the Tesseract?"

Fury was quiet for a short while. "That's classified Captain. Maybe you could explain to Stark what that means -"

"You're going to get us all killed," Steve told him and he was being more than confrontational.

Steve didn't just sound angry, no. He sounded afraid.

"With all due respect, Captain, we've got a hell of a lot more of an idea about what we're dealing with now than folks did seventy years ago."

"Oh, look! PEGASUS: Potential Energy Group, Alternate Sources, United States!" exclaimed
Tony with delight. "Are you guys trying to solve the energy crisis? Is that it?"

"What the-- Stark! How did you get through our firewall?"

"It was easy," said Tony, standing over his desk, scrolling through the intercom transcripts. "What's THOR?"

"It's none of your business. Captain, we know what we're doing. Mind your place."

Tony's head snapped up. "Did you just tell my omega to mind his place?"

"Easy, Stark. I meant as a soldier. Not as an omega."

Tony had already automatically begun to bristle on Steve's behalf, but Steve seemed a hell of a lot more upset by the tesseract than by any of his usual status civil rights stuff. No one had yet explained what the hell the tesseract actually was, though, only that "it," whatever "it" was, was dangerous and powerful. Steve had recognized it from a drawing of an actual hypercube, but a hypercube was merely a shape. Not a thing. Tony felt like everyone might as well be talking about "the rectangle" or "the pyramid." Maybe they didn't know what the hell it was after all and that was all they knew: its shape. That made it even more intriguing to Tony. He desperately wanted to see it. For one thing, he'd never seen a 4D object with the influence of a ton of drugs.

He knew the first time he'd seen a hypercube on paper though. It was in his father's notes. He had seen it, then, as a mere curiosity. Now he was wondering. If Howard was in SHIELD... and SHIELD had this thing... then surely...?

Tony got up and crossed the room. He had boxes of Howard's notes stored away; most had never been opened. He'd put them away back when it had been too painful to deal with and let it slip his mind, intentionally, because Tony's feelings about Howard were complicated and he'd rather not examine them. But the promise of cracking open SHIELD's mysteries was too exciting to resist. He left Steve and Fury to argue while he began dragging boxes out from the server room. It was an unused lower level to the shop where he stored most of JARVIS's hardware and a few generators for whenever he accidentally brought down the power grid around his house (once or twice a year, on average). The boxes were heavy, laden with notebooks untouched for decades, and covered in dust. Tony had some trouble managing them with his hurt leg, and when he sneezed, his ribs hurt. As usual, physical discomfort was compartmentalized and ignored; Tony's mind was excellent at getting obsessed with ideas.

"You haven't experienced the tesseract like I have Nick. You have no idea-" Steve was saying.

"We have the best scientists in the world working on this."

"So did Schmidt!" Steve pointed out, his whole body trembling.

"Steve." Fury sighed. "Nothing is black and white, remember. There's good and bad in everything. I know the tesseract caused a lot of harm-"

"You have no idea."

Steve could still remember it. He could remember it like it was yesterday. The burning blue heat from it and the ghoulish light that blinded his eyes as he was-

- slammed down next to it. Steve was pretty sure one of his legs was broken, or at least dislocated, considering the fact that he couldn't really move it. His shield was embedded in the metal floor of
the plane a good few meters away and Schmidt was scrambling toward him... he was coming toward him, face contorted with hate... he curled his fingers into Steve's hair, lightning-fast, and rammed his forehead into the floor. Once. Twice. Three times. Steve's vision swam, the tesseract still dangerously close to burning his face. Schmidt laughed; the sound was shrill.

"Oh, your arrogance, Captain... it will cost you dearly."

Steve blinked slowly. He tried to move his fingers. He had to get the cube away. The blue light in his eyes was still blinding.

There was a weight on top of him. Schmidt was pinning him, keeping him from the cube. Steve's fingers scabbled uselessly over the metal. If only he could reach his shield...

And then he felt it, the baring of teeth against his neck. His breath was hot. "I always wondered what it would be like... to ruin something so overbearingly good."

Steve tried to move, to push himself up. His limbs protested; his head felt heavy. Schmidt slammed him back down. "Don't fight. You were made for this."

Made for this.

For some reason, that made Steve overwhelmingly angry.

He roared and with a strength he hadn't known he possessed he twisted around and promptly elbowed Schmidt in the eye. And then the neck. The other man reeled back and then Steve kicked him away with his good leg. Steve rolled toward the cube. Schmidt tried to retaliate but Steve caught his punch. And for each punch he caught he delivered one back, and then another and another. Steve let out a roar as he smacked Schmidt around the face with his forearm and knocked him to the floor. It was an outburst of rage and fury and of pure violence.

And all the while he was hyper-aware of the cube sliding across the floor, of the rumble of the plane beneath them as the two punched and kicked and rolled around screaming in English and German.

At some point, they rolled over the shield. Steve grabbed it and smashed it against the Alpha; he did not hold back. Schmidt went reeling; he coughed and a splatter of blood appeared on the wall of the plane. The plane! Steve limped toward the controls but Schmidt's hand whipped out and grabbed his ankle; Steve crashed to the floor.

Schmidt's face looked up. It was gaunt; the skin had peeled away from it, leaving a shiny pink-red mess that made him look like the Devil himself. The two stared into each other's eyes.

"You...you..."

Steve kicked at him. He had to get to the controls; he had to secure the cube; he had to save New York; he had to do so much, in so little time, even though his whole head was a haze of pain and he would have given anything to just lay down. But he had a fight to win. It was what he was made for.

Made for this.

Steve wrenched his foot away and stood.

"I WAS MADE-" Steve brought the edge of his shield down onto the back of Schmidt's head. His whole being was shaking, his jaw and hands bloody. Steve's eyes were wild. "-TO KILL-" he screamed, the shield coming down again, "-NAZI BASTARDS-" Something warm splattered over
his cheek; the little glowing cube clattered across the floor, forgotten. "LIKE YOU," he finished as he drove his shield down and severed Schmidt's head from his body.

It rolled away, mouth gaping, leaving Steve panting, clutching his shield, shocked by his own violence.

He had never felt more alive.

"...Steve? Captain Rogers? Can you hear me?"

Fury's voice sounded fuzzy. Was Steve on the floor?

...how did he end up on the floor?

In the server room, Tony was on the floor as well, whistling and trying to wiggle a particularly large box out from behind a Rolls-Royce P-3 "Orion" turboprop engine that he'd squirreled away in the server room because Pepper kept threatening to throw it out unless he did something with it. His heart was hammering with the exertion of trying to move the engine by himself but he was too proud to ask for his omega's help.

"Sir?" JARVIS' tinny voice flooded the workshop, reaching Tony's ears. "I do believe, going by his heart rate, that Captain Rogers is having a panic attack."

When JARVIS mentioned Steve, Tony dropped the box he was holding and darted out, leaving papers, notebooks, and photos scattered all over the floor.

"Steve!"

"Captain?" Fury's voice was calling over the intercom.

"Mute!" barked Tony. Steve was lying on the floor, eyes glassy, gaze distant. Tony didn't think he would want Fury to know about this, didn't think Fury needed to know. He dropped to his knees and pulled Steve to him.

"Hey... hey hey hey... Steve... Steve, come back to me, I'm here, I got you... Steve... Steve."

"Incoming call from Director Fury on line 2," said JARVIS.

"Send to voicemail; don't take any calls right now, Jarv!" snapped Tony, cradling Steve to him. Steve's skin was clammy; Tony could actually see his pulse in the hollow of his throat. "Pretend there was a power outage or that I forgot to pay my phone bill or something... I don't know, just don't put him through! ...Steve," said Tony, trying not to let his omega's panic infect him. "Hey. Steve. It's me, Tony. We're in Malibu in 2010. It's me, your Alpha, I've got you. It's just us. I need you to calm down, buddy. Breathe with me." Steve's body was tense and twitchy; his fists were clenched and Tony had to admit that he was worried Steve might take a swing at him. Tony wouldn't be able to duck it, and being punched in the face by Captain America was probably like being hit with a brick. But his concern for Steve was overriding any logical sense of self-preservation; Steve was his omega and he loved him and he would gladly let himself be punched in the face if that was what it took to get Steve to calm down. He knew Steve, like him, had PTSD and knew that Steve, like him, suffering flashbacks and panic attacks, but this was the first one he'd really witnessed. Combined with Steve's weird behavior earlier in the morning, Tony was starting to get genuinely worried about his mental health, but he had no idea what to do other than to be there for him. Tony was ill-equipped to take care of other people; hell, he could barely take care of himself.
Steve's eyes flitted up to Tony's face in recognition. 2010. Malibu. His Alpha. He let out a ragged breath. His chest was still falling and rising too quickly but Steve was beginning to regain the feeling in his ankles and wrists and neck, the pins and needles buzz under his skin slowly fading. He let his head loll back against Tony's chest, eyes half open as he focused on breathing. Jesus. How embarrassing. Steve couldn't even hold a phone conversation with Fury about it.

But didn't that also prove a point? That maybe this thing, the tesseract, was, in fact, incredibly dangerous?

Steve let out a long breath and swallowed as he let his eyes slip shut entirely. He curled into Tony's touch, his head in his Alpha's lap and hands slowly unfurling from their fists. His shoulders shuddered as the tension bled out of him. "I-" He swallowed. Speaking wasn't so easy. His bottom lip shook. "I-enjoyed killing him." Steve whispered in Tony's shirt. "People talk about me like I'm such a good person. But I'm not. I enjoyed it. I'd do it again if I got the chance. I'm not-" He sucked in a breath. "I'm not- I'm not good Tony. That thing, the Tesseract, it brings out the worst in everyone. It's toxic. What it did to Schmidt's face... it's going to get us killed. Please, you have to believe me."

"It's okay," said Tony quietly, stroking Steve's hair. "Steve. We have limits, everyone, even you. I enjoyed killing them, when I left the cave. That Schmidt guy, he was evil. You needed to do that, to stop him. Don't beat yourself up, okay? You are good. Steve, you're the best guy I ever met. All the stuff you stand for, the other omegas you try to help, the whole... all-American justice and equality thing... you're so good. You're such a good boy..."

Steve's panic was coursing through his veins and he found himself struggling to maintain his cool; it took deliberate effort not to talk too fast or pet too hard.

"It's okay, Steve, we got this..."

Tony wasn't sure how to respond to Steve's talk about the tesseract being "toxic." It was just an object. Objects couldn't be cursed, or evil, not in Tony's mind. But he didn't dare disagree with Steve while Steve was curled into him, shaking and vulnerable.

"Hey, look, Clint's with it, SHIELD is guarding it, it's okay, it's safe... I'm gonna get into the files and it'll be fine, we'll learn all about it and we'll be able to handle it..."

"They shoulda left it in the ice where they found me," Steve breathed, words trembling with a kind of resentment. He was just so angry at SHIELD. He never thought he'd be battling old enemies in the new century.

He realized he was worried about Clint now. What if he got hurt? Or worse killed? The tesseract had done enough harm. Steve screwed his eyes shut again and just focused on his breathing.

It took about ten minutes but eventually he was breathing normally. He shuddered against Tony in relief as the moment finally passed. It was embarrassing really, to be so vulnerable.

"Director Fury is still trying to call back sir," JARVIS announced. "I believe he's quite concerned. Also, he seems aware that your power and phone line is working normally."

"You don't have to take that," said Tony firmly. "Not if you don't want to. Steve, listen to me." Tony took Steve's face in his hands and tilted it to to look at him. "You're mated to the single most technically superior person in the world. I'm going to find out everything, everything, I can about Project PEGASUS, and you and I are going to deal with this thing together. We're not going in blind, this isn't the forties. We're going to educate ourselves and make sure we take every
precaution, and everything is going to be okay."

"Sir?" prompted JARVIS again.

Tony kissed Steve's forehead. He was inclined to think Steve was over-reacting, but what could you expect from a guy who was frozen in 1945? Steve hadn't understood lots of things; the world was undoubtedly a terrifying place for him. Everything, right down to what money looked like and how people cut their hair, had changed. It wasn't just things like the internet that baffled Steve. He hadn't ever used a microwave or swiped a credit card. Tony figured that, however powerful the Tesseract was, the fundamental problem wasn't the item itself but Steve's lack of understanding about it. Now, in 2010, Tony was sure that he and SHELD could probably study it safely. After all, if they had recovered it along with Steve, then it had been in their possessions for months and months, and so far, nothing had blown up, and no one had been turned into a zombie, and there were, to Tony's knowledge, no weird portals to other dimensions. Everything seemed fine.

"Steve, the tesseract is in one of the world's most secure facilities... and it's guarded by a guy with a bow and arrow, so don't worry, it's totally safe," said Tony. "Talk to Clint, now that the cat's out of the bag, I'm sure he can tell you all about it." He stood up, and offered Steve a hand to get off the cold concrete floor. Steve looked shaken, but a hell of a lot better.

"Tell Fury I'll call him back later," Steve instructed JARVIS as he stood, not letting go of Tony's hand once he was on his feet. He was still a little shaky on his feet but he wasn't trembling anymore. He leaned his forehead against Tony's for a minute and let his eyes slip shut, overwhelmed with gratitude for how well his Alpha had dealt with all that.

His blue eyes flickered open and locked with Tony's. "You have to promise me that if it's not safe we get rid of it. Sometimes the price of progress is too great Tony," Steve whispered and squeezed his fingers gently.

"...Okay," said Tony. He avoided actually promising. "Not safe" was a relative term, anyway.
Steve had never considered himself to be a very dependent person, but after the vision of the Winter Soldier in the morning and the flashback of Schmidt's death, combined with the stress of wondering what SHIELD was doing with the tesseract, Steve found himself hovering close to Tony, gravitating toward the comfort that their bond offered him. Tony accommodated him without complaint. He grabbed a hard copy of his suit notes, told JARVIS to put on some music, and sat on the floor to read quietly beside Steve, squeezing Steve's hands occasionally, or reaching out to pat his knee. Steve picked at his nails distractedly, clearly anxious. After Tony had squeezed his hand for the third or fourth time, he looked down at his fingers and frowned a little at the feeling as he flexed.

"I think today is the last day. Of our honeymoon, it's like...I feel achy. Like the end of a heat, or something."

He was glad to hear Steve talking about something other than the tesseract, or the Winter Soldier, but frowned at Steve's words. "Oh. Really?" He took a second to assess himself. He didn't feel different. He felt the usual overwhelming urge to writhe on top of Steve. Protect him, mate him, maybe punch and/or fuck something. The yooj. "I think I got maybe two or three more days, but it's not as bad as it was at the beginning," he reported. "Let's enjoy this, okay? We can worry about the hypercube later. Look, they'd had it for months, and nothing bad has happened. It's not going anywhere. C'mon, let's hit the pool. Some sunshine will do you good." He tugged Steve's hand.

Tony grabbed his phone off his desk. He wanted to look up honeymoons on Wikipedia real quick, just to make sure they were doing everything right. And he was going to call Clint, too. Finding out that Steve's fertility was high had been a nasty little surprise, and Tony wanted to avoid any more.

While he was at it, he should probably look up heats. The amount of things he didn't know about omegas was vast. He hoped Clint would be cool enough to explain things to him; it was embarrassing to be forty years old and not have a clue about this. It would be the equivalent of going to Natasha and asking a bunch of questions about how menstruation worked. Better Clint than Natasha, thought Tony idly. Natasha was borderline terrifying; Clint was a bit more jocular, and besides, he was an omega; Tony didn't feel at all threatened around him.

Tony led Steve up the stairs, out of the workshop. He had wanted, so badly, to get some work done on the Mark VII but he felt like Steve needed to be away from technology for a while. Swimming pools and sunshine were timeless.

The idea of distracting themselves and focusing on each other was appealing. It was exactly what Steve needed in that moment. They grabbed towels on the way out (and the condoms; Steve did,
admittedly, turn a little pink when he grabbed them.) Then they headed down to the pool. The gardens had high walls around them so there was a sense of security and privacy. Steve felt safe here, despite being outside. The only part of Tony's estate not protected by fences, hedges, and high-tech security was the western border, which was a sheer cliff-face that fell into the Pacific ocean. There was a tiny strip of beach down there but as far as Steve knew, it was utterly inaccessible from Tony's house.

The pool itself was gorgeous. The tiling was a mix of deep greens and blues, just like the sea, and the pool's edge was arched into an attractive curve. Naturally, the water was warmed. It was appealing and the thought of just floating in the water until all the stress bled out of him was very tempting.

Steve was drawn out of his thoughts as Tony's fingers brushed against his own. He didn't have any swim trunks, but there was hardly any real need for them, was there?

"Going to the pool was a treat for me." Steve murmured.

"Going to the pool?" repeated Tony, momentarily confused.

"You know, going down to the Y."

"The what?"

"The Y. The YMCA. ...this will be like... my fifth time in a pool in my lifetime, Tony."

"Oh, really? Wow," said Tony casually. "I've always had a pool. I spend more time next to it than in it, though. It's just an excuse to get girls to take their clothes off." He stripped away his pants and kicked them aside, then dove in in a single smooth motion. It was the motion of someone who had always had access to a private swimming pool.

He surfaced, shaking his head, treading water and reaching up with one hand to wipe water from his goatee. "...it was hard for me to get back in," he said suddenly. "In the water. Because they waterboarded me."

He floated onto his back, staring up at the sky. "Can you toss me a pair of shades? ...it helps that the water is warm, and clean. You know, this was in November, and the mountains were freezing. I think they just melted snow from outside, to be honest. Sometimes it was like slush. ...so I know where you're coming from, with the water thing. ...you and I ought to start a group, we can call it aquaphobics anonymous. Speaking of AA, beer me, will you?"

One hand up to shade his eyes from the sun, he opened his hand, waiting for Steve to throw him sunglasses and a bottle. If there was one thing Tony's house had an abundance of, it was alcohol, prescription sunglasses, and, now, orchids.

The forced casualness of Tony's tone and the seeming randomness of his thought pattern was something Steve was coming to identify as Tony's way of coping with things he didn't want to cope with. Tony lighted on sensitive subjects and then flitted away before they could drag him down. He was someone who skimmed the surface of darkness without ever truly acknowledging it; the line between seriousness and sarcasm blurred so heavily with him that it allowed him to deny anything bothered him if necessary, and it was clearly a powerful defense mechanism.

SHIELD's records had been sparse. In 2010, there had been waterboarding and unspecified torture, "physical and psychological." SHIELD's psychologists had easily diagnosed Tony with the usual gamut of disorders: narcissism, OCD-like tendencies, PTSD, anxiety, addiction. But all of it was
speculation and no one spent more than a paragraph on it because they just didn't know. Realistically, Tony probably knew more about Steve than Steve knew about Tony; both were outrageously public figures, but Steve was guileless. Tony's openness about himself was always tongue-in-cheek.

Steve realised he couldn't even envision Tony being tortured in his head (not that he wanted to, of course he didn't.) But when he mentioned stuff like being water-boarded...it was so passing, so fleeting that it almost skipped through Steve's mind. Tony was an overwhelmingly enthusiastic person, even if he wasn't often all that happy he was often excited. Whether it was about his work, or sex, or annoying SHIELD... he kept himself busy, just like Steve tried to.

When Steve woke up they kept him a small room. Four walls, no windows. They were some newspapers and books but that was about all for the first few weeks. He'd felt so useless with nothing to really do. It had nearly driven him insane. When Natasha had shown up and said she was going to start training him he'd never been more grateful in his life. He hadn't been very good at first and every session had ended with Nat making him land on his ass. But being beaten in a fight had been better than doing nothing. That was one thing he had loved about being Tony's PA. He had always been busy.


Modern day showers had been a revelation. The water pressure in them was awesome. Natasha had laughed so hard the first time she saw him step into one. (New York's SHIELD headquarters was old enough to retain some relics from Steve's age; one was the "Ladies and Horseshoes" sign over the showers. Used to following signs, Steve had followed it without thinking; thankfully, Natasha was embarrassment-proof, and she was kind enough to point him toward the men's showers, where Steve had found other omega men casually changing among unbonded Alphas like it was no big deal.)

A beer bottle landed in the water near Tony, the cap keeping it from getting watered down.

And then Steve slipped into the water, naked, and waded over. He gently slid the sunglasses onto Tony's face. "You really are used to having servants, aren't you?" he asked, tone not critical at all, more curious than anything else.

Tony smiled at Steve when he put on the sunglasses and righted himself, treading water, tried to twist off the bottle cap, then, realizing it wasn't twist-off, made an annoyed little scoff.

"Yeah, I guess so," he answered Steve. He popped out his arc reactor, letting it trail from his chest from its wires (it sank in the water), and set the neck of the bottle against the rim of the hollow metal cylinder in his hand. He gave the top a practiced whack, and the top came off with a hiss from the bottle; Tony quickly sipped off the foam.

When Tony just opened his chest like that it was incredibly alarming. Steve didn't see how it could possibly be safe but also assumed that Tony knew what he was doing and was considerably less reckless (understandably so) now he wasn't dying. But still, Steve didn't like to be reminded of his mate's fragility. Sure, Tony was practically untouchable in the suit. But the arch reactor would always be a weak point. Steve ripped the one out of Ivan's chest. Sure it wasn't easy and it hurt like hell but he'd done it. And there was plenty of other people out there as strong or stronger than Steve.

He looked up and flashed Steve a grin. "Party trick," he said, fishing the arc reactor out of the water and carefully tucking the wires back in before smacking in the device. "... servants is kind of
Tony wasn't sure how many people he currently had on his staff because he had long since stopped writing checks; he let Pepper do that. Even though she was no longer his PA, she still acted as his accountant. She had signed off on her own checks for years; Tony trusted that she was managing things well. He had as little interactions with the staff as possible. They floated around like ghosts, but Tony knew that if he hollered, at least a few people would come running. Life had always been like that. Tony had once told Pepper, drunk, that he experienced a condition he'd named Schrodinger's Loneliness. It was the feeling of simultaneously feeling like you were never alone while always being alone. Tony experienced it in a house far too big for one person, and at parties where everyone was his friend but no one knew his favorite color.

He floated back onto his back, holding the beer on his stomach. The bottle was already perspiring under the sun. Tony felt slightly uncomfortable, having his unusual lifestyle highlighted, because he knew perfectly well that Steve had grown up in a crappy one-bedroom tenement building in Brooklyn and had probably always done everything for himself. The idea was baffling to Tony; he had no idea how to iron a shirt or wash a dish or sort out recyclables or tune a piano or dust a mantle-place or any of that stuff. He took it for granted that he could throw laundry on the floor and leave empty take-out boxes in the shop and that they would mysteriously take care of themselves. He didn't even know if he had a hamper; clothes and dishes and trash blinked in and out of existence in the Stark household without a second thought.

"It's not a bad thing," hummed Steve. "Just... hard for me to relate to, I guess," he said, tone still totally criticizing. But Tony seemed lost in thought, so Steve let himself sink down to the bottom of the pool and swim. Despite having drowned once, Steve did love swimming. He enjoyed the feeling of weightlessness; it was a form of movement in which he wasn't constantly aware of how big he was all the time. It was hard to feel graceful when you were six foot and solid muscle, but in the water, Steve felt fluid and smooth.

He stayed under for almost two minutes before he rose back up beside Tony, the look in his eyes easy and relaxed. The panic attack felt days ago even though it had been only an hour or two ago. The pool had been a good idea.

Tony closed his eyes floated placidly, soaking up the sun, sipping his beer. "HEY, JARVIS!" he yelled.

"Yes, sir?"

Tony had long since wired up speakers and intercoms outside so he could yell at JARVIS from the comfort of his pool. The first time the pool maintenance had heard the disembodied voice, it had nearly given them a heart attack.

"Can you play some music? How about All Along the Watch Tower? Steve needs to get caught on the classics."
"Dylan or Hendrix, sir?"

"Oh, Hendrix, definitely, that's the best version. Thanks, Jarv." Tony tilted his beer back, finished it off, and then tossed it onto the pool deck with a light clink.

He heard a soft splash next to him. He reached out with one hand for Steve's without opening his eyes. "Steve, I need another beer. Also, listen to this song, it's a classic. Actually, can you just get me a bottle of whiskey? ...and my phone?" Tony felt so relaxed, weightless and warm, floating naked in his pool with a cold drink and a pair of sunglasses shielding his eyes. He was glad he could share this level of hedonism with Steve. Seeing Steve panicking over the tesseract had been... alarming. A combination of old-timey superstition, Tony thought, and the shock of seeing something from his past rear its head in the 21st century. Hopefully, Steve would forget all about it, and Tony could study it in peace. He had access to a large portion of SHIELD's operatives at his fingertips, plus boxes and boxes full of his father's old notes that he'd never gone through that might contain some secret.

Tony knew very well that his father had searched for Steve after the plane went down. Maybe he was searching for something else, too.

...unlikely though. Tony's stomach twisted a little. Howard Stark had been extremely open about his feelings for Steve. He loved Steve. Not in the same way he loved Maria, no. It was more like the love he felt toward Jarvis, a selfish, proprietary sort of love with a clear power dynamic. Tony had heard him say, more than once when he'd been drinking, that he loved Steve, that Steve was one of the best and truly good things he'd made in his life, that he was proud of Steve and that Steve was too good for the world. Tony had always silently raged against both Howard and Steve in those moments. What was he, chopped liver? Howard never told Tony he loved him or was especially proud of him, but he wasn't incapable of saying those words, because he was more than willing to say them about Steve. Tony never understood why Howard withheld his affection for Tony but was so open about his fondness for Steve.

Thinking about it now, knowing that Steve was an omega, it made a little more sense. Howard treated Tony like a man and an Alpha. He'd loved Steve and made no apologies for it, but Tony doubted that he'd ever truly respected Steve.

He shook his head to clear it. The last thing in the world he wanted to think about right now was his father. His notes weren't going anywhere, after all; Tony would find time to slip away later, without Steve, and paw through them, trying to find out more about the tesseract.

Steve swam over to Tony, to mouth at his neck and smile against the skin there. "Not your servant," he murmured into his ear, tone teasing and seductive but also making a point before Steve sank back into the water. The music was pleasant but the feeling of being underwater was better. Steve honestly found twenty first century music very confusing. Everyone had a different idea about what a 'classic' was. Back in Steve's day it had been the classical music. Now everyone was going on about Bowie and the Beatles. Why people were naming their bands after insects he would never understand.

He also didn't want to feed Tony's alcoholic habit. Whenever he saw him drank something sank in Steve's chest and whenever he asked for it he felt conflicted. Tony was his own person who could make his own decisions but Steve was also his mate and was supposed to care for him, where was the line crossed when Steve would be protecting Tony from himself? Couldn't his alpha feel Steve's conflict whenever he asked? Didn't he know how hard it was for him to watch? Steve mentally sighed as he clocked off the minute mark underwater, his lungs protesting a little, but he still had a while.
Steve sat on the bottom of the pool, legs crossed underneath himself. He stared up at the blinking sunlight that bled into the water. He felt oddly serene in that moment.

Tony felt a little smile tug at the corners of his mouth. The way Steve had refused him reminded him of Pepper.

He felt a tug of discomfort in his gut. Pepper...

He gave a little kick and went to the edge of the pool, hauling himself out to get a bottle of liquor. Steve was under again.

The discomfort wasn't going away. Tony made a beeline for the outdoor bar and grabbed himself a bottle; suddenly, he was hit with a series of memories. Jarvis, pulling one of Howard's arms around his shoulders and hauling him to bed with grim determination; Jarvis, pressing a cool washcloth to Howard's forehead; Jarvis, uncorking a bottle of wine with a look on his face that clearly, clearly indicated that he didn't want to.

Jarvis had never, in Tony's memory, said no to Howard. Theirs was a different generation. Howard loved Jarvis but ordered him around without a second thought, and Jarvis obeyed; he never said a word against Howard, not when Howard got drunk and told Tony was a worthless, stupid sissy he was. He'd comfort Tony with a kind of neutral diplomacy worthy of a UN ambassador. Tony remembered how hurt he'd felt, not only by his father's words, but how Jarvis wouldn't ever say anything against him. He wanted Jarvis to say that Howard was the stupid one, that he was wrong, and a drunk, and that Tony deserved better in a father. But he never heard that. Jarvis seemed almost incapable of even thinking such thoughts against Howard. Tony had forgiven him long ago, and now, knowing that they were bonded, Tony could appreciate why Jarvis had been so reluctant to take sides.

He tilted the bottle up and took a long, deep drink, trying to chase away those painful childhood memories.

He still felt bad.

...Steve.

Tony glanced back toward the pool, at the blonde hovering under the sparkling blue surface of the water.

*He doesn't understand,* thought Tony darkly. In alcohol, Tony had found a reprieve. A way to loosen himself, dumb himself down, dull the world so it wasn't so sharp and loud. Tony had been told, as a teenager, that his IQ was probably around 215, but that after so many deviations, the test was no longer really accurate and that that was only an estimation. Tony retained that fact and was well aware that he didn't relate to normal people; he'd begun drinking in college because it was the only way to relate to his peers, who were not as smart as him and also happened to be several years older. In fact, he'd met Rhodey at a frat party-- he'd been too drunk to walk straight, and Rhodey had been furious, demanding to know who the hell was responsible for getting a 16-yr-old trashed.

Later, as an adult, Tony had found alcohol to be a good common denominator. He floated into conferences and galas and parties tipsy and kept it up, earning him a reputation as a fun, party-oriented person. And still brilliant. Tony knew his limits. He could down ten shots before his ability to do mental math was interrupted; he hadn't given a single sober lecture in more than a decade. It was the only way he had to operate in a world that he felt utterly removed from. He was too intelligent, too wealthy, and too traumatized to hold a normal conversation with the average person, and too scared of giving away too much of himself. Alcohol softened the edges. Made
Tony walked back over to the pool and slid in, hanging on the edge with his elbows, one hand holding the neck of the bottle.

Steve surfaced just before his lungs began to burn in protest. His eyes were the same blue as the water, beads of liquid clinging to the ends of his blond hair. Tony eyeballed him. He could be an Abercrombie model, the way he looked in water.

"...you disapprove of my drinking," said Tony flatly, looking at him. "I'm getting a vibe... like you're disappointed. ...you never drank, before the serum? Whiskey is like super-soldier serum for Starks, you know. Dad practically embalmed himself. ...it's not that bad, is it? I keep an eye on it, you know. I just need a little, to take the edge off. ...like how you exercise for like, four hours a day. Six? Whatever."

"The super serum isn't going to eventually kill me." Steve said bluntly. This was the Steve Rogers the media had talked about. The Captain who didn't take any bullshit, would say things how they were. He wouldn't dumb things down for Tony, he wouldn't soften them, he wouldn't lie. Steve would totally be himself. "You don't have a little, you have a lot and you know you do else we wouldn't be having this conversation. And yeah, I drank. But... not like you do. I drank for special occasions, or with friends, or that time I trapped my hand in a door. But it was different too. I was tiny. A glass of whiskey and I would be on the floor. You drink it like water. And don't even try to compare it to exercise... look, I'm not going to tell you how to treat your own body, Tony. It's your life and it's your choice."

And then Steve sank back under, letting the words hang in there. He wanted Tony to think about what he said, not just get defensive off the bat. Because that wouldn't get them anywhere.

Tony sulked as Steve dipped back under the water, not letting go of the neck of the bottle. He took another long drink, appreciating the burn in his chest and the tingle in his limbs.

Didn't Steve understand he needed this? He wasn't an abusive drunk, like his father. No-- Tony was a fun drunk. Didn't that count for anything?

He watched Steve swimming, begrudgingly appreciating the omega's naked body even though he resented Steve. He was hoping they could just lay this to rest. He needed his alcohol. Maybe Steve would come to accept it, with time. Tony didn't think his drinking habits were dangerous... yeah, okay, he drank a lot, but didn't genetics count for anything? Howard drank like a fish and when he'd died, he'd looked remarkably healthy. He'd looked young and well and he probably would've lived another twenty years if it weren't for the accident.

Tony didn't think about it much but deep down, a huge amount of his resentment for Howard stemmed from that accident. Howard had been the one behind the wheel. Had he been drinking? No clue. Certainly possible. This was one of Tony's darkest thoughts, that his mother and father had died as a result of Howard's negligence... that Howard's final act had been to take Tony's parents from him at the age of 16.

But he never voiced it, ever. That would have given the idea too much power.

He pulled himself onto the deck and flopped back with the bottle, letting the sun dry him, still defensive about Steve's words. He could hear Steve splashing around softly.

He decided to go check the orchid situation. He got up and walked over to the back door, pulling it open; he nearly slammed into Pepper.
"Hey, Pep! I thought you were in New York."

"Oh my God, you're naked," said Pepper, holding up a folder to hide her eyes.

"Well, yeah, it's a beautiful day and I'm honeymooning. What are you doing here?"

"I have a meeting in San Francisco on behalf of AccuTech this afternoon, and wanted to stop by to say hello. ...can you please put on a towel?"

"No thanks," said Tony, standing on his tip-toes to look past her. The living room was infested in flowers. "Pepper, about all these stupid flowers. Steve wants to start a charity. Can you make that happen? It's for omega rights, um, a legal omega defense fund and also for omega terminations, if they need it--"

Pepper groaned loudly. "Are you trying to start an uproar?"

"--and so I wanted to auction all these off, we have hundreds, it would be a nice little charity thing, what'd you think?"

Pepper was still holding the folder in front of her eyes. "You're getting water all over the floor and you're naked. That's what I think."

"As if you haven't seen it before. Thanks for the orchid, by the way."

"I'm happy for you. ...really, I am," said Pepper sincerely, lowering the folder a fraction of an inch. "I really care about you, Tony. You deserve to be happy."

Tony stared at her, not knowing how to respond. After a moment, he said, uncomfortable, "Yeah, well... I am."

Steve made it three minutes before it felt like his lungs were going to burst and he had to rise up. It was useful information and he logged it away just in case he ever find himself situation which meant he'd be stuck under water for so long. The water felt good and he didn't really want to leave it. He knew he'd pissed Tony off, he could feel it. But Steve wasn't going to regret being honest with him...he couldn't just pretend everything was okay when it wasn't. He wasn't going to enjoy watching Tony slow destroy his own liver.

Steve swam to the edge of the pool wide and rested his arms on the edge, treading the water lightly. He could hear Pepper's voice from inside the house. Surely she would at least agree with him about all this? ...No, ganging up on Tony with other people wouldn't be fair and it wouldn't get them anywhere.

He could fall asleep like this, the water was so lovely, but he forced himself to get out. Steve didn't really want to get all pruney.

There was a gentle splash and Pepper glanced outside automatically. "Oh Lord," she muttered at seeing a very naked Steve. At least he was going for a towel and had the decency to look embarrassed. "The last thing you need is a naked picture of the two of you in your pool Tony...."

"Who's gonna see?" demanded Tony, gesturing. "I live in the middle of nowhere, we're completely isolated... and it's not like either of us have anything to be ashamed of... Steve looks like a Greek god and I'm pulling my weight... what, you think people don't already know we've got dicks and hang out naked together, we're bonded for crying out loud."

"What about the staff?"
"They had all already seen me naked. We've established this. Seriously, I've got nothing to apologize for, I'm a respectable--"

"Please don't."

"--six and three-quarter inches," finished Tony as Steve was strolling over. He wrapped an arm around Steve's toweled waist, pulling him close and bumping hips with him. He was above average for a beta and solidly in the "average" range for an Alpha. This was one of the few statistics he knew about himself; he couldn't have named his pants size or blood type if his life depended on it.

Pepper lowered the folder a little more, still shielding Tony's lower half. "Hi Steve. Tony said you want to start a very controversial charity."

"The Pepper Potts Foundation for Omegabortion," said Tony, face completely straight.

Pepper rolled her eyes.

"Congratulations, by the way, you're in charge now. Use your accounting wizardry and make it happen."

"I'm trying to run your company."

"...which is what qualifies you to run Rogers's charity!" said Tony, beaming.

"I don't think it's controversial," Steve said.

And that was the thing. He really didn't. Omegas were a forgotten slice of society, beholden to archaic rules that targeted only omegas. The government wasn't stepping in and Steve felt they should. Someone or something had to help protect omegas. In situations like divorce they were already starting off on the wrong foot - biologically, they could not sever bonds themselves, and legally, they had less rights to property than their Alpha counterparts. In the last year in the US alone Alpha's usually took at least 75% of all property in a divorce proceedings. (Steve had been using Google a lot). And in the past six months 79% of Omegas who'd wanted to get abortions were unable. The reasons offered differed between states but usually came down to finances; omegas struggled to keep jobs ("heat leave" was only a legally recognized right in 11 states) and were, on average, paid far less than their Alpha and beta counterparts.

A lot of things were different in the 21st century, but not the way omegas were treated. Not a lot, anyway.

"And you don't have to run it," Steve assured her. "I think it needs to be, you know...an O who runs it. Otherwise we're missing the point."

"Pepper's a beta, that's practically--" began Tony.

"Tony," warned Pepper.

"--look, we can't hire someone because they're an omega, that's still discrimination. If you don't want Pepper, fine, but we'll need open interviews... legally, we still have to consider beta and Alpha applicants," said Tony.

"He's right," said Pepper. "Tony, please put on a towel."

"Why? I'm among friends, aren't I?" asked Tony. He pointed to Pepper. "Start getting the wheels
turning, because we're announcing this charity thing soon. Steve had ultimate say-so in who he hires, though." He reached up to pat Steve's bare, damp shoulder, and looked up at him with a fond, almost gooey look. "So proud of this guy... didn't I pick the best one?" He leaned his head on Steve's shoulder. Barefoot, their height difference was noticeable.

Pepper smiled without meaning to; Tony had spent the last few weeks being reckless and brooding and unusually withdrawn, his actions oscillating between uncontrollable bursts of energy and moody sulky. Now, he'd stabilized. At least, as much as someone like Tony ever really did.

"Fine. I'll start the paperwork, but you really need to get someone else as soon as possible. Between AccuTech liquidation sales and the Expo investigation, I'm swamped."

"How's that investigation going?"

"You're being sued. A bunch. How's your heart?" she asked, nodding to the arc reactor.

"...fine," said Tony quickly. "Replaced the palladium cores with a badassium one and everything's good now. Don't worry about it. It's none of your business. ...lemme go get a towel."

He darted off. Pepper watched him go, then looked up at Steve. "Was it really necessary?" she asked quietly. "Spying on him? He's an open book. I don't know how much more SHIELD found out about him by planting you here. The last thing someone like Tony needs is more trust issues. He didn't tell anyone about his heart... I want him to be able to go to people when he had problems, Steve. James, Harry, and I have been trying for years to get him to trust and it's an uphill battle already. I thought we were on friendly terms with SHIELD; I've been talking to Agent Coulson for years. I had no idea they'd go behind our backs like that."

"SHIELD was convinced Tony was hiding something from them." Steve looked regretful. "It was the wrong decision, taking it. But it's easy to see that in hind sight. They honestly probably could have offered me any job and I would have said yes. If it's any consolation, I found SHIELD bugs in my apartment, too," he told her.

SHIELD had screwed them both over, really, and yet here they both were, about to work for SHIELD. Maybe Steve was an hypocrite. Maybe he was an idiot. But they were his best option right now, weren't they? Who else could he turn to? Steve wanted to fight for the right thing and he couldn't do that by himself, could he? Maybe he was with the charity thing... but that was in politics, in media. SHIELD went that extra further step so no one else had to...

Steve had been listening to Fury way too much.

Pepper glanced over at the forest of orchids. "...I'm glad it worked out. I won't say any more about it. But so help me God, you'd better take good care of him, Steve."

"I will," Steve said immediately. "I swear, Pep- I mean, Virginia."

She rolled her eyes a little. Tony's nicknames always stuck; she no longer expected anyone to call her by her real name.

When Tony came back, wearing a towel, it was under his arms instead of around his waist; the arc reactor was covered.

"Pepper, also, since you're here, I gotta talk to you alone about something," said Tony breezily.

"Steve's birthday, I have an idea, I need your help--"

Steve blinked in surprise when Tony mentioned his birthday. It was close, he guessed, but he
hadn't expected a deal out of it. "You're not doing anything too crazy, are you?" he asked.

Pepper gave Steve a look of sympathy. When Tony actually remembered birthdays, he went crazy.

"Absolutely apeshit!" said Tony with glee. "And we've only got two and a half weeks to set it up, so Pepper, I'm really going to need you to bring your A-game." His attention turned to Steve; he looked at him with sheep eyes, one hand resting in the small of Steve's back. Steve's birthday was Tony's current new top priority, tied with hacking the hell out of SHIELD and researching the mysterious tesseract situation. But his mate's birthday was a big deal. Definitely on par with mysterious government black sites and the secret sources of power they contained.

"You know I'm not your PA anymore, right?"

"You're my Preferred Adviser. C'mon, help me." He beamed at Steve. "Wait 'til you see what I've got in the works, it's amazing!"

Pepper heaved a world-weary sigh. "Just e-mail me, will you? Are you sure your heart's okay? Are you taking it easy? How's the leg?"

"My heart is great, seriously, it's fine. You worry too much. It didn't get that bad, I took care of it," said Tony. It was honestly impossible to tell whether Tony was lying or whether he had convinced himself that his brush with death wasn't as close as it had been. Tony's ability to walk away from near-death experiences and act normal within 24 hours seemed to be a direct result of inhuman levels of denial.

Pepper looked unconvinced and it occurred to Steve that the reason she was here was to check on Tony with her own two eyes. On the phone, Tony could lie to her; it was easier for her to check up on him in person. He was still limping; Pepper's eyes were examining him all over, critically, assessing his condition even as he tried to hide it. After their conversation in the pool, Steve could understand Pepper's demand that he take care of Tony; Tony bordered on helpless when it came to self-care. Forty years of being conditioned to be waited on hand and foot had made him incredibly lackadaisical about his health.

"I'm not your PA," repeated Pepper with good-natured exasperation, but Tony wasn't listening; he was hugging Steve and nuzzling into his neck, nipping his shoulders, too distracted by puppy love for Steve to hear anything anyone was saying. "Well, I guess I'll leave you two to it... I've got to go, I've got to be in San Francisco in a couple of hours... Tony? Tony, pay attention, this binder is a preliminary report-- Tony?-- preliminary report from the Expo, Rhodey turned it over to us, please review it as soon as possible ...I'll leave it on the table. Also, heads up, you've got about four subpoenas coming your way; try not to schedule any discovery hearings for the last week of July or the first week of August because you promised Mandalay Bay to be a keynote speaker at the Black Hat conference this year and they're threatening to sue us too if you pull out last minute."

"I love subpoenas," said Tony distractedly, hands roaming over Steve.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Of course you do. Call me tomorrow so we can start dealing with this. Oh! Your publicist wants to know if you're doing the Geneva Motor Show this year, it's in March. I think they want you to give some sort of speech, I don't think it's a good idea to call any more attention to the Monaco disaster, but--"

"Uh-huh," said Tony, arms around Steve's neck, practically scaling him.

"--but aliens are invading New York and only Iron Man can stop them," said Pepper, eyeing Tony.
"Great," he said.

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

"Sure."

"...I'll put you down as a tentative yes for the Motor Show," said Pepper with a sigh, who knew that, even though she was advising against it, Tony was going to want to go. "And please, for the love of all that's holy, please get a new PA. I can't handle you and the company and all its subsidiaries and all of the media nonsense you generate."

"Bed," said Tony, biting Steve's neck ignoring her.

Steve sent Pepper a very apologetic look as Tony began to make it very clear what he was interested in. He blushed a little but fortunately Pepper was polite enough to already be leaving. This was probably nothing she hadn't seen before of Tony, Steve was aware of that. But he wasn't sure if he was ready for her to see him like...this just yet. Or ever, ideally.

"Have a safe flight," he told her and she sent him a grateful smile over her shoulder before she slipped away out of sight.

Steve shuddered a little as Tony's teeth continued to graze against the soft skin of his neck. He was surprised they'd honestly gone this long without doing yet already. It had been over twelve hours. "Okay. Bed," he hummed and took Tony's hand, letting his alpha tug them quite impatiently to the bedroom.

The sheets... weren't utterly ruined. Huh. Steve blinked in surprise and then realized that someone must have changed them. Oh God. How bad they been? No time to worry about that now.

"How do you want me?" Steve asked Tony in a murmur as the backs of his legs nudged the mattress behind him.

"Don't care. Just want you," said Tony breathlessly, pushing him onto the bed and pressing their mouths together. Part of him was sad to see their honeymoon go; it had been nice, staying home at all, not talking to reporters or facing boardrooms full of men in suits or uniforms. But on the other hand, he was looking forward to feeling normal again. He constantly felt jittery and anxious, like he'd had too much coffee. His description to Pepper hadn't been at all metaphorical; he genuinely felt like punching someone and fucking Steve all the time, perhaps even simultaneously.

Steve's mouth tasted sweet and familiar, Steve's body warm and inviting under him. He was vaguely aware of how casually he'd dismissed Pepper, who'd gone out of her way to check up on him, but he could make it up to her later; his concerns had shrunk down to Steve again. Still licking into Steve's mouth, working his jaw desperately, he reached down with one hand to push up the damp towel around Steve's waist and feel between his legs.

Another problem with honeymooning: Tony had found that the faintest whiff of Steve' arousal was enough to stall his thought process completely. At that moment, if anyone had asked him about the tesseract or the mysterious Project Thor or even who the head of SHIELD was, Tony wouldn't have had any clue what they were talking about. He stroked Steve's slick entrance, growling encouragingly against his lips. He was completely unaware of the towel still draped over him. A bucket of water tossed over him probably wouldn't have merited so much as a shake of the head. Seeing Steve climb out of the pool and strut over with such a ridiculously confident yet understated presence... right when Tony thought he had control of his instincts again, they reared up and slapped him in the face.
Steve hummed in approval as Tony licked into his mouth and stroked at his entrance. His hole twitched and he rocked his hips down subtly, encouraging Tony's fingers inside as he ran his own hands down his arms and chest. Then he slid his fingers down to curl around Tony's own member, which was half hard already. Steve gave his cock a few experimental strokes, swiping his thumb over the head and smiling against Tony's lips at his reaction. They had worked themselves up into quite a state very quickly, their kisses breathless and hips rocking together at a lazy but firm pace.

"Tony. Mph..." Steve arched up into his touch and sighed sweetly. "I think-" His words were stunted again as he squeezed around Tony's fingers and stroked at his cock. Steve's own was hard and leaving a smear of precum against his stomach. "-we left the condoms by the pool side," he finally managed to get out in a soft huff of annoyance, breath hot against Tony's cheek.

Tony made a noise of approval as Steve wiggled his hips down; he responded the way he knew Steve wanted, working his fingers into him, interrupting Steve's gasp of pleasure with more kisses. The two of them found each other's rhythm quickly, automatically syncing up their bodies' movements.

Tony nipped Steve's lip at the sound of his name, but the words that followed were anything but sexy.

"...oh. Right," said Tony, breaking away reluctantly. He hesitated. Logic was telling him that they were better safe than sorry, at least until he could get a legitimate vasectomy and stop relying on one that he'd gotten at a shady clinic for virtually nothing at all. But instinct was telling him to screw logic, screw his omega, fuck him bareback, take him and knock him up, give him twins or even triplets--

Tony blinked. The hell?

"Yeah. Go get them," he demanded, withdrawing his fingers from Steve and rolling off of him.

Gross, he thought. For a split second, his brain had been utterly hijacked, and that was absolutely terrifying. If this was a pseudo-heat, Tony was worried about what a real heat would be like. His experience on the plane had been goddamn awful, and that was before they'd bonded.

He was reluctant to ask anyone for help but he was pretty sure he would need to ask another Alpha for tips. Unfortunately most of his friends were either unbonded Alphas or betas. The closest thing he had to a friend who was a bonded Alpha was...

...Romanov.

Not a snowball's chance in hell, he thought.

Steve grunted softly as Tony pulled out of him, his thighs shiny with slick and want. He let out a frustrated sound but he also didn't want to get pregnant, or have another scare. That was hardly fun. He would have usually refused being bossed around like that but this was sex and Tony was undeniably in charge. With a soft huff he got up and walked back down to the pool side, conscious of Tony's eyes on him as he walked to the door.

Steve tossed the box onto the mattress by Tony's head before he crawled back onto the bed, hovering above his alpha before he leaned down and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "You're very bossy today," he commented in a murmur, tone fond as he traced his teeth and tongue over the edge of Tony's jaw.

Tony saw a flicker of hesitation before Steve got up and went to grab the condoms. He settled onto
the bed, smirking, feeling content; Steve returned and lobbed the box next to him.

"...what, you don't like it?" murmured Tony as Steve accused him of being bossy. He wrapped his arms around Steve. ". ...you're a good boy," he whispered, softly. ".So obedient. So good."

Steve practically preened at the praise, his back arcing prettily in a feline manner as he nuzzled against Tony's jaw and the dip of his neck. Something about Tony calling him a good boy just made him wet, made him tremble. "I never said I didn't like it," he murmured, breath hot against his Alpha's ear.

This, Tony was aware, was exactly the sort of scandalous thing that would cause a media frenzy. This was the sort of thing that was just between them, that couldn't be shared with anyone because it was too intimate. Steve couldn't be seen like this, as a subservient little omega; he was Captain America, national treasure, living legend. Something about knowing that, though, made it feel even more intimate to Tony. He had exclusive access to something no one else ever would.

Except Bucky.

The thought was so sudden that Tony froze in surprise.

_Shut up, Brain! I'm trying to be happy_, Tony snapped at himself. "Steve? ...I'm the only Alpha you listen to, right?" asked Tony tentatively. He felt self-conscious, vulnerable. But it was a two-way street; they had gone far beyond the point of feeling self-conscious around each other.

Tony played with a short strand of Steve's hair, his other hand stroking Steve's back.

Steve frowned at the question.

"You're the only one I let boss me around," Steve assured him and pressed a kiss to the edge of his jaw. And then another kiss. And another. Then he dragged his teeth along the jut of it gently. "You're the only person I've ever let inside me Tony. There is no need for you to be self-conscious."

"I'm not self-conscious," said Tony quickly before he could stop himself. He rolled the two of them over so that he was on top of Steve. "I was just... asking. Y'know, making sure." He turned Steve's head to brush their lips together, parting then with his tongue, exploring him softly, trying to regain the mood.

The thought of Steve's old Alpha had cast a bit of a damper over the whole thing. Steve didn't understand; Tony could sense the rejection he felt, that his mate had refused to take him. But Tony, as an Alpha, understood, at least somewhat. If he thought mating Steve would hurt him, he wouldn't do it in a million years. And from what he gathered, Steve had been sick, far too sick to handle the rough mating or, worse, pregnancy; Tony would never admit it to himself, but he felt like he understood Bucky's position more than Steve's.

The important thing was that they were together now. Steve was Tony's and Tony's alone; Bucky had been dead for seventy years; Steve wasn't too small or sick or frail to be mated and Tony was wasting precious time by even thinking about Bucky when he should have been balls-deep in Steve like an hour ago.

He stretched on top of Steve for the box of condoms and tore it open.

"Welp, it only took us, like, a week to get to the responsible part," joked Tony, sitting back on his knees to open the foil packet and roll the condom down over himself. "Don't worry, I'm gonna go to the doctor as soon as I can. ...if you want me to. ...the thing is, realistically... I have no idea
how we're going to remember this part when you go into heat. Unless SHIELD develops a suppressant that actually works on you..." Tony trailed off, lying back down on Steve, kissing his cheek and lips. "Love you, omega," he said softly, pressing himself between Steve's legs.

"I think they have something in the works-" Steve's head fell back and his lips parted as Tony pushed inside. He shivered at the stretch, his Alpha's words rolling over him slowly as his body throbbed with arousal. It felt a little different with the condom on. But it was better than dealing with the risk of pregnancy.

His legs curled around Tony, allowing him to sink in deeper as Steve was almost bent in half. He was flexible, he could do it. The serum had allowed him to push himself easily. He could even do the splits. Clint often told him he should do yoga but Steve wasn't sure all the sitting around and focusing on breathing was for him.

Steve's fingers threaded into Tony's hair gently as he rolled his hips into him. He gasped softly and then let out a strangled noise of pleasure as Tony thrust inside in a particularly firm snap of his hips. "You- you feel good... fuck..."

"Right... back... atcha," gasped Tony, thrusting his hips against Steve. Steve's fingers were on his scalp, his legs wrapped around Tony, and Tony shuddered with delight as he pushed into Steve, slowing a bit when he got to the base of the knot, letting Steve's body get used to the stretch. He bit Steve's neck as he worked his hips, the warmth of arousal coursing through him; Steve's smell only enhanced it, and Tony relished the smoothness of his body, the minimal friction as his cock glided into Steve; Steve's body was so responsive to him, eager and soaking wet, and any misgivings he'd been feeling evaporated as he buried himself into his omega, feeling the other pulsing around his shaft.

Steve let out a high-pitched whine as Tony's knot stretched him further. His fingers tugged lightly at his hair, gasping and squirming beneath him at being filled again. His eyes rolled back as Tony grazed over that sweet spot inside of him. "F-Fuck..." He gasped out, trembling beneath him. "Please- ah-h... Do that again. God, Tony, please," he begged. And Steve Rogers didn't usually beg. It seemed Tony was a lot of exceptions, all at once.

He was floating. It always felt like he was floating. Would sex always be this good or was it limited to their honeymoon period? Steve sincerely hoped it wasn't. When Tony pressed inside of him his body sang and trembled. It felt so good and he wasn't prepared to give up this feeling for just about anything.

Tony laughed breathlessly. He loved hearing his name, and he loved hearing Steve beg for him. Seeing Steve in ecstasy was almost as good as the actual physical sensation of fucking him. He was more than happy to comply, to do whatever things Steve wanted, as long as it kept Steve moaning and squirming under him. He shifted slightly, finding the perfect angle to stroke Steve's prostate, delighting in the way his fingers curled into Tony's hair and the whimpering, shuddering gasps he made under Tony.

"Cum with me, Steve?" he murmured, panting softly as he thrust into Steve. Steve's body was warm under him and gleaming with sweat; Steve's look was one of rapture and that, more than anything, was what was making Tony's cock throb inside him, was pushing Tony toward the edge. He caught Steve's lips in his again; their kisses had turned frantic, sloppy as they edged toward climax.

Tony shuddered on top of Steve; Steve caught his lips and nudged at his tongue, almost tentatively. Tony pushed back, dominating Steve's mouth, satisfied and secure in his authority.
Steve came with Tony and with a cry, the heels of his feet digging into the small of Tony's back and pulling him in as deep as possible as he filled him. It didn't feel as good with a thin layer of latex between them but fuck it still felt good. Steve was panting as he came down from his high, cheeks flushed, and his damp hair, now mostly dried, pushed messily back from his forehead.

He hummed as he began to come down, nosing against Tony's cheek before he tilted his head into a kiss again, letting his Alpha lead as their tongues slid together. Steve moved his fingers out of their grip in Tony's hair and moved them to run down his arms and over the curves of his biceps.

"I love you," he whispered.

Steve broke away to murmur that he loved him; Tony nosed his jaw in response. "'M'mega," he mumbled. He slid out of Steve gently, rolled over, peeled off the condom, and tossed it aside without any indication that this action was in any way unacceptable. Yet another indication of a life lived with a nameless, faceless, ghost-like presence of staff that revolved madly around Tony at all times.

Tony slid an arm under Steve's neck and another around his body, pulling him close before (fuck, Steve was heavy) closing his eyes and stifling a yawn. He didn't plan to nap; he just wanted to hold Steve for a few minutes before wandering back downstairs to attack the piles of boxes of notes that were still probably scattered all over the floor.

Steve curled into his touch, eyes half drooping shut. It was strange...still feeling so weirdly clean after sex. Nice, in a way. Steve guessed he would get used to this. He tucked his face against the crook of Tony's shoulder, hiding away from the late afternoon sunlight that was pooling into the room. He sighed softly, contently.

He'd never felt more secure than he did when he was in Tony's arms.

"We should eat something," Steve mumbled against his skin. "It's too early to sleep..." And yet sleep was tugging at his bones anyway.

"Yeah," agreed Tony. He could feel the stirrings of a headache from too much alcohol and physical exertion combined with not enough water.

He sighed a little. "C'mon. Let's get up," he said. He was pretty sure there was a box of old Chinese food in the mini-fridge down there. Granted, it was a few weeks old. But it was in a fridge. Tony wanted to wolf it down and get back to work.

He felt satisfied with Steve, at least for now. Steve had a weird way of triggering sudden urges in him.

He extricated his arm from Steve, Steve's tiny noise of protest tugging at his heart strings, and swung out of bed with another yawn. He walked into the closet and pulled on a pair of jeans and a wifebeater, not bothering with underwear or socks.

"Hey Steve. You should call your agent," said Tony, leaning against the door frame, eyeing Steve's body. "You know people are gonna wanna get interviews. An assload of them."

Tony was both looking forward to it, and dreading it. He liked the idea of showing Steve off, of preening in front of the cameras and have people praise him. But he was also nervous; this was something intimate and meaningful, and he couldn't ignore the obvious reality that his omega was an uncharacteristically commanding type. That he was getting dragged into a progressive civil rights spotlight, and that Tony wasn't really someone who was especially into that. Sure, he was
progressive in his own way... but not publicly. Publicly, Tony went out of his way to be as shallow as possible and to hide anything he really cared about. But there was no hiding Steve. For one thing, he was over six feet tall and probably over two hundred pounds of sculpted muscle. There was no overlooking him.

Steve rolled onto his front, his legs curling up as he turned his head to peek at Tony from under his bicep as he lazily ran his fingers through his own hair. He watched the way Tony's eyes ran down his form and shivered. "I'll call her after a shower," he murmured, words a little muffled by his arm. His blue eyes were glazed over. Steve looked serene, peaceful.

Tony looked down. "Uh... and even though I know you're gonna be.. doing that, and stuff, I would prefer if you were at my psych eval." He glanced up. "I mean, I've had bad trips before, I don't think SHIELD can really throw anything at me I can't handle. But I wanna make sure I'm on the team. You guys are seriously short on Iron Men and it'd be a damn shame if your little justice league were missing the coolest super-powered badass ever."

Badass. Right. Another thing on the to-do list: contact IUPAC and get badassium put into the periodic table of elements. They were going to have to have a long discussion about its symbol, since barium had already laid claim to Ba. Lousy barium, thought Tony. It was easier to fret about barium and badassium then think about SHIELD's lousy test; he'd seen what they'd put Steve through and he was admittedly worried. He thought using Schmidt was a low blow.

Steve's expression softened and he raised his head, eyes still on Tony. "Of course I'll be there," he said. "We can still get a practice in, if you want. It'll be quieter in the evenings...Nat was texting me about it, actually. When I was drawing. We can go in together. Do you think that would help?" Steve asked. "You can have actually have up to five people in the machine at once. It wouldn't be dangerous. It's up to you." He knew that he would have felt a lot better with Tony in with him the first time. It had been a very isolating experience - he hadn't felt that alone since he'd been driving in ice cold sea water.

Tony frowned a little at the mention of Natasha. If he had been asked to describe the person he would least like to witness his innermost fears, he would probably say a powerful female redhead. It wasn't that he was insecure... exactly... but still, he didn't know Natasha well and she was a strong Alpha and Tony didn't want her to see him vulnerable.

"You gonna go work now?" Steve asked gently, like he already knew the answer.

"We'll talk about it later," said Tony, striding over and leaning down to kiss Steve's head briefly. "Yeah, I'm gonna go down to the shop for a bit. Just tinker, y'know." He gave Steve's bare ass a pat before limping out the door.

When Tony was by himself, he opted to spend about half his time at home in the shop. Even though the whole house belonged to him, Tony often felt like the garage was the only place that was truly his. For one thing, it was locked and there was no chance of bumping into household staff there, unlike the rest of the mansion. For another, he'd decorated it mostly by himself. Whereas the rest of the house was all minimalist design and modern art, the garage boasted a bunch of pop art posters and a neon beer sign and all the trappings of a place that was truly lived in and personalized. Tony flicked on a Van Halen song and sat down in the middle of the floor, among the scattered notes on the floor, and picked up a few pieces of loose paper, examining them. Notes on nitramene. A faded photo fell out. Four people standing on a pier, a lighthouse in the background. Cape Cod? Tony's father and mother were smiling at the camera; Ana and Jarvis were there, too. Tony's mother was noticeably pregnant. Tony examined it for a moment. His father and Jarvis were shoulder to shoulder, but Tony's father's arm was around his mother.
He flipped the photo over, looking for some more information on it, but there was nothing except for a date. Tony squinted at the numbers. They were familiar. Stane's handwriting. He must have been the one who took the photo and gave it to Howard.

Tony set it aside and picked up a notebook to begin reading it. He was certain he'd seen at least one reference to the tesseract, but the photo had gotten him distracted, and the half-finished gauntlet lying on the desk, its wires trailing over the side like they were some sort of weird steampunk jungle vines, was calling his name.

He doubted the tesseract was worth worrying about. Tony was all about alternative energy. SHIELD sounded like they had it under control; Steve was overreacting.

Tony shoved his father's paper's aside and went to work on his suit instead. There was no chance of finding old photos in the suit so it was, at least emotionally, a much safer project to dedicate his time to.

"Hey JARVIS!" he called as he settled down at his work bench, adjusting the desk lamp. "Can you..." He hesitated for a split second, then said, "...can you call Barton? I wanna ask him some quick questions about omegas. Also, Steve's birthday is coming up, can you look up how much a bald eagle costs?"

"Around five thousand dollars sir," JARVIS replied. "Putting Barton through."

The dial tone lasted for a while until finally Clint picked up. "What? Who is this? This is not a good time." For once the archer didn't sound his usual self. He sounded... serious. Maybe even a little stressed. There was talking going on in the background; the voices were getting raised but the words weren't quite clear enough to work out.

"It's me, Barton, your favorite Avenger!" said Tony cheerfully.

"...Tony Stark? ...how the hell did you get on this line? This is a secured--"

"Oh, sweet, simple Barton. MD5 hashes are easy to crack open. Don't worry, I'll redo your security system once I'm officially on board. So I wanted to ask you some quick questions. Is now a good time?"

"I literally just said it was not."

Tony pulled up the news on the screen in front of him and began scrolling, sweeping downward with his hand. There was a picture of several grinning people with the Washington monument in the background, all wearing matching pins. Tony squinted. The pins looked like Steve's shield and looked like they might have had text, but he couldn't read it.

"Great. So, Steve's birthday is coming up and I wanna do something awesome for him."

"Tony, I'm seriously right in the middle of--"

"--guarding the tesseract, I know, I know. But this is more important. He's turning 93."

"Look, Tony, I respect that you want to do something nice for your mate, but at 93, most of the people Steve knew back in his time are dead or dying. Calling attention to the fact that he's basically lost in time... I don't think it's a good idea."

Tony frowned. He hated to admit it, but Clint was right. "But I'm happy he was born."
"Well, unless you can invent a time machine in two weeks--"

"Money can buy anything. I'll figure something out." He wrote himself a note: *time machine.* "How's the tesseract doing?"

"You're not supposed to know about that!"

"And yet, here we are," said Tony, leaning back in his chair.

There was a sigh on the other line and in the background, some scuffling. "Did you hear the news?"

"What, that me and Steve are bonded? Yeah, I heard a rumor."

"No. All the omegas that are coming out. There's a whole movement, Stand With Cap?"

"For once, I've been pretty unplugged, to be honest," said Tony. "Who's out?"

"A representative from Louisiana, one of the shooting guards for the Chicago Bulls, and Carson Daly."

Tony groaned and dragged his hand down his face. Happy had been insisting for years that Carson Daly was an omega taking massive amounts of suppressants and hormones to pass as a beta (he'd read it in *The Enquirer*); Tony now owed him another $5,000. *At this rate, Happy will end up buying up all my bald eagles,* he thought grouchily.

"Well, that's good, I guess. What's Project Thor?"

"Tony, I can't tell you that. Are you done wasting my time yet?"

"No," said Tony. "Is THOR an acronym? C'mon, gimme a little hint, Barton."

"No. Leave me alone. This line is supposed to be open."

"So you don't know what Steve wants for his birthday? ...do you and him cycle together? ...how does bonding work?"

"Jesus Christ, Tony!" exploded Clint. A moment later, Tony heard him talking in the background. "No, no, it's nothing, sorry... sorry, I was listening to a podcast, that's all..." His voice came back on the line. "You're going to get me in trouble!" he hissed.

"I called you because you're an omega and I want an omega's perspective on bonding," said Tony. "Seriously, I have no idea how anything works. Toss me a bone, Barton. I suck at biology."

A pause, then a world-weary sigh. Hearing Tony admit any sort of weakness was not something Clint could take lightly. "Okay, fine. Five-minute crash course and then you'll leave me alone and leave the line open and untampered with. Deal?"

"Deal. And also don't tell Steve."

"I doubt Steve knows much more than you do," said Clint. "They didn't figure out the genetics of any of this or discover the bonding glands until the 1960s."

Tony reached for a notebook and flipped it open. "Ah-ha! Genetics! Exactly the sort of thing you can explain to me real quick. Go on."
"Aw, geez, it's been years since I learned this... uh... okay, so there's two genes. The LMG-1 gene carries a dominant allele for being a beta and a recessive allele for being either an omega or an Alpha, and the LMG-2 gene can shut off the allele for beta expression, but I... I think it's recessive?"

"Boring. Continue."

"So if you inherit the LMG-2 gene, you can have a beta allele but still be an Alpha or an omega. You're basically a carrier. Otherwise, most Alphas and omegas are homozygous. It's a recessive trait, hence the lower number in the population compared to betas."

"Super boring. Continue."

"So that's why, mostly, betas have betas but when you have, like, two Alphas, they almost always end up with an Alpha. ...I think? I don't really remember entirely. I think there's a movie called The Third Sex that explains all this crap but I've never seen it."

"So you're saying you don't even know what you're taking about? What, were you raised in a circus?" demanded Tony.

There was a pause on the other line.

"...are you kidding me?" said Clint finally. "She's a woman, so she can't knock me up, and everyone knows male omegas can't impregnate female Alphas. How in the hell are you forty and you don't know this?"

Tony ignored the question. "So, you're like, infertile?" The truth was, Tony had spent most of his high school biology classes drawing circuit designs. Biology had simply never held much interest for him.

Clint sputtered a little. "No. Male omegas can impregnate betas or other omegas. Just... not Alphas."

"But you guys bond the same way, right?"

"Yeah, basically. Bonding occurs when you break open the cluster of glands on the back of the neck of the omega and release a bunch of hormones--"

"Ew. Continue."

"--which in turn triggers pheromones that affect the Alpha."

"So you and Nat can't have kids?"

There was a long pause. "Not with each other, no."

"Is that why she seemed so bitter when she was yelling at us about protection?"

"You guys are using protection, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. ...so the bonding glands, those don't heal, once they're broken?"

"Not typically. I guess Steve's did, at least partially, anyway, because of the serum."

"...biology is disgusting. ...could the glands heal again?"
"I don't know, Tony. Just keep biting him there and you won't have to worry about it," said Clint, the faintest hint of amusement in his voice.

"Thanks, Barton. About heats--"

"Usually about twice a year, three to seven days, averaging five, and, yes, we cycle together. Tony, I have to go, it's doing something weird again."

"What? What's it doing?!" asked Tony eagerly, sitting bolt upright.

Clint had already severed the connection. Tony looked down at his notes. He'd written "1960s," "neck glands," "bite Steve," and "gross." He tossed the notebook back onto the desk and frowned, swiveling his his chair, tapping his fingers against his chin thoughtfully. Biology was not Tony's strong suit. He was a whiz at engineering and programming, at anything involving math or mechanics.. but when it came to the organic side of science, he was well aware he was no brighter than the average person.

He had been hoping Clint might supply him with some sort of reassurance, perhaps, that his and Steve's bond was safe and that there was an easy way to prevent any unwanted surprises.

"...JARVIS? What do tulips mean?" he asked after a moment.

"A host of things, sir, depending on the color. Enduring love, elegance, refinement, regality, abundance--"

"White ones."

"A white tulip bouquet connotes an apology or symbolizes forgiveness. Shall I send one to Miss Potts?"

Tony's stomach turned. "For once, Jarv, I don't think I'm in the doghouse with her," replied Tony. Normally, he would find it amusing that JARVIS assumed he owed Pepper an apology. But he was more interested in who was asking for Steve's forgiveness. He was positive that those tulips weren't for him.

Maybe he was reading too much into things. Maybe whoever sent them simply thought tulips were pretty.

"Hey JARVIS? ...don't let anyone deliver tulips to us again, okay? If a florist tries to come in here with tulips, turn them away. We're only taking orchids. Capiche?"

"Yes, sir," said JARVIS. One of the benefits of JARVIS being a program is that he was wholly incapable of judging Tony or questioning him when he made seemingly eccentric demands.

JARVIS was not the only one who was immune to the seeming impulsiveness of Tony's questions and demands. Pepper had long-since gotten used to it. And the agent she'd recommended to Steve, Aria, was another woman who, used to juggling the requests of eccentric celebrities, had ceased to question them. She'd admitted to Pepper that Steve was an easy client because he was polite, reasonable, and agreeable. His lack of knowledge about modern technology was a small price to pay considering his overall general respectfulness.

Steve sat out on the balcony with a towel wrapped around his waist as he dried. The early evening sun was warm on his face, it was pleasant. With a soft sigh he called Aria.
The rate at which Aria could answer her phone was really quite alarming. "I was hoping you would call. Good honeymoon?"

"Great," Steve told her and tilted his head back to look up at the clouds. "I read those articles you sent. Thanks."

"I was thinking maybe you could go back to the Times for your next one. They wrote the first article I sent over in the list. And then move onto tv stuff, maybe with Ellen. Oh, and I'm guessing you haven't heard? About the badges?"

"Badges? Er, no?"

"Look it up. It's trending on Twitter. #StandWithCap. People have made little badges that look like your shield. It's cute. They're wearing them to show their support, not just for you...you know, for what you're standing for."

Steve's chest seized a little. He was one of those optimists who still thought people were inherently good. But they could still surprise him, it turns out. "That's kinda amazing," he murmured and Aria went quiet for a brief moment.

"Yeah... yeah, it kinda is," she hummed. "So, the Times. Shall we say Saturday? That gives you another day for honeymoon. But we don't want you in the dark for too long Steve."

"If we do early morning Tony will probably sleep through it anyway," Steve said. "Or he could just come with."

"Okay. Great. I think we're sorted then?"

"Oh! One last thing."

"Mhm?"

"I'm kinda, gonna...start a charity..."

He explained to her his idea. She listened and wasted no time in telling him what everyone else had: anything related to family planning was going to stir up controversy.

After Aria had finished berating him, she set the times of his interview with the Times and then hung up, promising she'd call back with news about Ellen and SNL as soon as she could. She told him that Pepper was handling Larry King, and Rolling Stone, and that he shouldn't worry one bit because the two of them were working in tandem to make sure any interviews were well-controlled.

But Steve couldn't help but feel nervous, or at least uneasy. Now the questions weren't going to be what was it like in the forties? Now it was going to be what's it like being bonded to Tony Stark? Did you think you were going to die at the Expo? Steve didn't want to talk about any of that. It was personal. Bonding was a private matter, and maybe it was because he was old-fashioned, but he didn't think it was for discussion in the public sphere. Or maybe Steve just didn't really like people thinking about what him and Tony did in bed and how 'un-captain-like' that was.

Only Tony got to see him like that. Steve just hoped his Alpha understood the gravity of that fact. Tony's reputation was enduring. Scandal after scandal, and he still remained. Steve's reputation, on the other hand, felt like it was fragile, like one push too far and he'd go tumbling down. Steve needed to build up his defenses before they started their onslaught- of course the attacks on him had already begun. But once his relationship with his Alpha was dragged out into the public eye
things were only going to get worse. It was a lot harder to maintain a reputation of purity than a reputation of moral superiority.

Steve played around on his phone; Aria sent him multiple photos of famous celebrities labeled #StandWithCap. It was heart-warming to see, even if Steve knew who very few of them were. He set the tablet down and then grabbed a dressing gown (Tony had far too many as it was) before he went downstairs. The clothes JARVIS had sent for arrived. He still didn't know how the AI knew his size or what to order but he wouldn't question it. Steve wasn't sure he'd ever get used to have so many menial things done for him, however.

Steve drew orchids lazily on the couch for a few hours before he finally bothered to get dressed. Then he figured he should probably cook them... something? There was very little in the fridge that Steve recognized, but he found frozen chicken in the freezer, and a jar of curry sauce in the back of cupboard that was just within the expiration date. He couldn't deal with living off take-away every day, or the strange, exotic foods Tony seemed to like so much.

It was about 9 by the time it was done, with some frozen sweetcorn thrown in and added cumin from the spice rack in the corner. It was nothing special, but it was food. Steve before he took Tony's downstairs (microwaving it to make it sure it was hot). (He watched the plate go around and around as the microwave hummed; it was incredible, he thought, how you could make food warm up in a matter of minutes.)

He knocked once before stepping into the workshop, tentatively sticking his head through. "Tony?" He called out. "I brought you food."

Tony looked up sharply. He had lost track of time; he'd been flitting between his father's notes and the prototype for his newest suit. Currently, he was listening to Van Halen and trying to unbolt a panel from what might someday be a compartment for anti-aircraft missiles or maybe a heat sink for a laser. He wasn't sure yet; the current designs were still very much in the planning stages.

"Hey Steve. Wow, something smells great. Other than you, I mean. Is that my robe? I got an e-mail from the folks at SNL and they want you on the third. Great, right?" Tony pulled away from the machinery in front of him and pulling a hand covered in oil through his hair. His face was smudged with grease and there was a noticeable tear in his shirt. Steve had seen him like him a lot as a PA; Tony might have worn $15,000 watches and silk ties in public, but in his shop, he was content to lose himself in his work. On more than one occasion, Steve had watched Pepper shriek and barely save one of the main floor's immaculate white pieces of furniture. It was a testament to her involvement in Tony's life that none of the rest of the house had any oil stains anywhere; left to his own devices, Tony probably would have ended up accidentally ruining the carefully manicured living room upstairs.

"Is SNL the funny one? I forget their names."

Tony grabbed a dishrag and wiped his hands, but it didn't do much good. "Yeah, SNL's the funny one. Or at least, it tries to be. How're you doing, lover? Have you checked Twitter this morning? You're trending again. Your charity is gonna blow up when you announce it, I guarantee it."

Seeing Steve's look of alarm, he quickly explained, "Blowing up is an expression. It's a good thing in the 21st century."

"Ah. Okay," Steve let out a soft laugh and moved to set the bowl of food down on the side, the chicken and sauce steaming a little with a fork wedged into the rice. Steve was never going to be much of a cook but if Tony wouldn't take care of himself properly then someone had to.

There was something terribly attractive about a scruffy-looking Tony who was sweaty and oily
from work. Of course, he looked good in his three-piece suits but there was something more raw about this, more primal and it kind of made Steve want to kneel at his feet all over again. But he wouldn't. Tony needed to eat more than anything else right now. Steve moved to kiss his forehead and then not so subtly pushed the bowl in front of him, clearly expectant.

"What are you making?" Steve asked, peering over the tables and honestly having no idea. There was obviously method in Tony's madness but it meant that, for Steve, it was quite undecipherable. Tony grabbed the bowl and began wolfing it down. In his shop, Tony often treated eating like an unnecessary chore, an interruption to his work.

"This is the latest suit. I'm trying to get it to so that the suits are all self-aggregating. I'm tired of having robot hands molest me. ...sorry, 7UMM-E," he added over his shoulder. One of the bots whirred at him in recognition of its name. "Oh, and I was going through some of Dad's old stuff. Wanna see something really cool?"

He abandoned the food and crossed the garage, his limp noticeable but much better. He pulled out an old photo and held it out to Steve.

It was very slightest out of focus and sepia-toned. Eight men were looking at the camera. Two of them Tony had recognized instantly. His father, in the middle, stood out like a sore thumb in a turtleneck and a civilian jacket, a smug smirk on his face. Steve was there right beside him, clean-shaven, chin tilted proudly up. Tony had studied the other men carefully, methodically, left to right. It looked obnoxiously integrated: there was a black guy on the far right and an Asian guy on the far left. No women, though. And Tony would bet his arc reactor that Steve was the only omega there.

You could pick out the Alphas easily; they towered over the betas. There was a guy in a bowler hat and an enviable mustache standing just behind Howard, and another one with a goatee and a beret on Steve's left, and the guy on the far right with a helmet and a bandolier and a jaunty grin. Tony had noted, with some small sense of satisfaction, that Howard was the shortest Alpha.

It was funny to see how huge Steve looked. Tony had gotten so used to thinking of Steve as an omega that he often forgot how he looked in photos. Appearances could be deceiving, but generally, Alphas were bigger, more muscled, than their counterparts; Steve looked unquestionably Alpha. No wonder the history books had gotten it wrong; no sane person looking at this photo would guess he was am omega, not in a million years.

And there, next to Steve, a clean-shaven man, no hat, with a sharp, intense, familiar look. Bucky. Undeniably Alpha and undeniably handsome. Tony had debated showing Steve the picture at all, but it hadn't felt right to keep it from him.

"Dad and the Howling Commandos," said Tony with a small smile. "Look at you guys... all dressed up and ready to save the world."

Steve took the photo and stared at it hungrily, longingly, and Tony knew he'd made the right decision to share it.

"Oh my God," Steve whispered, and his breath hitched. "I didn't think there was anything the museum hadn't already snapped up," he murmured and gently took the photo, holding it closer to see it. There was more photographs but the Smithsonian had everything, something Steve silently resented. Most of it was from war photography, sure, but they had some of his old things too. His old uniform, his old clothes... even a few sketches. He hadn't asked for them back but they hadn't offered to return anything either.
The Commandos all looked so real. He could just hear Dugan's hearty laugh as he looked at him and remembered the way the man would him on the shoulder and squeeze when he was proud. And Falsworth...with all his British charm and swagger. He tried to chat Peggy up too many times and every time she rejected him it just go funnier. He was a good sport and a brave man. They all were. They'd all been willing to die for each other.

And now they were all dead. Steve swallowed down the lump in his throat, eyes flitting to Bucky. There didn't look anything wrong with them. He looked fine. Was Natasha right in saying he was sick after Zola? That the experiments performed on him in the POW camp had messed him up somehow, ruined their bond? Or had Steve managed to save him in time?

"Thank you. I...I didn't have anything of all of them."

Tony watched Steve for a few moments, then, reluctantly, gestured toward a shoebox on the floor. "There's more," he said. He'd been sorting it out slowly, the war memorabilia from the notes from the personal stuff. There were photos and letters, a patch in the shape of a wing, the Commandos' insignia.

Tony had stopped reading after unearthing a letter from Peggy Carter. It seemed to be consoling Howard about losing Steve and the language made it clear that Howard's letter to her had been a heartfelt one.

"...Dad liked war," said Tony, watching Steve stare at the photo. "I don't mean he wasn't aware of how awful it is. But you gotta understand... he was rich, and he wasn't really affected by things like war rationing or the draft. To him, it was like... like an extreme sport or something. He loved being a pilot, he loved building weapons. He built weapons because he liked winning and I guess he wanted to keep people safe, or at least, that's what he said. ...one of the first songs I learned on the guitar was War Pigs . I played it all the time, just to piss him off, especially the part about leaving the dying to the poor. He was a war profiteer. A patriot, though, too. I don't know. He believed in his cause... I just... I don't think he understand what his cause was. He thought war was... romantic." Tony lapsed into silence. He had grown up with all the right rhetoric to justify the family business. They were a defense contractor, their weapons helped saved lives and keep America safe. Tony had sparred often with liberal, left-wing journalists; he didn't think of himself as an arms dealer, but as an inventor, a modern Renaissance man. He joked about the weapons, deep down assuming that his cause was noble, that the monikers that followed him, like the Merchant of Death, were cute little tongue-in-cheek jokes that everyone was in on.

Every time he leveled something with a missile, he felt pride, not horror. He never considered that flattening a mountain was an analog for flattening a city block.

Afghanistan had changed on that. War wasn't noble or fun. War was ugly and brutal and Tony wanted nothing to do with it. Seeing all this old stuff of his father's made him feel sick, because clearly, Howard had never learned what Tony had. He had gone to the grave with a idealistic impression of war, that it was somehow honorable and sporting and that his weapons were only a force of good in the world, and that if they were ever used otherwise, well, by golly, it was hardly his fault, was it?

"...some of the news about us... people are saying, you know. It's a political move. Us bonding," adding Tony. "You're Captain America, national symbol of freedom and justice and... whatever. And I'm... y'know." Pause. "A Stark." Another pause. "My company pretty much single-handedly outfitted the entire armed forces for like twenty, thirty years. ...I've probably killed a hundred, a thousand times more people than you. People I never met. Never had to actually look at." Pause. "So that's what some people are saying. That... Captain America, shacking up with an
arms dealer... y'know. It's... political." He glanced down, picking at a nail, then added, almost viciously, "Ex-arms dealer."

Steve sat cross-legged on the floor, rifling through the box with gentle hands. He thumbed over the badge and he had to swallow down the lump in his throat again. He swallowed. All the remaining pieces of his past...crowded up into a shoebox. Maybe it was a little sad to have lost so much but he was still so grateful to Tony for just having this small part of his old life to show him. There was a photo of Dugan laughing. The photo didn't need to be in colour for Steve to know just what shade of pink his cheeks must of been.

"...political?" Steve echoed, finally processing what Tony was saying. He dragged his gaze away from the box to look up at the Alpha. "That doesn't even make sense," he said eventually, a frown knotting into his brow. "Why would I... oh." His frown deepened. "They think the only reason you've...is because of... but do they even know how bonding works? I'd be able to feel if you didn't actually want me."

_I've felt it before_.

The words went unsaid but they hung heavy in the air.

"People are saying it was arranged. That, like, the government sort of... orchestrated it," explained Tony.

"That's ridiculous. They're just trying to undermine our relationship because they're threatened by it. And, frankly, it's no one's business," Steve pointed out calmly. His gaze flitted down to the box and then back up to Tony. He stood and moved to take his Alpha's hands in his, not caring if they were dirty with grease. "I bonded you because I wanted to and I like to think you did the same. Sure, we were a little amped on hormones... but they got no right to judge us for any of that. I'm happy with you. Not because of my past, or yours." He reached up to push a loose lock of hair back from Tony's forehead. "But because of the future we're going to have together."

Tony forced a smile. "Just because people don't have a right to judge us doesn't mean they won't. People are also saying we're only together because I'm... y'know. My dad's son. And you and my dad..." He trailed off, letting the words hang.

"Well I didn't even know Howard that well. It's just rumor. People are only speculating 'cause I'm a 'mega. No one gave a shit when they thought I was an Alpha. It's kind of funny, when you think about it," Steve breathed and tried for a smile, but it was weak.

"...people like to talk. I'm kinda used to it," Tony added with a purposeful nonchalance. He looked away, still holding Steve's hands. "I mean. Yeah. Our relationship is... weird. You don't have to worry. Mostly, people think I'm the asshole and you're just, you know... a poor smitten omega. That's maybe the one benefit you get from being an omega. Even people who don't like our bond still like you."

"I care about how people see you too, you know," said Steve sincerely, and he squeezed Tony's hand gently.

Tony shook his hands out of Steve's. "Sorry. I'm cranky from a lack of alcohol. I've been keeping an eye on the news. It's not all positive. And going through all of my dad's shit..." He swung a leg over his chair and sat down heavily, dragging over a pile of wires and circuits and loose bolts and beginning to play with it again.

He hadn't come close to finishing what Steve had brought him but he had lost him appetite.
Steve frowned when Tony mentioned missing alcohol. But then, Steve guessed, that meant he hadn't been drinking, which was a good thing, right?

"...I'm just going to be glad when this all dies down. We're basically drowning in orchids. I wanna go back to being Iron Man," said Tony, closing one eye to concentrate on screwing down a small bolt. "Didja find a time for us to go do the simulation thingy? ...if it's all the same to you, I would prefer if Natasha weren't there. ...the thing is, when you... when you're around other Alphas, you kind of size each other up, and she's... well, let's face it, Steve, she's a total badass. Not that I'm intimidated. I just... I don't want to do it in front of another Alpha."

Tony had taken the liberty of dragging up everyone's old psych evals. The subconscious was a weird, weird thing and reading their reports was like reading a person's fever dream. Clint, Tony learned, was unsettled by mice and rats; Natasha had negative associations with ballet and surgical suites. Tony could absolutely understand having a fear of hospitals-- he hated them, too-- but was at a loss to explain why Natasha would find dancing upsetting. He tried to figure out what that meant, even going so far as to look up a dream interpretation manual, but eventually gave up. Perhaps there were other files, buried somewhere even deeper, explaining it, but Tony didn't have access to those yet. And if the notes were written instead of entered into a database, he'd likely never see them.

"Natasha will get us in but she won't hang around. I promise. We'll be in and out within two hours," Steve breathed and leaned forward to kiss the middle of his forehead. "We can do it tomorrow, if you want."

"Sure. What better way to spend Friday night than to scramble my subconscious using questionably legal government drugs and equipment?" said Tony glibly.

Steve knew Tony's bravado was a purposeful attempt to hide his fear. "How do you feel about it?" asked Steve, gently. "I know after seeing mine, it must seem a little scary."

Tony's defenses went up, automatically. "Scary? Oh, please. There's nothing SHIELD can toss at me that I haven't already gone through. I just want to make sure we're doing this on my terms. From what I've seen so far, Fury has some pretty serious control issues."

Steve dropped it. Tony was clearly not in a mood to talk seriously about it. Steve nudged his nose against the other's. "You want coffee?"

Tony nosed Steve back, again automatically; just as quickly as he'd protested being scared, his defenses crumbled again. It was just him and Steve, and Steve probably knew exactly how Tony felt because he could smell it all over him. He gave Steve a small smile. "...coffee sounds amazing. Can you put a few fingers of liquor in it? Maybe just two... three shots?" He squeezed Steve's hand. "...okay, okay, fine, you caught me. I am the tiniest bit... freaked out. But if you ever tell anyone, I will deny it."

"You do know alcohol and caffeine are like the two worsts thing you can combine, right?" Steve said with an almost fond sigh.

Tony gave Steve's lower lip an affectionate nip in reply before pulling away from him and settling down once again at his work bench.

He had already given the psych eval a lot of thought and had decided that the most important thing was to coach himself to remember that, no matter what happened, it wasn't real. Tony had taken plenty of drugs recreationally and he felt that if he could power through the initial fall down the rabbit hole, he'd be fine. The danger came in forgetting that it was only a simulation. But Tony
had gotten good at lucidly dreaming; it was one of the best ways to control his nightmares. Two years of practice had made it so that at least half the time, Tony could realize when something wasn't real; that knowledge was invaluable in the middle of an unconscious flashback. That knowledge was often the difference between waking up screaming and waking up feeling merely unsettled.

Steve grabbed the plate of half-finished food and took it upstairs to reheat it again before making coffee, with an extra shot of coffee in it and no alcohol. If Tony wanted liquor in his coffee he would have to put it in there himself.

Steve took it back downstairs and set it down on a spare spot of bench. He moved to kiss Tony's cheek. "I'm gonna go to bed, okay? Its late. Don't work yourself too hard," he whispered, voice soft and soothing before he pulled away. Tony needed to be well rested if he was going to have a good practise with the simulation. It was a harrowing thing in itself and if Tony did want him to join him...Steve honestly wasn't looking all that forward to going back in there.

"I'll come to bed soon," said Tony, glancing up for a fraction of a second when Steve kissed him. "Ten more minutes."

He went to bed, curling up in the sheets in Tony's robe still. It was strange...going to sleep by himself for a change. The bed was a little cold. But Steve had been up since six and soon sleep was tugging at his bones.

Steve's advise, not to work too hard, was almost immediately forgotten. The coffee sat untouched, slowly going cold, while Tony fiddled with the suit in front of him.

It was past three in the morning when he realized he'd forgotten to come to bed; the only reason for his moment of clarity was that he had slipped on a gauntlet and hooked it up the arc reactor, and was trying to test the range of motion, and ended up knocking over the coffee Steve had left him.

"Crap!" he exclaimed.

The mug had chipped, but hadn't broken. Tony picked it up with the glove, set in one the table, and threw the oily dishrag over the puddle of coffee on the floor. It wasn't big enough to cover the rapidly spreading liquid.

Tony sighed and used his unsheathed hand to begin pulling out wires, unplugging himself. He wondered if Steve had missed him, if Steve would be upset or bothered or even annoyed that he'd completely forgotten to come to bed. Tony's best work was always done late at night and he could happily work until dawn; back when Pepper was his PA, he'd often waited until she came in at 6, toss back an espresso, and then crash for an hour or two before getting back up to start his day.

Tony dropped the metal arm back on his work bench, then paused to stare at it for a moment.

He remembered the Winter Soldier, how he'd murmured an apology to Steve before shooting him. A tiny shiver ran through him that he quickly suppressed.

Out of habit, he pulled out his arc reactor and swiped inside of his chest to make sure the cavity where the reactor was sitting was clear. It was. He pricked his finger to check his blood toxicity. 2%. He was going to be just fine. He sighed and ran a hand over his face. He'd come so close to the brink of death. And in a way, it was Steve who had brought him back. And here he was, at 3:30 am, screwing around in the shop with poor Steve sleeping alone upstairs.

Tony got to his feet and staggered out of the shop. He eased his way up the stairs, stiff from work
but not as sore as he'd been in the aftermath of the fight at the expo, and made his way down the hall toward their bedroom.

Their bedroom.

Tony slipped in with a smile. Steve was curled up in the bed, the sheets twisted around him, his face peaceful. Tony felt a surge of affection for him. He wanted to climb in immediately, but instead, he forced himself to go to the bathroom for a quick shower. He had a sneaking suspicion that, regardless of how much Steve loved him, he wouldn't appreciate waking up to being smeared with engine oil.

Tony made sure he was dry before climbing in beside Steve, wrapping his arms around the blond. Spooning Steve was a weird experience; Tony was used to holding people much smaller. He checked the clock on the bedside as he settled down with his omega; it was almost five. He nosed Steve's hair apologetically and closed his eyes, drifting off still thinking about the metal arm on the table downstairs.

Steve let out a soft huff of air. There was.. a voice? Someone was saying something?

"Captain. Mr Stark," JARVIS said again. Was it possible for an AI to sound impatient? Steve was beginning to think it was.

He blinked blearily over at the night stand to see that it was past eleven. Had he seriously slept in so late? Sure, it was normal for Tony but not for him. Maybe it was because the honeymoon was almost over and his body was worn out. Maybe it was because he spent over two of yesterday morning in a weird trance and his body needed a break...when had Tony gotten to bed anyway? Probably too late. Regardless, he'd missed a proper gym session for two days running. He was never going to get the muscle back that he lost whilst he was running around as Tony's PA at this rate. Sure, to the average person Steve still looked built up as hell but he wasn't at his peak strength. He could feel it and he didn't like it.

"President Ellis is calling again," JARVIS informed them. Steve grunted in discontent. Tony was still curled around him, his front warm against Steve's back. It felt like he still in deep sleep.

"Urgh. Okay. Put him through. Just...just give me a minute," Steve said, finding it strange how talking to an AI suddenly felt normal now. He rubbed a hand over his face and sat up in bed, one of Tony's arms lingering around his waist, his Alpha's robe pooling around his thighs.

"Captain Rogers?"

"Speaking, sir."

"Ah excellent! I have to say, it's an honor." Of course it is , Steve mentally sighed. "I did try to call a few days ago but I'm afraid I couldn't get through."

Funny that .

"Yes, sorry about that. I was...busy. Sir."

Tony surfaced from sleep only partially, vaguely aware that Steve was sitting up, pulling away from him. He grunted with displeasure and squeezed Steve's waist.

One thing that he noticed, though. The air had changed; Steve's smell was... not different, exactly. Just less... powerful. He realized, with a small hint of sadness, that their honeymoon was coming to an end.
He wondered how many orchids there were. If they'd broken the 500 mark yet. If he was going to have to hire on someone to care for the damn things until they could get rid of them, or at least give one of the gardeners a raise.

Steve was talking; Tony curled up again around him, listening to the rumble of his voice without really processing the words. He could tell it was late morning by the light but he felt groggy and didn't want to come awake yet. He wanted to stay in bed and snuggle.

*He's turning me into a real sap,* thought Tony.

"Love you," he mumbled wearily.

"No, I understand, I was hoping to catch-- wait, was that Tony?" asked Ellis. "Hello, Tony."

"Oh, hi," mumbled Tony. "I'll be up in a sec, okay, if you can just put on a pot of coffee, I'm up, I'm up..." He wasn't sure who was talking to him but he was so used to demanding things from people that he didn't really care.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake anyone."

"You didn't," Steve said automatically even though Ellis obviously had. He reached out to run a hand through Tony's hair. "Can we help you, sir? Is there a specific reason why you called?" he asked, trying not to sound rude.

"Well, yes. We wanted to invite you, both of you, for dinner at the White House."

Well shit, okay. That seemed like a big deal. Was it a big deal? Steve wasn't sure. Last time he'd met a president it hadn't been a great experience. He didn't have the greatest of track records but he was willing to give Ellis a chance. This was a gesture. He was extending a hand out to them. It felt like they should take it.

"Wow, thank you, sir. That's swell, isn't it, Tony?"

"Yeah, super swell," agreed Tony blearily, not sure what he was agreeing to. He would have agreed to anything Steve wanted him to after running his hand through his hair. He stifled a yawn and finally opened his eyes.

Suddenly he realized who was calling.

"...Matthew?"

"Hi, Tony."

"Oh, shit, sorry. I... I had a late night." Tony realized almost immediately what that would sound like. "Not banging Steve! Working on Iron Man!" he said quickly, sitting up in bed. His hair was a mess.

President Ellis had the grace to laugh. "That's what you're doing on your honeymoon? Working?"

"To quote Bob Marley, the people trying to make this world worse are not taking the day off. Why should I?...Steve, Bob Marley is a famous musician," he added. It was becoming second nature to explain things to Steve. "So what do you want?"

"...I just invited you to dinner. And you accepted."

"I did? Great!" said Tony. He'd rubbed shoulders with Ellis on a number of occasions and found...
him to be likeable. He was a moderate Republican whose policies were most focused on economics. If Stark Industries still produced weapons, they would have benefited greatly from his defense spending. Ellis and his veep, Rodriguez, were both betas; it occurred to Tony that they were being invited in an effort to garner political support from the minority population of Alphas and omegas. Having only ever met Ellis for business, it felt weird to suddenly be called on for a social issue. Tony wasn't sure he was the right guy to sit down and talk about that stuff, but he figured Steve would take the helm and he could go ahead and get ragingly drunk. The White House had an impressive open bar that Tony had decimated on four separate occasions.

"I'll send you more formal invitations later today. All the suit and tie nonsense," Ellis said, sounding more familiar now Tony was in the conversation. "I'll leave you to... work. Have a good day, gentleman." Then he hung up.

Steve reached out to run his fingers through Tony's hair again, trying and failing to smooth it down. Because he'd slept on it wet his bed hair had gone pretty wild. The sight was cute. He was almost tempted to snap a picture but he wasn't sure his Alpha would appreciate it.

That was something Steve couldn't get over... pictures. How easy they were take now and how accessible. How a person could carry around over a thousand of them just on their phone. It was amazing how easy it was to preserve memories nowadays, Steve thought. Back in the forties photographs had been precious and certainly not readily available. They'd made the soldiers feel like movie stars when they turned up with cameras and made them pose and line up in rows. But then they would go out into battle and that feeling would quickly fade away.

Steve gave his head a little shake to clear his thoughts. "What's President Ellis's stance status stuff?" Steve asked curiously. "Do you know?"

"Uh..." Tony racked his brain. He had never stayed on top of status issues; after all, they only really affected omegas, not Alphas. "...I don't think he's really too involved with it. I mean... now that you guys can, y'know, vote and go to college and stuff... well... no one really thinks about it. I mean... I mean, y'know, whenever there's like a big news story, whenever there's a hate crime, he probably gives a statement or something..."

Tony trailed off. It sounded so sad, so woefully inadequate. Being around Steve had given Tony a window into a world he'd never thought of, one where omegas lived with the constant awareness that they were second-class citizens. Jarvis had been one of the "lucky" ones; being Howard Stark's butler had protected him from the worst of it. But still, now that Tony knew what he knew, he realized Jarvis probably got treated like crap a lot, ordered around and molested and dismissed by Howard's Alpha business partners. The thought turned Tony's stomach.

The only reason Ellis was probably inviting them was that Steve had caused a massive media shitstorm. It wasn't just his coming out, but his interview. Demanding better treatment for omegas had started a movement, and said movement was currently snowballing out of control. It had gained traction and Ellis was politically savvy enough to know he'd better get on board.

"...he's a good guy, though," said Tony quickly. "...I think it's hard for betas to really get it, y'know? Beta presidents never really address status issues much." He didn't say what both of them were probably thinking. That there had never been an omega president. That omegas were woefully under-represented. That, with the exception of banning arranged bonding, there hadn't been any new leaps forward for equality in Tony's lifetime.

He supposed it was a good thing, then, that they were going to see Ellis. Maybe they could tackle some of those issues together. Tony was pretty sure Pepper had some sort of formula for White House dinners. 30% business, 70% socializing? Something like that. He'd never paid it any
attention; again, the open bars were fantastic.

"I don't think your status is an excuse once you're president of the United States, Tony," Steve sighed and ran his hands through his hair. It wasn't really the answer he wanted to hear, that Ellis was a beta who didn't give a shit. Was he allowed to go to the White House if he ended up arguing with the president? Or did he have to go and be nice? Steve didn't think he could keep up a pretense, not even for the president.

"I have an interview tomorrow morning, with the Times, again," Steve said and his gaze flirted down. "If they ask me what I think about government legislation I'm gonna be honest about it Tony."

"Honest is the best policy," agreed Tony. He didn't believe that at all, but he wanted Steve to know he was going to be supportive if Steve chose to trash-talk the president.

"What time did you even get to bed last night? You look kinda beat." Whereas Steve had slept for almost twelve hours and he was feeling better than he had in weeks, actually.

"I went to bed before dawn," said Tony quickly. "I feel fine, I just need an espresso." He heaved himself out of bed. He did feel worn out, but Tony bounced back from everything quickly and he was desperate to get some coffee and liquor in him for breakfast. "...do you want me at the interview?" he asked, stretching. Discovering shirtless pictures of Steve in the news had been fun the first time. But Tony didn't know if he liked the idea of Steve doing it again. Who had painted the flag on his abs? Another omega? Or...? He didn't ask but the idea nagged at him.

"You can come if you want to," Steve said. "But you'll probably just get bugged by all the people who work there. Last time I went everyone was staring. It was sort of intimidating." It then occurred to Steve that Tony didn't find that kind of thing intimidating at all. Whilst Steve had been his PA, Tony had been in the spotlight every time he'd walked out the doors. And he seemed to handle it well. Tony being at his interview could equally be supportive, or distracting. "Why don't you pick me up after my interview?" he suggested. "We could go for lunch or something."

He threw on a robe and hovered while Steve got up to brush his teeth and shave. He didn't need to ask what Steve's plans were for the day; Steve was pulling on exercise clothes and had that determined "Captain America" glint in his eye. Tony planned to probably sleep sandwiched between a couple of gym mats, possibly with a bottle, and then call up Pepper and make sure they had an in with Rolling Stone, which had always been pretty sympathetic toward Tony in the past. Tony tried to make his publicity short and sweet and exclusive, and only talk to outlets he knew would present him in a good light. That had gotten easier after Afghanistan; people liked him more as Iron Man than as a defense contractor. But it was still, at times, difficult. His reputation as an eccentric, out-of-touch, womanizing billionaire made a lot of people resent him. Tony had never cared before (those people were clearly jealous), but now that he and Steve were an item, he was hyper-aware of how his actions would reflect on Steve, who, so far, had managed to keep his nose clean. People genuinely liked Steve, and why wouldn't they? Steve was good. Steve believed in people and causes and stuff, and Steve worked to make the better place for purely selfless reasons. The truth was, Tony's motivations were a lot more self-centered; he was making up for his past sins. Iron Man was a sort of penance. Steve had nothing at all to make up for, at least, not in Tony's mind.

"I'm allowed to drink before the simulation thingy, right?" asked Tony, eyeballing the bar in the front entrance as the two of them descended the curve of the main stairs together. The orchid situation was predictably worse than before. To prevent the main room from becoming too clogged, whoever had accepted the latest ones had begun putting them on the stairs; they lined the
stairs, giving the impression that the orchids in the front room were multiplying and creeping
toward their bedroom. About half the counter space in the kitchen was taken up, and Tony
hazarded a glance into the little-used dining room. The table had been overtaken. He made a
mental note to get Pepper's and Rhodey's out as soon as possible so that they didn't get mixed up
with all the others. Those two were the only ones that were truly meaningful to him. Had Happy
sent one? If so, that was all three of his friends, right there. The rest of the flowers would have to
go.

"No. Six hours before the simulation all you're allowed is water. It sometimes makes people throw
up so it's best that way," Steve said, unable to fight back the tug in his chest. He wished Tony
wasn't so reliant on alcohol. He knew he wasn't the perfect example of mental health himself but he
still cared.

"I think I'm gonna go for a jog. It's a nice day outside. I won't be more than an hour," Steve assured
him. The sun was pooling into the house enticingly through the huge walled windows. He was
never usually this cooped up indoors for this amount of time. He just hoped nobody was going to
harass him out in the real world. He just wanted to jog and that was really it. "Okay?" he checked
and took the other's hand, squeezing his fingers lightly before he tilted his head down to kiss his
temple.

"...okay," agreed Tony, even though none of Steve's words sat well with him. Steve said he
shouldn't be at his interview because everyone would be staring; well, of course they would. Why
wouldn't they? Everyone stared at him; he was awesome. He didn't want to leave Steve alone,
strangers touching his abs.

Then again, being alone meant valuable shop time. The suit needed work. And he knew Steve
could handle himself.

More concerning was the idea that he wasn't allowed any food or booze that evening. He tried to
squash down his concerns. If there was one thing he'd learned from doing drugs, it was that
freaking out always made things worse. (But how the hell was he supposed to relax without
alcohol?)

He knew he couldn't go with Steve on a jog outside. He wouldn't be able to keep up. He wondered
if Steve was just going to be going around the estate--Tony's Malibu mansion sat on almost three
acres--or whether Steve was going to leave the grounds and jog along the coast. He gave Steve's
fingers a quick squeeze back and followed Steve's gaze out the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Another perfect day. The sky was crystal clear. Perfect conditions for a test flight. The Mark V
had recently been tinkered with; now might be a good time to take it out and see what it could do.
Nothing quite helped Tony relax like being in the suit; the feeling of power was unparalleled. It
was hard to have any real worries in that thing.

"See you when you get back," he said, giving Steve's ass a quick slap and grinning cheekily at
him.

Steve rolled his eyes fondly. "See you in a bit," he told him and then moved to leave. He glanced
back over his shoulder once to catch Tony watching his behind and raised his brow in playful
disapproval before he slipped out the door. It was good to be in running shorts that actually fit him
for a change. Happy's had been too tight in all the wrong ways.

He ran along the drive to the estate and it felt good to be moving again. Steve kept up a steady
pace, exiting through the wrought-iron gates and following the curve of the Pacific Coast Highway
down toward the shore. He was soon on the beach side. They was a few other odd joggers, and he
passed an old couple. No one seemed to be recognizing him; he was blending in fine. The sun was warm as it kissed his skin too. Maybe he would finally get a tan.

Then he heard it. A kid's voice. "Mom! Mom look! Captain America!"

Steve slowed to a stop on automatic and turned to see a man with his child tucked away into a small bank of sand. The kid looked about six; she was sweet-looking with a few missing teeth and a bathing costume covered in ladybugs. Steve was momentarily confused by the term "Mom" because the only person nearby was the man on his phone, who was waving at the girl to be quiet. But he knew that some omegas in same-sex couples used the term to keep things simpler; "Mom" often meant the person who had borne the child. Children from omegas were called whelps, though they were no different than children born to female Alphas or female betas.

Steve had lingered too long. The girl was pointing at him and pulling at her 'mother's' arm. Tired of being ignored, she tottered over to Steve.

"Excuse me, mister! Are you really Captain America?!!" She asked, eyes lighting up.

"Georgina, get back--" began the man on the phone. "--holy shit!" the young man muttered when he saw Steve.

And that was how Steve ended up taking a selfie with Georgina and her mother, the sun glinting in the corner and the blue of the sea behind them. Ian (the parent) asked if he could upload it on Twitter and Steve said sure, why not? He couldn't recall Aria or anyone else telling him he wasn't allowed to take pictures with his fans, and besides, what was the harm?

"Seriously, um...thank you," Ian said a little awkwardly as he tucked his phone away. Georgina was already distracted and playing with the sand, her enthusiasm for meeting Captain America overshadowed by the fact that she'd just found a sand dollar. "All the stuff you're doing for us, our status... it's amazing. Seriously. Thank you so much."

"Don't thank me yet," Steve told him with a small smile. "I'm just getting started."
In this chapter: Tony and Steve fuck, go on a date, and then head to Camp Pendleton for Tony to get an unauthorized taste of SHIELD's subconscious simulation exercise. A bit of fun filler before the next chapter, which is long, intense, and full of flashbacks (much like Tony himself is. Wink.)

Tony watched Steve jog down the drive and out of sight. His "jog" was like a regular person's sprint. His loping pace was easy, graceful. He made running look like it was easy and fun.

Tony loathed running, himself. The idea of going nowhere in a hurry just didn't make sense to him.

He waited until Steve was out of sight before heading down to the shop. "JARVIS! I want to test out the Mark V, let's suit up!" he yelled, throwing off his robe. One of the most-asked questions he got about the suit was what he wore under it. The honest answer, the one he didn't admit, was that he usually didn't wear anything, because clothes only made the whole thing uncomfortable. There was already a nomex-spandex lining that fit perfectly to his body. Sure, you could cram yourself in with clothes, but they had a tendency to bunch up and get in the way. When Tony did wear clothes in the suit, it was often just boxer-briefs and an undershirt, items designed to be comfortable and form-fitting.

He stood on the gantry platform and let the suit be assembled around him, his mind still turning over SHIELD's psych evaluation. It seemed extremely, bordering on reckless.

But Tony was all about recklessness. The heady feeling of abandon he got right before sex, right before doing anything dangerous and stupid, was one he pursued with gusto. He supposed he might technically qualify as an adrenaline junkie; he'd once jokingly told "Wired" magazine that the Stark Standard for missiles was that, during the initial launch, he expected to get either goosebumps or an erection. He was only half-kidding. His brain had long since tied together sex and weapon launches and flying, and sometimes, when Tony was frustrated and no girls were handy, he went for a flight over the Pacific instead. Last time he'd taken the liberty of shooting at seagulls, which had netted him a nice, aggressive bit of media attention from PETA even though, he pointed out, he hadn't actually shot down a single bird, just scared them a little.

Once the suit was assembled around him and his digital display was lit up, Tony clanked his way out of the garage. "How're we doing Jarv?" he called as he left the garage and made his way toward the back of the house.

"All read-outs indicate full functioning," said JARVIS.

"Sweet. Let's do it, then," said Tony cheerfully, stopping through a carefully maintained hedge toward the cliffside. He strolled off it and went into a dive; his heart pounded with excitement and he felt the usual rush that accompanied the split-second before he felt the drop in his stomach indicating he was in free-fall, trusting his technology to pull him out of it before he splattered all over the ground.
He hit the jets and caught himself, skimming over the surface of the ocean, the sun sparkling above him.

A couple of dolphins jumped out of the water at him, but he outstripped them almost immediately.

The last time he had been in the suit, he'd been fighting for his life. It had been a while since he'd simply gotten to fly around. He loved the feeling of weightlessness, the weird, out-of-body experience. He was going impossibly fast but because of the helmet, there was no wind in his hair. He could twist, brake sharply, corkscrew straight up, all of it in any direction. It was not dissimilar to what he imagined being a ghost would be like. (Tony didn't believe in ghosts.)

He'd missed this.

Tony made JARVIS pull up the suit diagnostics and monitored the energy use languidly. The new reactor was monstrously efficient. The old palladium-core ones had often needed swapped out after only a couple of hours in the suit. After an hour of tearing across the surface of the ocean, the suit showed zero signs of slowing and the reactor showed zero signs of having been used up at all. Tony felt a smug sense of satisfaction. He was going to totally raise the bar at SHIELD; Steve was going to be so proud of him. Other than the psych eval, he was going to have no trouble at all passing any of test they threw at him.

He could have played around all day, but he wanted to get back and have a few drinks before Steve returned. He zipped back to the house and went down to the basement, feeling refreshed. He mixed himself a martini at the minibar in the corner after the suit had been pulled off of him, taking a few shots of straight gin to tide himself over.

It had been two hours since Steve had left. Unbeknownst to either of them, they'd returned around the same time. Upstairs, Steve downed three glasses of water straight away, a little sweaty from the heat and the sun, but content with it too. The best workouts were ones that left him worn out; he felt better already. Steve headed down to the workshop as he finished his fourth glass of water, knocking once before he stepped inside.

"Tony?"

Tony nearly dropped the glass when he heard Steve call his name.

"Oh hi," he said, trying to look casual. He was suddenly very aware that he was naked and holding a bottle of liquor. "...believe it or not, I did get work done this morning. I just came back from a flight. How was your run?"

"Good!" Steve said with an enthusiasm Tony hadn't really seen before. Steve looked hyped and energised, just about ready to go out on a run again and then probably four more after that one. He almost couldn't stay still. He was bouncing on his feet. He smirked subtly as he glanced over Tony, looking oddly at home as he was. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes (although it would have been fondly).

"A flight?" he echoed and it took him a moment to process that that meant in the suit and not in a plane. It made sense. Tony had been working almost non-stop. "And it went okay?" he asked, and leaned against one of the benches, cheeks still a little pink from his sprint back (and that had been a proper sprint, world record's be damned.) Steve leaned his hands on the back of the desk behind him, eyes flitting over the bottle. The run had given him too much of a buzz for him to be sad about that right now but he certainly wasn't happy about it either.

"Do you...er, usually fly naked?" He asked. "Doesn't it get a little hot and sweaty in that thing?"
"...are you crazy, Steve? Air conditioning, bro! That was one of the first lessons I learned from the Mark 1. Air conditioning is a must. Otherwise I'd be baked alive. C'mon, it's metal, do you have any idea what the sun would do if I didn't have a coolant system?" Tony hopped up onto the counter, legs spread and dangling, holding the martini delicately. "The flight went great, by the way. Oh my God, Steve, this new reactor? It's the best. It's crazy efficient. And also not killing me, which is always a plus. ...you look great." Tony sucked an olive off of a toothpick. He'd learned years ago that a garnish often meant the difference between looking refined and looking like a lush. He almost envied Steve's lifestyle. He wished he could get the sort of high Steve seemed to get from exercise.

It was funny how different they were. Steve had grown up poor, and Tony rich. Steve believed in people and principles, and Tony in math and machines. Steve rarely swore (except in bed) and hardly drank at all, whereas Tony... well.

Tony felt he needed a drink or two, though, as he was trying to keep up with the news. Plenty of people were happy about the bonding. Some were skeptical. But the thing that hurt Tony the most wasn't the skeptics. It was the people who said Steve could do better, that Tony wasn't good enough for him, that Captain America shouldn't have settled for Tony. Tony liked to think of himself as fun and eccentric but was well aware that he often came across as a jerk. And he'd never really cared one bit, until now.

"You wanna drive the bike down to the base? I know a really nice restaurant... thought we could have a little lunch date before you and Nat fry my brain," he said with feigned casualness. He eyeballed Steve's outfit. "...unless you were planning on running there?"

"Sure. Sounds good," Steve hummed as he watched Tony's lips around the toothpick. He paused for a moment, apparently lost in thought. Or rather lack of it. Steve pushed off the side of the bench slowly.

"Are you saying sometimes I don't look great?" he asked with a coyness he hadn't known he was capable of. He was still buzzing off of his run and Tony was naked in front of him. He was only human. Or, only super human. Whatever. He was almost stood between Tony's legs now, his Alpha taller than him like this. If Steve tilted his head up just right he'd feel Tony's breath on his cheek. "Because that's not very nice, if you are..."

Steve had never known he was capable of moving so confidently. Sure, he was good in a fight but sexually he'd had about zero experience before Tony. Maybe it just the honeymoon. But the self-consciousness was fading and in its place was something new. Steve was being more himself, not holding back. He kinda liked it.

Tony cocked his head. There had been a subtle change in the air around them.

"...sometimes you don't look great," said Tony slowly. "Sometimes you look incredible. But right now, you merely look great." He smiled at Steve. Sitting on the counter-top, he had gained a few inches on Steve. He smiled down at the blond and reached out to touch his cheek, aware that Steve had moved into the space between his legs and was smirking teasingly at him. He was still flushed from his run.

"Oh, I see..." Steve hummed, feigning seriousness. His blue eyes were bright with mischief, something swimming beneath the surface. He was never usually his confident, not in a sexual sense anyway. But the endorphins from his final sprint were still pulsing through his system. He rested his hands either side of Tony's hips on the desk, not glancing down at his arousal almost pointedly.
"...can I help you, Mr. Rogers?" Tony asked innocently, trying to act unaffected by Steve's proximity. It was a silly game; of course Steve could probably smell his excitement and, frankly, if Steve glanced down, he could see it, too. But Tony had never seen Steve act this way and was curious to see where he was taking it.

He tilted his head into Tony's touch and mock-bit at his fingers, the hot breath from his mouth tickling at his Alpha's fingertips. Something dark glittered in his eyes. "It's Captain, actually," he told him, tone a touch lower than before.

"Oh, right. Captain Rogers," said Tony, tracing the soft swell of Steve's lips with his fingers. "...I guess that means you're in charge, huh?" He didn't smile, but his eyes were bright. The martini he had been sipping was sitting on the counter next to him, half-drunk, forgotten. Tony liked this confident, flirty version of Steve. He wanted to grab him and kiss him, bite him, throw him down and take him. But he wasn't just joking around when he said Steve was in charge. Steve was initiating and Tony wanted to give him the reins. "You know... I'll follow any orders you give me... Captain. I wouldn't want you to have to court martial me," he said, fingertips still gliding over Steve's face.

Tony liked this new game. Tony would never admit it, not in a million years, but he was a sucker for uniforms. Maybe it was just the power they represented. But he'd never seen Steve, in real life, dressed in his, and it was a thought he'd turned over a few times since discovering Steve's identity. That was probably what Steve would be wearing to the White House dinner and Tony was looking forward to it. Something about seeing an omega, his omega, in an officer's uniform was, to Tony, extremely sexy.

Steve was a soldier but that was something Tony found easy to forget. All week, they'd been lounging around, regular people. Being reminded that he was a captain was a titillating thought; Tony could feel his body respond to it automatically. Neither of them were looking down but Tony was pretty sure they were equally aware of the erection Steve was giving him.

Steve ducked his head down to press a kiss to Tony's index finger. Then he nipped at it with a subtle smirk, tongue darting out to taste briefly. He was sure there was a limit to what he could get Tony to do but this would be a curious experiment. There was a lot he wanted from Tony, everything they'd done and more. Sometimes his thoughts wandered...he felt both the need to make Tony squirm beneath him and be the one squirming. Sometimes Steven even wondered about the suit and if Tony could hold him down in it- even if he fought back. The thought made him shudder. But right here and now was about making Tony squirm.

"I find it uprising you've never been court-martialed before, to be honest," admitted Steve.

"Me too," agreed Tony.

"...it would be a terrible shame," Steve hummed, a smile curling onto his lips. He leaned forward, breath ghosting over Tony's cheek. "Lie down," he whispered abruptly, tone unwavering.

Tony shivered at the feeling of Steve's tongue on his finger and again at the command. That's what it was, plain and simple. A command. From an omega! Tony couldn't have ever imagined it; if he had, he would have expected it to be weird and hilarious, except it wasn't, because Steve's tone was serious, his face stern, and Tony could completely believe Steve had ordered around a special unit of Alphas and betas during the war.

Tony wanted to say yes, sir, to keep up their pseudo-army banter, but couldn't quite bring himself to. Not to an omega. If Steve had been a beta, he wouldn't have hesitated. But he just couldn't and he felt a pang of irritation at himself for that. Until he'd met Steve, he had ever considered himself
prejudiced, not the slightest bit. How wrong he'd been. Tony was filled with bias, and he was only just now becoming conscious of it.

But even if he couldn't bring himself to say those two words, he did obey. He lay down on his back on the counter, excited and nervous, and also the slightest bit angry at himself for still holding on to the prejudices that had been ingrained into him since birth.

Steve felt a sense of satisfaction as he watched Tony lie down across the work table. He bit down on his bottom lip slowly and then moved to crawl over him. He ducked his head down to drag his teeth down the curve of Tony's jaw quite mercilessly, smirking against the skin as he felt an involuntary shudder in response. This was different, this shift in authority. Steve was enjoying it more than he expected to.

"You feel frustrated," Steve commented as he traced his tongue down to the hollow of Tony's neck. "Why?"

He trailed down lower, teasing his teeth and lips over Tony's left pectoral just because he could. Steve's eyes flickered up to watch his Alpha's face. "Tell me."

Tony shivered, holding still, his skin breaking out in goosebumps at the cold counter under him and Steve's teasing mouth exploring his body.

"It's nothing. Nothing you're doing," he reassured Steve quickly, closing his eyes and reaching down to run a hand through his hair. "Just... just mad at myself over something. Don't worry about it. I like... this." He paused, then added, "...Captain."

Back before Afghanistan-- pre-Iron Man-- Tony had dabbled in playful power dynamics. He liked strong women, liked them to order him around, to be teased and tied up and maybe even smacked around a little. But the whole thing had lost its luster after his experience overseas.

When he came back, he'd had to wait three months for the results of an HIV test (blessedly negative). But he'd waited longer to jump back into sex. He made the excuse that it was because he was too busy being Iron Man. But that wasn't it. It was because his experiences had changed him.

This was the first time in years he'd done anything even remotely like the old stuff he'd used to enjoy, and he sure as hell wasn't going to ruin it by admitting to Steve that the idea of calling him sir was inexplicably revolting. Tony had called plenty of betas titles like mistress and goddess and ma'am and, yes, even sir . The issue wasn't that Tony didn't like that. The issue was Steve's status. And Tony hated himself for discovering that, even though he respected Steve, he couldn't fully relinquish power to him.

"Let me know if you want to stop," Steve whispered and then he ducked his head down, continuing his path. He dipped his tongue into the hints of muscle in Tony's abdomen, teasing with a soft hip here and there as he slowly trailed lower. He kept his pace languid just to work Tony up even more.

When Steve was finally in front of Tony's cock it was hard and leaking. He licked a bead of precum away from the head and then blew over it, watching with delight as it made his Alpha squirm. "Patience is a virtue," he reminded him.

Tony's body tensed as Steve's mouth roamed over it; he let out a mewl of longing when Steve's tongue finally dragged over the tip of his erection. Steve's breath ghosted over the moist skin and he arched, aching for more contact with his tongue; Steve was nuzzling his thigh, though, teasing
Steve was very much aroused himself by this point, to the extent where his running shorts were probably wet at the back. He nosed along the inside of Tony's thigh then nipped lightly at the skin there. "If you want something," he said, voice deceptively sweet. "You should ask for it."

"...I want you to put it in your mouth," groaned Tony, fingers flexing at his sides, quivering with anticipation. "Please, Steve, oh, please..." He arched again, seeking relief. It wasn't just the memory of Steve's velvety tongue on his skin; it was the smell of him. Steve was enjoying himself and it made Tony melt to know his omega was aroused by him.

Steve smiled against him when Tony finally said please. He hummed in approval. "That's more like it," he murmured and then he moved to take Tony into his mouth. He sucked around the head, swirling with his tongue before he ducked down lower till the head nudged the back of his mouth. He watched Tony's reaction intently, taking in his every shudder and sound, before he moved to bob his head.

Tony groaned approvingly when Steve acquiesced his request, wriggling with pleasure at the feeling of his mouth.

He sank up and down a few times before he pulled off again. "Stay," he told Tony and then disappeared from above him.

When Steve moved off him and then commanded him, Tony felt hints of both embarrassment and arousal. But he obeyed and he was glad he did when he was rewarded a moment later: a moment later Steve had returned, naked, thighs shiny and cheeks pink. He moved to straddle Tony, gripping the base of his erection as he lined himself up and then sank down.

Steve sighed in relief as he bottomed out, giving his body exactly what it needed. "Fuck," he whispered, grinding his hips down and drawing Tony in deeper.

"Oh... Steve..." moaned Tony, reached out to his hands on his hips. He looked up, heavy-lidded, at his omega, and smiled. "Ride it?" he suggested hopefully, writhing under Steve. He could feel the strain of his knot against Steve's body, and the wetness of his body; his muscles were all taut with sexual tension.

Steve gently moved to take Tony's hands and pin them under his head easily with one hand. He didn't squeeze. Tony could easily pull away if he wanted to. His other hand he braced by Tony's head, getting purchase and ready to ride. He rocked his hips down once, Tony's knot teasing at the edge of his hole but he hadn't taken him all in just yet.

Tony tensed a little more when Steve grabbed his hands; his breath caught.

For years he'd passed off his reluctance to shake hands or take things from people as just another eccentricity of an over-confident billionaire, but that wasn't it. He didn't like people touching his hands. He and Steve held hands often and it was fine, but this was different. They were having sex and Steve was pinning him like he was an omega, and it felt... wrong.

But Steve's grip was loose and Steve offered no resistance when Tony pulled his hands away; the soldier was kissing his lips and his jaw and Tony felt his body tightened a little around his member, and he felt a confusing mix of delight paired with panic. His hips twitched involuntarily up into Steve, wanting to drive his knot into him.

Steve leaned down to nip Tony's bottom lip and then kissed along the edge of his jaw, the
movements of his mouth slow. "What's the magic word?" he asked softly in his Alpha's ear, squeezing around the cock inside of him.

"...please," said Tony quickly, hoarsely. He was good at compartmentalizing; he didn't want to talk about the hand thing, not now, not while he was still hard and buried into Steve. Actually, he didn't ever really want to talk about it. He just wanted to fuck his omega and then go get lunch. He put his hands back at his sides, fingers flexing; he could still feel where Steve had touched him and pinned him.

Was it worse or better to be pinned by an omega? Hard to say. Steve had been gentle but Tony was well aware that Steve was bigger than him, stronger; that he could be easily overpowered by Steve, despite Steve's status.

Despite his panic, his knot wasn't subsiding. The tantalizing wetness of Steve's hole pressing against it was delicious. He was still squirming under him, moving his hips, waiting for Steve to ride him.

"It's okay," Steve whispered, soothing a hand down Tony's side as he kissed the corner of his mouth. He felt the spike of panic then felt it slowly subside. The game they were playing was over and now this was just about each other. Steve kissed his bottom lip and then sat up properly, rocking his hips down until Tony's knot squeezed inside. He moaned, eyes rolling back, at the stretch. Steve shuddered as he took a moment to adjust to it.

Tony let out a deep sigh of satisfaction when Steve sat up and took his knot. He looked up at Steve, studying his omega's face. He found peace there; the sense of comfort, of being home with Steve, was so strong that Tony could sink into it, let his chase away his phobias, at least temporarily.

Steve didn't ride him like he had in the bath. Steve didn't want to break the table, or any of Tony's equipment. Or Tony. He kept the pace steady and thorough, rising up and down in a slow but firm rhythm. He moaned quietly from the back of his throat as he bottomed out yet again, cheeks not flushed from his run anymore.

Tony closed his eyes again, a slow smile of pleasure spreading across his face, arching his hips into Steve, letting his body be used and pressed into the counter over and over again. Even now, even in the throes of passion (Steve's face was flushed and his muscles were popping), Steve was still conscious of his weight and size; his actions were deliberate, not too rough, and Tony felt a surge of affection that had nothing to do with sex. He'd always been a selfish lover and expected the same from his partners. Seeing Steve acting so consciously, so careful not to hurt him... it engendered in Tony a rare sense of trust in another human being.

"Steve," he whispered longingly, reaching out to grab the blond's hips and wriggle into him. He didn't know how it was for omegas-- no knot-- but for him, it was hard not to cum immediately once he'd gotten the knot into Steve. "Wanna cum. ... please," he added, with a small smile.

Steve's eyes fluttered open and he looked down at Tony at the sound of his name. The look on his face was heady and blissful, his lips parted a fraction. "I'm not stopping you," he assured him, aroused by the way the word please left Tony's lips. He clenched around him in confirmation, aiming his hips down just right so Tony's cock grazed against his prostate. He moaned loudly.

Steve's own cock was hard and leaking where it was curved against his abdomen. His thighs worked easily as he rode Tony with abandon, fucking himself down a little harder to bring Tony to release.
"It's okay. Come on Tony, fill me up." He threw his head back. "You always do it so good..."

Tony moaned at Steve's encouragement and shoved himself into his omega, hips stuttering. Hearing Steve ask for it and encourage him was all he needed. His fingers dug into the flesh of Steve's hips; he could feel Steve gasping and twitching on top of him as he hit his prostate.

"Omega..." purred Tony as he rode out of his orgasm. "Oh... oh, omega... mmmm.. there you go..."

He cracked open an eye to watch Steve's reaction to his orgasm. The expression on his face was one of ecstasy.

Steve gasped as he was filled and ground down. Tony's cock teased his prostate just that little bit more and dragged him over the edge. He squirmed and clenched around his Alpha's member and then came, a silent gasp leaving his lips as he made a mess out of both of them. It was satisfying and dirty. Steve really needed a shower but he was content to bask in the moment right now.

He slumped down, leaning his head against Tony's shoulder, the pose itself a startling reflection of the extent of his flexibility.

And then Steve laughed. It was a happy, amused sound. "I just realised..." He wheezed a little. "We forgot to use protection. Oh my God, we're so bad at this."

Tony laughed breathlessly, hands stroking Steve's back as his omega draped over him. "Not again. Oh, geez. Okay, I'm serious, I'll get snipped again, just to make sure, okay... but it's the very end of our honeymoon, we're probably good, right?" He reached up to take Steve's chin and tilt his head so he could kiss his forehead. "I love you so much, omega. So, so much." A pause while Tony basked in the afterglow. "...don't touch my wrists, though, 'k?" he added with forced casualness, one hand still petting Steve's back. He kissed his forehead again.

He still had every intention of going to lunch before going down to Pendleton to test out SHIELD's fancy little brain-scrambler, but he could feel that they weren't going anywhere for at least fifteen or twenty minutes; his knot was still throbbing and Steve's body was tight around it.

"Love you too," Steve hummed and nuzzled against his cheek. He frowned a little, more to himself than anything else. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Let me know if there's ever anything else you don't like."

"Like didn't feel like a serious enough word but Steve didn't think Tony wanted this conversation to get serious. Especially not whilst they were still stuck together.

Steve didn't need to be told to be able to guess what it was about. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know either. He only did if Tony wanted to tell him, he decided.

"It's the end of the honeymoon, yeah. We're probably fine," he hummed. "Don't worry about it right now."

"Steve, I've never worried about a thing in my life," said Tony lazily with a wave of his hand. He put his arms around Steve and relaxed with a sigh. Knotting was strangely intimate. It should have felt weird and gross to be stuck like his, covered in semen, but for some reason, it always made Tony sleepy instead. Biology is kind of stupid, he thought idly. There wasn't any logic to it, not as far as he could tell, not in the way there was with mechanics. But that was okay. With Steve, Tony didn't feel especially self-conscious.

He closed his eyes, not planning to nap, just to rest until they could get cleaned up. It was easy to relax; the way Steve didn't ever press him, let him keep his secrets... he loved his omega for that. It made sense, he guessed. Steve had his own dark places; he was a war veteran, and he'd grown
up in a time when violence and abuse toward omegas was normal, and he'd had the whole
drowning-and-then-coming-back thing. They each had their mental battle scars. It made Tony feel
safe, knowing that Steve understood and wouldn't push him. After Afghanistan, that was one of
the worst parts of sleeping around. The women who tried to get him to "open up," who wanted
him to talk to them, wanted to be special, have Tony Stark confide in them and seek comfort in
them. Tony had hated those women the most. The closest he'd ever come to talking about what
happened was with Pepper, who took his cues and never pushed. But the topic had never really
been broached. They had maintained a level of professionalism that was so solid, Tony had never
figured out how to crack through it completely. With Steve, it was the opposite; ever since they'd
bonded, Tony felt almost like Steve was an extension of himself. The only reason he didn't share
things with Steve was because he, personally, didn't want to think about them. But if he'd been
able to confront his demons on his own, he certainly would have felt comfortable sharing it with
Steve. Steve was rock solid, steady, unwavering. A source of strength and comfort and
understanding. Bonding had created a vulnerability, yes, but in a way, it had also made Tony feel a
lot more powerful.

After about ten minutes Tony softened inside of him. Steve sat up and pulled away with a quiet
whine, neither a pleased nor happy sound. He leaned over to steal a quick kiss before slipping back
down onto the floor, offering Tony to help him find his footing too. "I'm gonna need to shower
before we go," he said with a gentle laugh as he looked down at himself. It wasn't just the run; he
was now messy from both his and Tony's release.

They ended up crowding into the shower, sharing lazy kisses whilst they rid themselves of any
evidence of what had happened moments before.

Tony let Steve pull him into the shower and happily made out with him while the water coursed
down his body, rinsing off their body fluids. His hands roamed over Steve's body and his tongue
explored his mouth; actual washing was an afterthought. Any actual washing occurred was mostly
thanks to Steve's attention.

It was Steve who broke away and stepped out first, knowing Tony lacked the self-control to do so.
Tony sighed loudly with disappointment, but he followed, grabbing Steve a towel and watching
him wrap it around his waist, studying the broadness of his shoulders and the outline of his pecs,
his abs. He was almost disappointed when Steve began dressing. Almost. But seeing Steve's
clothes mixed into his closet was thrilling by itself.

He tore his attention away from Steve to put in his contacts and give his beard a brief trim. Tony's
vision was good, good enough that he didn't necessarily need contacts, but he still preferred him.
More than half the designer sunglasses scattered all over the house were prescription. Being with
Steve, his goatee had lost a lot of its shape because he kept forgetting to shave. He cleaned up the
 corners a little, making sure it was even before moving on to his hair.

With the towel hung low around his hips Steve searched through his new clothes, which had
mysteriously found their way into a wardrobe. Seriously, were the maids invisible or something?
He settled with jeans, a blue shirt and a black sweater. Smart but casual.

"You ready to go?" he asked Tony as he glanced over to see his Alpha fixing his hair. Steve walked
up behind him and kissed him on the cheek. "You look good."

"Perfection isn't easy, Steve," said Tony seriously, carefully applying gel to his hair. "I'm not
going to go down to Pendleton looking like a slob. ...you wanna drive?" he added, glancing behind
him with a devilish grin. "I've got a nine hundred horsepower car with your name on it downstairs.
What did you drive in the forties, a buggy or something? There's a McLaren downstairs that can do zero to sixty in less than three seconds. It's fun as hell."

He turned and looked over Steve with a hum of approval. Steve always dressed pretty smartly. Forties sensibilities, he supposed.

"I never really drove cars all that much. It was either my bike or a tank or a rover," Steve admitted a little sheepishly. He grabbed a jacket as Tony busied himself with a wipe, getting the gel off of his fingertips. Steve slid it over his shoulders. It fit just right. How did JARVIS even....?

"Where are we going for lunch?" Steve asked as they headed down to the garage. He only knew which car they were taking because Tony walked towards it. He followed at his heels, not sure if he'd be driving. He was sure he could manage a car- maybe he wouldn't take it to full speed though.

"Back in the forties we weren't allowed to drive without a special license, you know," he filled in quietly as they stopped by the car.

Steve could still remember the first time they let him go a bike. The way the wind had whipped through his hair and stung at his knuckles as he'd gone way too fast. He'd loved it. They never bothered with a license for him once he was in the Howlies. No one cared if an omega drove a car through Nazi-occupied, war-torn France. Yet another thing Steve had loved about the army.

"...I knew that," said Tony quietly, offering Steve the key fob. History had never been his best subject but he knew how few rights omegas had had a century ago.

Steve looked confused by the key and Tony realized he'd never driven a modern car. Steve got around on a motorcycle, a Triumph, and those hadn't changed much. Cars were another matter.

"...the fob unlocks it remotely. It's, uh, it's push to start, there's just a button inside. There's a chip in the fob," explained Tony, showing him which button to press. The car chirped and lit up as he unlocked it. "Trust me, it's fun, this thing is a beast, Steve. Ceramic-carbon brakes. Sixty to zero in thirty meters... you pull about two G's if you brake this bad boy all the way. You can get it up to 150 in ten seconds!"

Tony was getting his usual gooey look he got when he talked machines. He ran a hand over the spoiler with a loving caress, then grabbed the fob and pushed. The doors opened upward instead of out, Tony slumped into the passenger's seat with a grin. "C'mon! It's 2010, Steve. No special licenses for omegas anymore. You're free to drive McLarens and Bugattis and Teslas and Lambos and Astons. My toys are your toys. Now let's go, I'm hungry."

He watched impatiently as Steve climbed into the driver's seat and pushed it back. One of the few disadvantages to the supercar was that it was not really designed for a person of Steve's size; it was low to the ground, streamlined, modeled to Formula One specs. Steve had to duck to climb in.

Okay... so, yeah. The car was kind of amazing. The engine trembled in the car's body just right and it almost made Steve's hands shake with excitement as he backed it up and then slowly guided it out of the garage. took a turn. He understood why Tony was so excited now. Steve wanted to see how fast it could really go; he wanted to feel that rush. (He'd always been a bit of an adrenaline junkie.) But he was cautious as he pulled out of the estate and turned onto the highway; Captain America couldn't be caught for speeding.

But if Steve took his corners a little sharper than he needed to, well, he could just blame it on lack of experience. Nothing would ever get harder than driving a tank. Steve's long artist's fingers
moved over the curve of the wheel easily. He felt more at ease than he'd expected to. Maybe that was because Tony was right beside him. Or maybe it was how much more responsive cars in 2010 were than they had been in 1945.

Tony beamed at Steve. Steve's hesitation disappeared the moment they were on the highway. Tony pulled out his phone to looked up a restaurant; he directed Steve, taking them on a slightly longer route because Steve was clearly enjoying himself. The car hugged the curves in the road easily; Tony noted that Steve didn't take it over eighty, but he suspected it had more to do with Steve being the kind of guy that respected speed limits as opposed to any sort of real discomfort.

With some directions from Tony, Steve got them to the restaurant. It was more or less due south; the ocean was on their right and it was a magnificent sight. The restaurant was right on the coast and offered a spectacular view of it. They didn't have reservations, but considering who they were, they didn't really need any. They slipped into the parking lot of a small Italian place. Tony got out and watched as Steve fumbled with the fob to lock the car. Steve might never be completely at home in this century, but he was learning.

Tony hooked his arm with Steve and they strolled into the restaurant together. The waiter at the door gaped a little when he saw them before quickly collecting himself.

"A table for two?" he asked, gaze darting between the both of them. Back in the forties he wouldn't have even looked at Steve; he would have simply asked Tony. And Tony would have ordered his dinner for him too, and his drinks.

"Please," Steve hummed with a nod and a winning smile.

Tony gave him a sideways glance. Steve looked happy but strangely nostalgic as the host led them to a table; Tony wasn't sure why. Sometimes Steve acted like normal things, such as a waiter being polite to him, actually meant something. Waiters were polite to everyone, weren't they? They were paid to be that way, but Steve clearly felt that it was important for some reason.

They were seated at a table for two by the window, overlooking coast. Tony immediately ordered a bottle of wine; Steve was driving, after all.

There was the sound of a shutter click from across the room. The waiter brought them a bottle of wine and had the discretion to leave without making a sound, giving them some privacy, although the idea of "privacy" was laughable. Tony was not a discreet person, and for that matter, neither was Steve.

"So I guess this is the last I can eat or drink until tonight, huh?" Tony said, putting an elbow on the table and looking out the window. A couple that was exiting had stopped to admire Tony's car; Tony watched the man circle it while his partner (girlfriend? wife? omega?) waited impatiently. Tony looked back over at Steve; he was examining the key fob in his hands. "Listen, I know this isn't your home," said Tony, suddenly. "I know everything is weird for you, but I hope you can learn to love my time as a sort of... second home. It's a good place to be in. Even with all the bad things that happen in it. I mean, we're not perfect, but we're getting better. I think. Y'know, two steps forward, one step back--"

Before Steve could respond, someone was hovering by the table. "Hey, aren't you Iron Man?"

"Guilty as charged!" said Tony, his sincere look toward Steve evaporating. It was like a mask came down. His look was suddenly one of smug confidence, power, energy... but not love.

"I'm sorry to bother you, I just... can I get a picture?" said the girl who was hovering at their table.
She was an Alpha; she didn't look at Steve.

"Sure, why not?" said Tony as she pulled out her phone. "Oh, good, a selfie, I love selfies... say world peace..."

"World peace!" they both exclaimed, throwing up a peace sign.

The woman was bonded, but even if she were single, Tony would not have felt threatened. His jealousy was ebbing a lot. Having a proper honeymoon in his own house, getting to mate Steve over and over... he felt secure. A lot more secure. Their bond had solidified over the last week and Tony felt a lot more rational and less emotional than he had at the very beginning. Thank Tesla.

The idea of being so out of control for his whole life was extremely unpleasant. It was nice to be around Steve in public without his hackles rising at every time another Alpha interacted with them.

"I just... I think you are so cool..." she continued.

"Yes, thank you, I am," agreed Tony.

"...can I have your autograph?"

"Sure, why not... who'm I making this out to..."

"Kelsey?"

"Is that with a y or an ie? Too late, I'm writing it like this..."

Tony was used to this. He'd been famous before, but now he was Iron Man; he hadn't been able to go out without people coming up to him.

Steve was ignored. She spared him a glance while Tony gave her an autograph, then left.

"...sorry. What was I saying? Oh right! My century! ...I hope you, y'know, like it here. Even though it's probably weird for you," said Tony, nodding. He looked back out the window to check on the car. The couple that had been ogling it earlier was replaced by a waiter on his break. Tony hoped he didn't touch it. He looked like he was thinking of touching it.

Some things never change, thought Steve.

Steve's mind drifted back to a conversation with Aria. She hadn't seemed to want to comment much on Steve's bond but Steve had asked her, several times, her thoughts, and finally, she'd caved.

"You know... having an Alpha, probably not a good game plan right now. Look, I know you didn't plan this but--"

"But what?" Steve had asked, a frown on his features.

"He's going to steal your limelight Steve. He'll always be there. Sure, you're the Cap. People love you, more than they'll ever love Tony, no offense intended. But he's famous. You're like a myth. A legend. Not a person. Unless you cause a stir you won't hit headlines. The attention is always automatically going to be on your mate first, then you second. It sucks. But it's how it is. I know I'm not an omega, but I've had plenty of them as clients and it's always the same. Once they mate... it's a tether. Sometimes it lifts you up, sometimes it weighs you down. But sometimes, it just means you don't exist at all. You become invisible."

Steve knew what feeling invisible felt like.
"I think I can find home here." He hoped he already had. "But, I don't want to rush it... you know? I haven't even been awake six months, Tony," Steve pointed out. It felt strange to say it. So much had happened in such a short space of time. And he'd already mated and moved in with his Alpha and even driven a supercar.

Jesus, Sarah Rogers would *kill* him if she were still alive.

"Hey," he suddenly piped up. "Would you, er... like to come visit Peggy with me, sometime? Like, no pressure obviously. It's just...if you wanted to."

"Uh... sure. Yeah, sure," said Tony, nodding. He didn't feel like explaining to Steve how awkward it would be to try to reconnect with Aunt Peggy after all this time. She had been a friend of Howard's, and Jarvis's, too, and Tony hadn't spoken to her in... shit, about twenty years. It would just be too awkward. But it was hard to say no to Steve when Steve seemed like he was in such a great mood. "...you and her, you were close, right? ...you think she'll be happy you're bonded? Have you talked to her? Does she know yet? I guess everyone knows. Have you talked to her?" asked Tony. He had taken it for granted that Steve didn't really have anyone in his life. Tony had no parents he had to impress, no siblings or old childhood friends who were protective of Steve. There was the threat of Bucky, of course, but Tony wasn't especially scared of a guy who, even if he was alive, was well into his nineties and undoubtedly mentally compromised. Amnesiac centenarians were the least of Tony's problems.

But Peggy fit the bill. She was one of Steve's few links to the past and her approval actually meant something. Tony wondered if being Howard Stark's son was a good thing or a bad thing. Peggy and Howard had worked together in the forties and fifties, and by all accounts, Howard had been something of a reckless lady killer back then. Tony didn't want Peggy to think he was fucking around with Steve. Surely she'd understand, as an Alpha, that Tony's commitment to Steve was just that: a commitment.

Ah, the dread "c" word. Tony downed his glass of wine and poured another.

"*You do* know the first unit takes two hours to wear off," said Steve disapprovingly.

"Unit of what?" asked Tony as he sipped his wine.

"And then an hour after that for each one," Steve told him, watching as Tony decimated their bottle of wine. After a third he would still be under influence during the simulation, which really wasn't ideal. It ran off the sub-conscious and a drunk sub-conscious was a stressful thing to be stuck in, surely?

Also, should Tony really be drinking so much while people were photographing them? He kept hearing shutter clicks in other parts of the restaurant.

Steve was a little self-conscious about photos being taken but he also could never tell what people were doing on their phones. Maybe the clicking noises weren't a camera shutter. Maybe they were just playing... what was it? Candy crush?

"Okay, okay, I'll slow down," grumbled Tony, who had no real intention of doing so. "So. You and Au-- Agent Carter. You were telling me about how you guys were close?"

"Peggy and me were... I don't know. It was the middle of a war. We never got time to figure it out. And now she's eighty-nine and I'm still in my twenties." It felt so weird to say it out loud. Peggy had lived her entire life while Steve had just been... sleeping. "Anyway, sometimes she's kind of out of it. She recognizes me, though, usually. And she knows we're bonded. I'm sure she'll be happy
to see you. She does mention Howard sometimes." He grimaced a little. "We, uh, kissed once."

Tony knocked over his wine. "You kissed my dad?" he repeated, horrified.

"No, Peggy!" said Steve hastily, grabbing a napkin and shoving it at Tony. "I kissed Peggy, right before I-- before I went on the worst plane trip of my life. It was nice, to have that." While he was dying... "...but, y'know, now we're just friends, and of course she wants me to be happy. She was bonded, had a career, the whole package. She wants that for me, too. To have a real life, like that, like how she and all of my other friends did."

Somewhere across the restaurant, a phone's camera clicked. Tony didn't hear it. He heard that noise everywhere he went and he'd long since learned to filter it out.

"You know, Steve, speaking about Au-- I mean, Agent Carter, I was thinking. About SHIELD. You know, part of the reason it's weird for me to join is, I don't want to just follow in my dad's footsteps. Sometimes I feel like I don't have a lot of... control over my life. Like, it seems like I keep getting dragged into things he was involved with. The company, and now SHIELD..." He shrugged a little.

"Hey." Steve reached across the table and brushed his fingers against Tony's. "You're not 'following in his footsteps.' I know I didn't know your dad all that well, but being something like Iron Man, and what that represents, that's not him. That's you, Tony."


Steve glanced up at a bit of movement in the periphery of his vision. The waiter. Oh right. restaurant.

"Lobster, mushroom risotto, Caesar salad, and go ahead and grab one more bottle of wine," instructed Tony, who hadn't even looked at the menu. He turned to Steve. "Steve?"

Steve ordered the tagliatelle, meatballs and something to do with mozzarella. That and a mocktail that the waiter would apparently make up himself and promised would be delicious.

He sighed as he glanced back over to Tony. "You do realize that if you drink this much we literally can't do the simulation, right? You won't get a practice run. It's not safe."

"What, two bottles of wine? That's nothing, Steve, c'mon, this is white wine, for cryin' out loud. I'm eating food with it. ...are you serious?" Tony sulked a little. He was pretty sure Steve was being over-dramatic. Steve was someone who clearly had some issue with alcohol; he'd just ordered a mocktail unironically.

Steve was still giving him that serious, concerned, "I'm the Captain" look. Tony heaved a miserable sigh and snapped his fingers at the waiter.

"...cancel the wine," he mumbled begrudgingly, glaring at Steve a little. He would just have to make up for it after the simulation.

"Hi, Tony Stark?"

Tony looked up. A young man was shifting his weight, a nervous, excited smile on his face. Another Alpha. Tony suddenly realized that he'd never actually seen an omega at this place, except with an Alpha. Shit. Had he dragged Steve to one of those places where it was casually Alpha-only? There were laws against discrimination, but often, upperclass places drew an Alphacentric clientele and it became a sort of unsaid rule that omegas were expected to stay away. And
"Hi. Sorry. I'm a huge fan. Sorry, you probably get that all the time, it's just that I'm a huge fan. Can I shake your hand?"

"Absolutely not," said Tony immediately, putting his hands in his lap like the man might try to grab one of them.

The young man was unfazed. "Wow, I just... I can't believe you're here, you're like my hero, I mean, even before Iron Man, but then, when you came back from Afghanistan--" A muscle in Tony's jaw jumped but his face remained fixed. "--I was just, completely blown away, like, wow, you know, Iron Man, like... wow."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," said Tony with a hint of sarcasm.

"Can I take your picture? No one will believe I met you."

"Yeah, sure."

"Do you mind?" The young man offered his phone to Steve. He and Tony both threw up Tony's signature peace sign. There was a pause.


Something hit Steve. It was when the guy handed him his phone and didn't look at his face. The newspapers all made it sound like he'd been received by everyone- not necessarily received well, but he'd been noticed. But Alphas didn't notice him, not around Tony, anyway. It didn't matter that he'd fought in the war, served his country, any of that shit. He was just Tony Stark's omegas and he was apparently here to take pictures.

*You'll be invisible.* Aria's words rang in his head like an alarm. Steve never really thought he was someone who liked attention but he definitely disliked being ignored more.

"Wow, thanks. I mean-- wow, Tony Stark! Hey, can I ask you a question, when you're in the suit--"

"I will pay you a thousand dollars and sign an autograph if you leave me alone now," said Tony.

"Oh! Oh, yeah, sure, sorry, yeah... can you sign my phone, it's a Stark phone--"

Tony accepted a marker and plucked the phone from Steve's hands, signing the back.

"Wow... thanks, I mean... I'm seriously such a big fan, you are so cool... sorry, thanks!" He backed away.

Tony turned back to Steve, smiling, but it no longer reached his eyes. "The fan club is relentless," he reported, reaching for the glass of wine. He took a long draw on it without any pretense; he was drinking for the alcohol, not the taste. He didn't think he needed to point out to Steve that this was exactly why he needed to drink. He hadn't had a meal in peace in years.

The waiter came by and placed a salad in front of them; Tony unfurled a napkin (the waiter has replaced the one Tony had drenched earlier), placed it on his lap, and proceeded to pick at the food, uninterested, chasing leaves of arugula around the plate with his fork without actually eating anything.
"It wouldn't be so bad if they just wouldn't bring it up every single time," said Tony suddenly. "It's like... no one appreciates that that was a near-death experience. They all wanna know what it was like and I can't say, well, it was fucking terrifying, it was one of the worst experiences of my life. I've got to always, you know, act like it wasn't a big deal, laugh it off. I told people it was humbling. Isn't that the bullshittiest sound bite you ever heard in your life, Steve? Humbling! Talk about making the understatement of the century." He heaved a sigh, looked up, seemed to realize something, and suddenly the mask was back up.

He smiled and poured the last bit of the wine into his glass; the bottle hadn't even made it to the main course. "Well. What can I say, I'm a hero, people love me. I'll tough it out, somehow." He laughed lightly.

"I get it," said Steve sincerely. "I never really understand why you're all obsessed with the wars in this century. Everyone romanticizes it. What's romantic about millions of people going to die? None of the soldiers want to be there, not really, but everyone shoots anyway, just because they're scared of what might happen if they don't."

"You wanted to be there," pointed out Tony.

Steve smiled a little. "Well, yeah, but I didn't want to shoot anyone. I didn't romanticize it. ...my point is, people nowadays glorify my war. War World II. And they're doing the same to you, about Afghanistan. And I'm sorry."

"Whatever," said Tony dismissively.

"Oh. And I just took a picture of me pulling an unimpressed face instead of one of you two. Thought you might appreciate that," Steve said, bringing his drink to his lips with a glint of mischief in his blue eyes.

Tony's goatee twitched in a smile. "You know how to flip the screen?"

"Yeah. Figured it out a week or two ago. I can take selfies and everything now," said Steve.

Tony laughed a little. "That's another thing I like about you," he said softly. "You never heard of me, because you're from, y'know, another time. So... I get to be myself. There's no preconceived notions. You know, most people have heard of me, they have expectations... with you, I get the experience of starting from nothing and... that's kinda cool."

Steve nodded in agreement. There was a natural lull in the conversation. "So... out of curiosity, are most of your fans Alphas? Or this just a coincidence?"

Tony considered Steve's question "Well... the thing is... weapon designing, it kind of draws Alphas. I never thought about it. Yeah. I guess most of my fans are Alphas. That's not my fault, though. I mean, most of your fans are omegas. I guess we get fans based on what people relate to. I mean, don't know what it's like to have heats."

"But that's a problem. You can't facilitate change from just a small, insular group. Without some beta and Alpha support I'm never going to get anywhere." It was depressing to say it but it was also very true. Steve sighed. "I need to find a way to make everyone understand, you know?"

"I didn't even notice all my fans were Alphas until you pointed it out. I work with Alphas, I went to basically an all-Alpha school... I just... never noticed. Because, y'know, they were all like me." Tony shrugged a little. He couldn't even begin to imagine what life for Steve was like after the serum. Being an omega in an Alpha-dominated sector of society, the military... looking like an
Alpha but smelling like an omega... it must have been hard. Hard in a way Tony would never fully be able to relate to.

It also occurred to him that Steve's words about war being awful were the words of a seasoned soldier, one who had actually fought and killed and been shot at.

He decided to change the subject.

"I think I mentioned this song, uh, War Pigs? It's by Black Sabbath. They're a band? You might like it. The lyrics anyway, I don't know about the style. The lyrics are about what you said, about people romanticizing war. That was the first song I ever learned to play. We can listen to their album in the car; Paranoid's the best one. Their lead guitarist played left-handed 'cause he lost two of his fingers on the right hand. They basically invented modern metal."

Tony went back to his salad, actually eating it now, relaxing a bit. No one else came up to them, but there was still the occasional click of a camera phone and, in one particularly irritating moment, a flash.

"I'm going to pretend I know what metal music is," Steve said, a half smile on his lips before he polished off a piece of garlic, licking the butter off off of his fingers.

Steve's phone (replaced by courtesy of Tony) buzzed in his pocket. He glanced down. From Aria: check Twitter.

Steve followed the link she sent her. "Are you serious?" He turned the phone around to show Tony and slid it across the table.

It was a picture of them at dinner, probably taken less than half an hour ago. The angle it was taken at clearly showed that, though they had a bottle of wine and Tony's glass was filled, Steve's was untouched.

Cap at a romantic date with his Alpha. But he isn't drinking?! Is he pregnant!!?

"Wow. That was fast," said Tony, looking unconcerned. He pointed a fork at Steve. "Well, Rogers, that's what you get for ordering a mocktail. You're a 92-year-old man, not a sorority sister. ...want to get into a big fake fight and then have me punch you in the stomach just to see what happens?"

He went back to eating, checking his phone briefly to see if they were about to start trending again. Part of him was annoyed by the lack of privacy they were being given, but another part of him saw it as inevitable. They were in a public place, after all, on the very last bit of their honeymoon. Everyone knew what people did during the honeymoon period; it wasn't really that much of a stretch to suspect that Tony had knocked him up. Especially considering his drink order.

"If I can't get drunk I really don't see the point in putting up with the taste of alcohol," Steve said. He'd never liked it all that much. The burn of whiskey had always made him grimace and pull faces before. Omegas weren't expected to drink but Bucky liked to indulge him, and his reaction to hard liquor always made Bucky laugh. Not patronisingly, more in an endeared sort of way...

"I didn't realize this was a romantic date," Tony said suddenly, startling Steve out of his memories. He looked over at Steve and smiled a little. "But I'm okay with it if it is. This is a nice place. I haven't been here in years." He glanced around the room and lowered his voice a little. "...listen, I'm sorry it's mostly Alphas, I seriously didn't notice that. I'm... kinda completely status-blind. My bad. ...but that's sort of good, right? That's our new thing, isn't it, raging against the machine?
That's a reference to another metal song, by the way. Don't worry, Cap, I'm going to school you on all the best music." Tony reached across the table with one hand to touch Steve's. "And I know I'm just one guy but for the record, as far as having Alpha support, you have my support."

"I kind of like the thought of passive-aggressively turning up at all the mostly-Alpha restaurants we possibly can," Steve hummed. There was already a middle-aged Alpha across the room who was shooting him the occasional glare. A traditionalist, probably. No doubt he was broken-hearted to find out Steve was, in fact, an O all along.

Steve brushed his fingers back against Tony's but a small but sure smile. "Your support means more than anyone else's," he murmured and he meant it. Having Tony's support made him feel like this was possible, like he wasn't just being crazy. Like what Steve was asking for was reasonable. Rationally, he knew it was but old forties anxieties still told him he just needed to be put in his place.

Their cute moment was broken when the waiter reappeared to take their plates away. "Can I get you dessert, sirs?"

Tony glanced at Steve. "I'm good," he said. If Steve hadn't been there, he would have ordered more alcohol. But Steve had made it clear that he shouldn't. He figured he could make up for it on their way back from Pendleton. "How 'bout you, Steve?"

He checked his watch surreptitiously. It was still midday; in the McLaren, they could make it to the base in a couple of hours, assuming no traffic. Tony hadn't actually felt especially nervous until now. Now, he was wondering just how bad it would be. He wished he could have one more drink, just to take the edge off. Steve seemed to think that would make things worse, but as far as Tony was concerned, it could only help him to relax.

"I'm good too, thanks," Steve hummed and their waiter nodded, saying he'd return with the bill in a few minutes. Steve reached forward to squeeze Tony's fingers gently.

"Hey. We're not putting any ideas in your head. This is just your sub-conscious, okay? There's not going to be a doctor, or five, triggering any simulations." He could feel how nervous his mate was and he could see it in the way Tony's eyes darted around like a fox. Steve sighed and ran his thumb over the bumps of the engineer's knuckles. "It'll mostly be memories or things you've already thought of. And I can still go in with you, if you want. Either way is fine. It's up to you."

"My subconscious is probably a pretty dark place," admitted Tony softly. He wasn't sure which was worse: Steve on the outside, looking in, or Steve in there with him.

"Everyone's is," Steve replied quietly. "I think that's half the point. They've already seen the best of you, then want to see the worst too."

Tony stood up, pulling out his wallet and throwing down a few bills on the table without looking. "Well, let's get it over with. You're driving," he added. He got a thrill from knowing that it was killing at least a few Alphas to see an omega driving a two-million-dollar supercar.

He didn't exactly consider Natasha a friend but he was looking forward to seeing her. She was gorgeous, and more importantly, she was clearly Steve's friend and Tony wanted her to like him and approve of him on Steve's behalf. He thought back to that picture on the fridge of her and Clint in front of the Washington Monument. Clearly, the three of them had gotten pretty close since Steve was unfrozen. She was a tough nut to crack but Tony had every intention of getting in the "in" group.
As long as she didn't watch the simulation. Tony was already preparing himself for the worst. He couldn't know, not really, what "the worst" was. Afghanistan? Stane? Something from his childhood? ...all three? There were plenty of things he'd never told Steve, things he no longer admitted to himself. Tony's method for coping was to cram everything away and never examine it again. Now they were dragging it all out and... well, who knows, maybe it wouldn't be that bad.

Tony still wished Steve had let him have that second bottle, though.

Steve spotted the Alpha that had been half glaring before as they headed into the parking lot. He was with a beta woman who was petite and at least half his age. He muttered something to his date who didn't reply. Steve unlocked the car (he had the fob thing down now) and winked at the man before he got into his seat. He took the car out a little quicker than he had to. Maybe he was showing off.

Maybe he was making a point.

"For the record. I think it would help if I was in there with you." Steve said as they slipped comfortably into a stream of traffic on a main road. Although Steve soon turned, taking them out of the city and towards the base. He liked getting out of all the chaos and the fumes- even if the base wasn't especially far out. It was something. "It's a very isolating process. You feel so... alone."

"Okay," said Tony, staring moodily out the window. After a moment, he reached over to turn on the radio. Track one: War Pigs.

Tony closed his eyes and leaned into his seat, letting Steve drive. He was trying not to think about the darker parts of his life, as if thinking about them might make them more likely to come out to haunt him later.

He felt at least a little better having read the files of Steve and Nat and Clint and Coulson and a few others. It had been interesting, if not a little confusing.

He must have drifted off because when he opened his eyes a few moments later, a completely different song was playing, the sun was much lower in the sky, and they were pulling into the base. Tony blinked, rubbing his eyes, trying to stretch the stiffness out of his limbs. The wine with lunch had made him groggy; he looked over at Steve questioningly. "...we here already?" A tinge of panic hit him. Already? He'd thought he would have more time. Were they really doing this?

Better to do a test run with Steve than to try it for the first time in front of Fury and all the rest of them, though.

Steve had let Tony fall asleep because he was pretty sure the drive to Camp Pendleton was a straight shot south, and anyways, it was good to see Tony getting some rest. He needed it. He never got enough sleep. Steve often ran on five hours at a time... but that was with the serum. And he wasn't forty, not that he would ever actually pull the age card with Tony. That would be unfair.

"Hey," Steve greeted softly when he saw Tony stir beside him. "Yeah. We're here. We don't have to go in straight away though, I'll just send Nat a text to set things up, okay?" He reached over to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Tony's left ear gently, a tender look in his eyes. He sent the text off quickly and then fixed his attention on Tony who was becoming increasingly worked up. Steve frowned a little.

"We can do this, okay? I know you've got this in you. You're one of the strongest people I know."

Tony looked at Steve, feeling a bit defensive. "Yeah. Sure. Of course I can handle this, it's just a
simulation, right?” he said breezily. Years of feigning confidence in everything had made it second
nature. "Let's just get it over with, seriously, I wan to hurry up so I can go get a drink."

"Just a simulation," Steve agreed quietly, even though they both knew it wasn't quite that simple. Sure- it wasn't real but it still felt like it was. In that moment rationality wasn't a comfort. Steve could still remember being shot and thinking he was going to die. When he woke up he couldn't believe it - it was an echo of when they'd woken him up from the ice. Steve had been trembling and laughing. He hadn't thought the reality he'd woken up to was real. It was a very unsettling thing.

He climbed out of the McLaren, which was getting more than a few loving glances from nearly
every private who was passing by. Steve got a couple of quick salutes, even though he wasn't in
uniform. Tony got a few nods. Even though he wasn't a soldier, he was someone who was both
immediately recognizable and revered. After all, his name was still printed on most of the guns
and missiles used by the military.

Tony stuffed his hands into his pockets, not wanting to hold Steve's. Not because he didn't want to,
but because he didn't want Steve to think he was scared or needed the comfort. Hell, he'd nearly
died like three times in the last thirty days. This was merely a practice test.

The thing was, he wasn't worried about being hurt. He was worried about what Steve would see.
About appearing weak. Steve's words, that he was one of the strongest people Steve knew,
reverberated through his head. They weren't comforting. Quite the opposite. They were an
expectation Tony now had to live up to.

"Lead the way, Cap," he said with fake bravado.

Steve obediently led Tony across the base, pulling his SHIELD ID from his wallet as they
approached the lab. Recognizable or not, getting into the lab required several security checkpoints,
and Steve had to reassure more than one sergeant that Tony was being escorted by him personally
and would not be let out of his sight.

"Hey boys," Natasha greeted them airily as they stepped into the lab's observation room. She was
sat at one of the control panels, typing away at a computer. On the wall across from the door, a
window looked into the simulation room. There was two seats set up, just in case Tony want
company, but one had a fair simpler headpiece. After all, it wasn't Steve's subconscious that they'd
be exploring, it was his Alpha's.

Natasha turned around in her seat to finally face them. Her hair was done up in a tight bun and she
was dressed in all black. She'd had a serious day, Steve figured. "Well," she breathed. "The
machine is ready when you are. I won't be watching but I will be monitoring heart rates and fun
stuff like that, just so I know if things are going a little haywire." Like when Steve thought he'd
been shot. "And you're not pregnant, right? The internet thinks you are."

Steve rolled his eyes. "No Nat, we're fine."

Probably. Ha . Nat didn't need to know about that.

"The Internet thinks a lot of things," said Tony with a wave of his hand. "Both of us are pretty sure
we're infertile, so it's fine."

Natasha frowned without looking away from the computer screen. "It's the word pretty that
worries me."

"Why? You must hear that word all the time, gorgeous," said Tony without skipping a beat.
Natasha glared at him. Tony gave her a cocky grin. In Natasha's presence, Tony's defenses had gone up a little. But he didn't dare show it. He looked thoroughly unconcerned. He gazed around the lab with uncealed curiosity, cataloguing the equipment, mentally judging and assessing the technological prowess of SHIELD. It was decent. Not up to Stark standards, but then, nothing ever was.

"Okay, let's go," said Tony, clapping his hands together. "It's like pulling off a band-aid, right, hook me up, Steve, let's see what my magnificent brain has for us. C'mon, the faster we do this, the sooner it'll be over."

"Thanks for helping us, Nat," said Steve sincerely.

She waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, no problem. Cheating is an honored SHIELD tradition. Nearly everyone tries out one of these subconscious simulations before the psyche test, just so that they know what to expect. You might be the only one trustworthy enough to have gone in blind."

Steve blinked. This was news to him. "Really?"

"Yeah, it was badass," said Natasha. "Most people's first run is the worst. Clint did like three practice runs before--"

"Less talky, more brain-picky," interrupted Tony impatiently.

Tony couldn't control his smell and knew Steve could probably sense his nervousness, but he was trying to keep it under control by thinking all the non-threatening thoughts he could. Tony's primary coping mechanism-- denial-- was in top gear. He was grateful Steve was letting him getting a taste before SHIELD did. If he had any Afghanistan flashbacks in front of Fury, he'd never live it down.

Steve brushed his fingers against Tony's subtlety in a silent form of comfort. Natasha walked past them and propped open the room between the lab and the sim room to start setting up the main chair. "So it's just you going in?" she asked, raising a brow at him in question before her gaze flitted between the two of them. She didn't offer her opinion on the matter itself. She clearly didn't see it as her place to.

"It's up to you Tony," Steve said softly and moved to stand on the other side of the chair. If Tony didn't want him in the simulation then he would be in the room anyway, by his side. But on the actual test day he would pressed up against the other side of the glass - just like Tony had been.

"Get in," Natasha gestured to the chair. "And I'll start hooking you up."

Tony flopped into the chair and kicked out one leg, crossing it over the other one, looking utterly unconcerned. "Sure. Steve can come in if he wants. He's my omega, he already knows kind of everything about me, pretty much," he said. Steve's hovering was easy enough to read. Tony was pretty sure Steve wanted to be there. And, thought he was loathe to admit it, it would help to have someone in there when the going got tough.

Assuming it got tough, that is. Hey, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Tony was pretty confident he'd compartmentalized the worst of it. Maybe it wouldn't come out at all.

"Are you scared of needles?" asked Natasha bluntly.

"Not really, w--" began Tony; she plunged a needle into the brook of his arm. "God damn it, why do you inject me with stuff every time I see you?" he demanded angrily.
"I see you came with your own gel," said Natasha, unwinding the wires for a couple of the electrodes that would go on his head.

"You'd better not mess up my hair," said Tony, rubbing his arm. "How long does this stuff take to kick in?"

"About two minutes."

Tony looked over at Steve in alarm. "That's fast," he said.

"It's intravenous, of course it's fast," said Natasha dismissively. She looked down at Tony's chest and frowned, holding an electrode in one hand. "I'm guessing that thing is going to interfere with this?"

Tony's eyelids were already feeling heavy. "Yeah... it's got... pretty strong... output... electromagnetically..." he said, struggling to stay awake. He looked over at Steve. Sleep was clawing at him, trying to drag him under. "See you soon, Rogers," he slurred quietly.

"Stop fighting it, Stark," commanded Natasha.

"Not... fighting..." mumbled Tony, head lolling.

"Yes, you are. You're still talking. Just relax." She tilted his head back to press another electrode to it.

Tony kept one eye open, but the room was blurring. He put out one hand weakly, groping for Steve's, but his limbs felt so heavy. He wasn't sure whether or not he managed to grab Steve's fingers before darkness fell and just like that, he was unconscious, head dropping onto his chest.

Steve leaned over to kiss Tony's forehead, squeezing his hand before he placed it on the seat beside him. Then he moved to get into his own with Tony's permission. "We need to be quick. He'll be in the simulation before you. Ready to gatecrash?" Natasha said with a faint grin. She readied another needle. "Good honeymoon?" she asked casually as Steve settled into a chair beside Tony's and rolled up his sleeve.

"Great, actually," he hummed and held his arm out straight. Natasha pushed the needle into his arm.

"Awesome," the edge of her lips quirked up in the hint of a genuine smile. "I guess one pro of being with Tony Stark is that he knows what he's doing."

Steve turned red. "Yeah. He's been with lots of girls. But not omegas," he said, perhaps a tiny bit defensively. "And it's not like he knows a damn thing about us. Pretty sure his sex ed was equivalent to mine, actually" Steve pointed out as he settled back, his mind feeling fuzzy. They upped his dose about five times the average to make it work.

Natasha laughed gently. "Hey, no offense meant, Rogers. I'm glad you two are happy."

Steve hummed in agreement as she began attaching a few wires to his head.

"Alrighty. I set the computer up for ten minutes, half of what SHIELD will give him. But remember, it might feel like longer in there. The mind works in funny ways. If I see anything weird going on with his heart, I'll pull you both out right away, alright?"

But Steve didn't really hear her; his eyes were already rolling back in his head.
Tony woke with a start and sat bolt upright. His bedroom was chilly. He checked his wristwatch; it was past eight already. March 15th, 1986. A Saturday. He climbed out of bed and went to look out the window. Sure enough, a thin blanket of snow was lying over the backyard. It must have snowed overnight.

He stretched and grabbed a pair of sweat pants off the floor before loping downstairs.

"JARVIS!" he yelled as he wandered into the kitchen. It echoed through the house. The tiles were cold on his bare feet.

"Good morning, sir," said Jarvis, hurrying in. Tony was digging through the cabinets, his hair sticking up in all directions. "Let me do that, for you, sir, please. Go ahead and sit."

Tony abandoned his search and let Jarvis get a mug for him. "I had the weirdest dream, okay. Oh my God, it was so weird, Captain America was there, but he was an O, and I had this flying robot suit..." It was already starting to fade. "...and my heart was gone and replaced with an arc reactor..." He slid into a bar stool, putting his elbows up on the kitchen island and waiting for his morning coffee. He'd only just discovered Fresh press, which was gross, but was what Stane drank, and Tony liked feeling mature.

Jarvis smiled at him. "When I was your age, I mostly dreamed about girls."

Tony grinned at him. "Well, there was a redhead. No, wait...two redheads," said Tony, struggling to remember while Jarvis made his coffee. "And you were a ghost! ...no, wait... you were.... I don't remember, you were there, though. Where's Mom?"

"She and Ana are down at the stables, sir. I don't think they expected you up for another few hours. I imagine she'll be back shortly."

Tony stretched with a yawn. It was true; he liked sleeping in when he was home from boarding school. Or, now, college. He was in his second semester at MIT. It was fun, being among college kids. Everyone was so mature. Some of the Alphas were already bonded.

He stopped suddenly, mid-yawn, remembering part of the dream. He looked over at Jarvis, trying to get a look at the back of his neck. Damned high collars.

"I dreamed you and Howard were bonded."

"Don't call your father by his first name. It's crass," said Jarvis without missing a beat.
"Are you?"

"Your coffee, sir."

"You're avoiding the question," accused Tony, accepting the mug from Jarvis and sipping it. Bitter as fuck. He winced, wondering how Stane could stand it. "Are you and Dad bonded?"

"Of course not, Tony. We're both dead."

Tony choked on his coffee and looked up, sputtering. Jarvis was wiping down the counter with a look of serenity.

"What did you just say?" he demanded.

Jarvis looked up. As usual, he didn't make eye contact. He looked just below Tony's eyes out of respect. "Nothing, sir."

"No, you just said--"

The doorbell rang. "I'll be right back sir," Jarvis said, head still bowed as he quickly left the room in a tactical exit.

Tony's skin was crawling. Something didn't feel right. But he couldn't put his finger on it. Something was wrong.

When Steve woke up he felt weird. He groaned as he sat up, the floor beneath him smooth. He was in someone's house. But not any house he was familiar with. He frowned and ran a hand over his face. Then Steve blinked and looked at his hand. Sometime felt different, but he looked every bit his skinny self that he normally was. His chest tugged with the effort as he stood on shaky legs, the coat he wore too thin to keep him warm. He didn't need it, not in here. The house was plenty warm. A far cry from the drafty tenement he was familiar with. His back hurt from lying on the hard floor. Of course, it always hurt.

There was a mirror against one wall, but Steve was too short to see himself in it so he couldn't really check himself. He wondered how he got here. Had he been drinking? He had no headache. Bucky would be so mad at him for disappearing like that.

There was a poster on one of the walls. It has CAPTAIN AMERICA: AMERICAN HERO written across the bottom in bold letters and a silly drawing of a soldier-looking type in the middle. He probably wasn't even real. They made up anything for war propaganda these days. The war was still on... wasn't it? Steve frowned again and shrugged the thought away. What a silly thing to ponder. Yeah, of course it was.

There was a shelf in the bedroom lined with trophies for various science awards. The desk was littered with sketches of things Steve didn't understand and little pieces of metal which had presumably been tinkered with.

Steve trailed his fingers over a few of them and felt a sudden urge to draw them. They were geometrically fascinating.

His ma had just gotten him a set of colored pencils for his 18th birthday. She'd had to save up for so long. He'd loved them. They were really good ones, the kind a real artist would--

"Who on earth are you?"
Steve shot straight up at the sound of a voice to see a woman in the doorway. A beta with brown hair and dark eyes. She looked a little stern, especially with the way she was looking at him.

"Jarvis!" she called out. "Jarvis, get here now! There's a thief in Tony's bedroom?"

"A w-what?" Steve stammered. He took a step back, hands up. "M'am I'm not- I'm so sorry. I don't know how I got here!"

Downstairs, Tony was halfway through his coffee when he heard his mother yelling. A thief? In his bedroom?

*Best. Easter break. Ever.*

Excitement seized in his chest and he tore upstairs.

He was almost immediately disappointed. He wasn't sure what he expected, exactly. Something a lot more threatening than some skinny blond breeder. He was expecting a tough Alpha guy in tactical gear waving a gun. This guy practically looked homeless. He peeked over his mother's shoulder; she shooed him back.

"How'd he get in?" he asked curiously.

"Tony, go downstairs. JARVIS!"

"What, are you looking for the open audition for *Newsies*?" asked Tony, looking the kid up and down. He was dressed... weird. In slacks and a button-up shirt and suspenders, like he was going to a costume party as sort of Dickens character. He looked a few years older than Tony, maybe by two or three, but they were the same height and Tony could tell at a glance that this guy probably couldn't win a wrestling match with a well-fed kitten.

"Tony!" snapped Maria warningly. "Downstairs. Now."

"Ma'am?" asked Jarvis, appearing behind them.

"Call the police, there's a thief--"

"--it's my room!" protested Tony, not wanting to miss any of the excitement.

"--Anthony Edward Stark, go downstairs this instant!"

"Mo-o-om."

Jarvis slipped past the two of them and grabbed the other omega by the back of his shirt. "Ma'am, with all due respect, this young man doesn't strike me as much of a threat," said Jarvis gently, pulling the protesting trespasser out of Tony's room and toward the stairs.

Tony couldn't have been more excited by the sudden turn of events. He followed Jarvis, his mother, and the newcomer down the stairs toward the living room. Jarvis deposited him on the couch and turned to Maria. "I'll call the authorities."

Tony beamed at the tiny, sickly, shaking omega on the couch. "How'd you get past the security system? Did you scramble the PIR signal?"

Maria rounded on Tony suddenly. "I thought I told you not to touch the monitors, Tony!"

Tony raised his hands. "I swear, I didn't mess anything up, I just-- okay, I made some minor
adjustments, I rewired a couple of rooms, but not enough for a burglar to get in." He paused. "Unless he's like, a super-genius." He looked the blond up and down. "I don't think he is," he added, sounding almost disappointed.

Steve had no idea what they were talking about. He fought against Jarvis but soon gave in as it became apparent that the older omega was a lot stronger than him. He didn't understand most of what they were talking about. He figured it was because they were rich. His ma always used to say the rich lived different sorts of lives. And you didn't have to be a genius to see that these people were the richest of the rich. Their house was gorgeous, the hall wide and lushly carpeted, with art on the walls and fancy decorations on the shelves. Every room seemed bigger than the apartment he and his ma lived in. Which admittedly was not saying much.

"The authorities?" Steve's eyes flew open wide. "No, please don't- I didn't mean any trouble at all, I swear. Please just call my ma-"

"She's dead," Jarvis said, rounding on him suddenly and Steve blinked. His heart thundered in his chest. "She's been dead since 1936, Steven. Surely you remember your own mother's death?"

"W-what..."

"Excuse me." Jarvis clipped and he was walking over to the telephone, the moment suddenly over. Steve's heart was in his throat.

"Please. Just let me go, I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I swear. Call my Alpha. Call Bucky, he'll come pick me up and I'll never bother you aga--"

"What's all this nonsense about?" Howard's voice rang out into room and everyone fell quiet instantaneously. The moment Howard entered the room, the whole dynamic shifted. Howard's presence was like an elephant's, impossible to ignore. He was older, quite a bit older; his hair and mustache were white but he still had a straight-backed posture and looked fully capable of running a 5K. His age only gave him more of a commanding air, not less. He had a tumbler in his hand, the liquid inside it golden. He took a sip as he sauntered around, eyes landing on Steve.

"There was a thief in Tony's bedroom!" Maria exclaimed.

"I'm not a thief," Steve protested in a mutter, hands balling up into fists in his lap.

Howard's eyes narrowed. "You look familiar. I know you."

Tony spotted the drink in his hand and glared, checking his watch. It wasn't even nine in the morning yet. He felt the back of his neck bristle.

Howard smelled the aggression and turned to look at him. After a beat, he said, "Son, go put a shirt on." He turned back to Steve, examining him. "...where do I know you from..." he murmured softly, eyeing Steve.

Tony didn't move. He had no intention of putting on a shirt; puberty was agreeing nicely with him and he looked pretty damn good, in his opinion. Also, he refused to be ordered around by a drunk.

Also, he was inclined to begrudgingly agree with Howard. The omega in front of them did look kind of familiar. His face, anyway. Tony was already scrolling through an index of omegas in his mind, trying to recall the face of every server and maid and busboy and valet and caddy he might have exchanged words with in the last week. He was home for spring break and he'd interacted with a fair number of omegas at the club. Over the last two years, zeroes had become a source of fascination for him. Something about the way they smelled made him want to show off. Case in
point: he was rather glad that he wasn't wearing a shirt right now.

"I already had Jarvis call the police, he was in Tony's room--" began Maria, eyeing him suspiciously.

Howard looked over at Tony again and pointed with the hand holding his tumbler. "Do you know him? Is this how you're spending your break, dragging home some street zero who's on the crack?"

"First of all, it's just called crack, not the crack," began Tony petulantly.

Almost immediately Maria jumped in. "How does he know about the crack?"

"Just crack, Mom, God! And no one calls it--"

"Haven't you listened to anything Nancy's been saying about drugs, Tony?"

"I'm not on drugs!"

"I knew it, I knew this would happen if he went away to that school, I told you he was too young--"

"Mom, I'm not on drugs! Do I look like I'm on drugs?" demanded Tony, gesturing to his body. He stole a glance at the guy on their couch, hoping that he was drinking in the sight. Granted, the guy on the couch might very well be on "the crack." He was skinny and looked a bit like a junkie. Not that Tony would know. He spent nearly all his time either in the robotics lab or at frat parties.

"Put on a shirt, Tony," demanded Howard, barely glancing at him.

Tony bristled again. Howard turned and stared at him; the stare was unwavering. A true Alpha.

Tony glanced away in submission before he could stop himself. He hated himself for it.

Time to be reckless and stupid.

"Okay, fine, I admit it, he's my friend, he stayed the night," lied Tony. "His name's Nick. He's not on crack, though. He's just a friend."

Maria's hand flew up her to mouth. "Oh, Lord--Tony!"

"He's sixteen, Maria, what did you expect?" said Howard, looking entirely nonplussed. He took a sip of his drink.

"He's just a friend!" Tony hated the idea of them thinking he was gay. He'd gone to an all-boys high school and had never felt a thing for any of his peers. Except maybe Ty, a little bit, right before he'd disappeared. But in Tony's defense, Ty had been an omega.

Ah-ha. Tony suddenly realized what his parents were thinking. It had nothing to do with this guy being male, and everything to do with him being a breeder.

...ew. Tony, like Stane, thought bonding was creepy and gross. It was not something he ever intended to do. Some of the guys at Philips' had had arranged bonds and most of them were not thrilled about it. According to Dan-from-chemistry, he'd never even met his mate; he was expected to have the scenting the day before mating her, in a big public ceremony. "Imagine," he'd said, "trying to bite the back of someone's neck in front of your mom." Tony could not think of anything more mortifying.
But he wasn't about to tell them he was a virgin, either. He'd been at college for a year now. How sad would it be if he admitted he'd only really made one friend and the only social life he had revolved around getting drunk and doing graduate students' homework for them? No, he was already dedicated to this lie. He shot "Nick" a warning look. If "Nick" didn't want to get arrested, he'd better play along. Tony was interested to know how he'd gotten past their home security system, anyway; he'd spent half the week rewiring it for fun and it should have been impenetrable. Clearly, something had gone wrong, if this tweaked out little weirdo had gotten into his room undetected.

As for Steve... he just wanted to go home. He wanted to go back to his ma and eat steaming hot porridge in front of the fireplace. They could never afford to heat it but Steve liked to sit in front of it anyway.

These people were strange and scary and Steve didn't like them. He was slowly curling in on himself. Where the hell was Bucky?Normally, when Steve found himself in a scrap, Bucky came right to the rescue! This was the first time Steve had ever been in a scrap with rich people, and not being able to remember how he'd gotten here was terrifying him.

"A friend," Howard echoed coldly, eyes still on Steve. "Well he's certainly not from your college, just look at him. Where on earth would you find a spade like this, Tony? You haven't been paying for it, have you?"

"Oh, Lord," said Maria, hands flying up to her face.

Steve and Tony both became indignant. "Hey-!"

"He looks homeless," Maria said worriedly.

"I know he looks dead, but that's just a side effect of the cryo," JARVIS supplied in a monotone voice. "Thanks to the serum, he's chock-full of nucleating proteins. The amount of sugar in his blood has kept him from freezing completely solid. We think we'll be able to wake him up in a couple more years. Of course, there's no telling how his mind is, but physically, he should be just fine."

Steve felt a tremble down his spine.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Tony, turning to Jarvis with an eyebrow cocked.

"Nothing, sir," said Jarvis, looking down respectfully.

"So," Howard bent down, toward Steve, ignoring Jarvis's strange outburst completely. "Where did you come from, 'Nick'?"

"I..."

"Well?"

"My ma just died," Steve blurted out and then he suddenly felt sad. Terribly, terribly sad. Wait, had she? Had she died? It wasn't real, was it...? "I didn't have nowhere to stay. I'm s'posed to be with my Alpha, Bucky... I don't know how I even got here."

Tony felt a smug sense of defensiveness at Nick's answer. "He didn't have nowhere to go," he repeated, voice dripping with mock sympathy. He couldn't place the kid's accent. Bronx? Brooklyn? He was already thinking of the omega as "kid" even though he looked maybe three or four years older than Tony.
Howard glared at him. "You can't go one week without stirring up trouble, can you?"

"Didn't realize adopting a zero in need was 'stirring up trouble,'" replied Tony, glaring back, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

"Jarvis, I don't think we'll be needing to call the authorities," murmured Maria quietly, touching his arm.

Jarvis nodded his agreement. "No, ma'am." He made no move to leave and Tony wondered if you could cancel a 911 call like cancelling a pizza. It occurred to him that Jarvis had probably never made the call in the first place. Nick clearly not a threat and undoubtedly Jarvis had a certain sense of unspoken omega solidarity with him.

"So I'm supposed to believe you brought some homeless omega out of the goodness of your heart? Give me a break, Tony, I was sixteen once, too," scoffed Howard. "And I thought I told you to put on a shirt."

"Why should I?" demanded Tony, hackles rising.

"Because you're bleeding all over the damn carpet!"

Tony looked down and his heart nearly stopped. There was a bandage around his chest, stained brown, blooms of blood around the edges, and trailing from it, wires--

--someone was speaking--

"...we call them the walking dead."

Tony's heart was hammering, every beat dragging him closer to death; he was sitting on a cot, clutching a car battery to his chest, shivering; he could see his breath; he was trying to figure out how the hell he'd gotten here. His memories were a confused jumble.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to orient himself. He remembered the world in a series of snapshots: blood staining a tuft of dry grass, the glassy unblinking eyes of a driver, whose body lay limp in the rocky soil like a scarecrow, the shiny casings of bullets glinting in the sun. This wasn't war as he'd imagined it, as he'd pictured it from hearing his father and Obadiah talk about it; this was the type of war photojournalists and angry protesters talked about, the kind he assumed was rare and probably over-hyped. This was real war, gritty, loud, overwhelming, and he wanted to grasp at the things he understood, things that reminded him of his safer, luxurious reality that wasn't supposed to ever overlap with this hellscape of limp bodies and bloody sand and barking gunfire.

Another sudden memory. For a split second, Tony felt like laughing. It had literally had his name on it. It had been a sleek, matte black, a rocket whose only identification was his own crisp, white name: STARK. But he didn't need any identification to recognize it. It was one of a series of short-range explosives with a small blast radius, a line Tony had glibly named "The Delegates."

His own fucking missile had done this to him.

"I'm-- I'm going to die," he announced, shaking uncontrollably. His chest was searing with pain. "I'm going to die!" he repeated, voice higher. "Oh God, I'm going to die, I'm going to die, oh God-..." His panic was making the pain worse. It was excruciating; he wanted to vomit; there was the smell of something burning, something meaty, something that made his mouth water. Tony realized it was coming from him and his stomach flipped; he squeezed his eyes shut tighter, shuddering, wrapped around the car battery, the one whose wires disappeared into the stained
bandage around his chest.

There were two other people here, a soldier and a civilian. The civilian was a beta, and the soldier was, inexplicably, an omega, and Tony felt like he'd met both of them before but he didn't know under what circumstances because he didn't make a habit of hanging out in the Middle East much. He doubted he'd be able to recognize his own mother in his current condition.

Steve had woken up in a desert. He was in his old uniform, still crumpled from sea water and frost - although the latter was quickly melting away. How the hell did he end up here? He'd drowned, hadn't he? Had God done this? Had he been saved? He'd certainly been prayed at the end, as the cockpit filled with water.

He sat up stiffly to see nothing but sand all around him. The sun burned down on his face and he suddenly felt too hot in his clothes, but it was better than exposure.

Steve stood on shaky legs. He'd have to keep the clothes on to protect himself from the sun. Maybe this was heaven, or hell. Yes. Steve probably would end up there. He'd killed people, let his unfilled Alpha die...she was awash with sin. Killing Schmidt didn't make up for that, not when he'd enjoyed it so goddamn much. At best, this was limbo. But definitely not heaven.

He shuddered as he remember the sound of his shield slicing through bone and flesh.

Yes! His shield! Where was his shield? Damn it all, he'd had it on his back, hadn't he?

Didn't matter now. All that mattered was putting on foot in front of the other.

Steve walked for hours, maybe even days. He didn't know. He was so tired and thirsty and his limbs throbbed with every step. But he deserved this suffering, Steve reminded himself. God had given him this. When he saw a strange-looking car in the distance he cried out in relief. Maybe this was his absolution.

Huh. He'd sort of thought limbo would be longer. Like, at least a few hundred years.

Men get out of the cars and shouted at Steve in a language he didn't understand. They had guns; he knew that much but they looked different. A man held out a water bottle, tentatively. Steve took it without thinking and downed it and then one of the men promptly ran the butt of his gun into Steve's head, knocking him out.

Steve woke with his hands fastened behind his back with some sort of tight plastic string. His clothes were gone. The air around him was cold. He could smell the coppery tang of copper. Was he in a cave? The case for hell was getting stronger...

A beta man was hunched over an Alpha on the table.

"Is he going to make it?" Steve asked. The Alpha looked familiar - a bit like Howard but too old to be him.

"I'm in hell. This is hell," said Tony, staring up at the rocky ceiling.

Steve's brow knitted. So they were in hell.

"He's got about a week. He is not reacting to the news very well," said the beta. He was small, his face surprisingly serene behind a pair of wire-frame glasses. There was a hint of an accent Steve couldn't place. "Though I suspect he's also in shock. He's lost a lot of blood. ...can I get you a
"I'm going to die. I'm in hell," repeated Tony, dazed.

"Mr. Stark. You're working yourself up."

"It's in my chest. I'm going to die. I'm dying, and I'm in hell," said Tony. He gagged softly, fighting the urge to vomit.

The man with the glasses sighed and rose, going to get a blanket. He offered it to Steve, eyes glancing over him. It was a clinician's gaze; he was checking Steve for wounds, unconcerned with his nakedness.

"Why is this happening to me. Yinsen. Please. I don't wanna die," said Tony, looking up, shivering. "Can't I just-- just-- replace it--?"

Blink.

He was in his shop, swiveling back and forth on a chair.

He was in his lab, tapping a pen against the desk. The reactor was glowing through his shirt, an old tank-top he didn't mind getting stained, because lately, the socket had been leaking a foul-smelling discharge. Something was wrong, terrible wrong, with the core.

"What do you think, Jarvis?"

"Impressive, even for you, sir," said the butler, offering him a drink. Tony took it gratefully.

"Thank you. At times, my genius surprises even me."

"I see two design flaws."

Tony paused, cocking his head. "Two? Lay 'em on me."

"This device is designed to create an electromagnetic field that keeps the foreign objects from moving in your atrial wall. However, the electrical output also appears to be affecting your sinoatrial node."

"Yeah? So?"

"It's regulating your heart as a pacemaker would."

"Which is what it's supposed to do."

"If removed, you would likely die."

"Well, yeah, but it was that or wait for my heart to get shredded up by metal bits. What's the other problem?"

"The reactor is powered by palladium, which will degrade over time."

"Yeah, well, I'll just replace the core every once in a while. No biggie."

"The neutron bombardment of the palladium core will create a toxic discharge."

"Which would be an excellent name for a band, wouldn't it?" said Tony, unconcerned.
And then he was staring in the mirror in his bathroom, breathing heavily, feeling dizzy, his fingers tracing the bruises around his chest, his neck stiff, painful.

"Palladium in the chest. Painful way to die."

And now Tony was snapping awake again. He was on the floor in a limp heap, freezing cold, dripping wet, a shivering mess of pure panic. They'd been holding his head under water and he was fighting them, certain he was going to drown, his chest on fire, and whenever they pulled his head up, it was all he could do to gasp greedily, desperately at the cold air for a breath before going under again.

"No!" he barked. He couldn't even remember what he was saying no to, only that they wanted something and he didn't want to give it to them. Tony had made himself into an impenetrable tomb where he'd buried his thoughts, and he was using his own flesh to protect them.

He had seen what his weapons could do.

He'd seen it right through the head of the soldier he'd been laughing with moments before.

There was no torture they could throw at him that would make him help them. None. He was a defense contractor and he was going to defend his plans until his dying breath. He had set out to make the world a better place, to protect American soldiers, and he'd watched them gunned down like helpless little lambs.

He was shaking violently, and there mere act of breathing was hard; something warm was dripping down his leg, he felt like he might throw up, and the mixed smell of cooked meat and burning tobacco clung to him like gauze. His wrists were bruised and covered in small, half-moon cuts from fingernails; the back of his neck was surely burned down to the bone. He was too shell-shocked to cry. In between prime numbers, he was still chanting no over and over.

He couldn't remember who he was or how he'd even gotten here.

"нет..." he wheezed softly, head lolling. "нет...нет..."  

"He's awake," said someone, somewhere.

"полковник Карпов," he mumbled. He opened his eyes but everything was blurry. He tried to reach, weakly, for his Alpha, but his arms were pinned. He couldn't feel his left one at all, but the right one was tingling with the pain of being tied down too tightly. "полковник Карпов," he repeated weakly. He couldn't remember anything but he knew that he could trust Karpov. Knew that Karpov would take care of him, tell him what to do.

He was feeling confused; wasn't he an Alpha? Why would an Alpha have an Alpha? Shouldn't he have an omega? Yes... someone who needed him, someone small who needed his protection-- he could almost, almost, imagine such a person. But more vividly than that, he could imagine Raza pinning down his wrists and growling in his ear and the excruciating pain of--

...who the fuck was Raza?

"полковник Карпов?" he repeated tentatively. He needed someone to explain to him what the fuck was going on.

"молчать, солдат," said a familiar voice. He relaxed the tiniest bit, waiting for orders. An explanation would be furnished eventually, when they were ready to give it to him. He tried to flex some feeling into his left hand but wasn't sure if his hand was responding. Around him,
people were talking. All Alphas. Powerful men who, presumably, knew what was going on and would take care of him. He felt groggy, like he was only just waking up after a long, long sleep; his brain was full of static. He had a very vague idea that, recently, someone, someone familiar, had called out to him.

"This is your fault. You sent him to kill someone who already knew him. How could you be so dense?"

"He's fine, look, we can reprogram him. Two words won't undo decades of training."

"The program was failing even before this."

He could see, fuzzily, a calendar on a desk in front of him. March 16th, 1986.

"He completed his objective, what do you care? Stark is dead, and you got your serum."

"Because he's still got a half-dozen more targets and--"

"--and now we can make more, we don't need him anymore, we have the serum and we can produce an entire army. Please, doctor, don't be so sentimental. It's embarrassing."

Someone brushed the hair out of his eyes. He appreciated the gesture; he couldn't move his arms to tuck it behind his ears and it had really been starting to annoy him. He felt a small, fierce bit of pride that he had, apparently, completed his objective, though he didn't really understand what they meant. He had a vague recollection of a man, a man who was familiar, a man with white hair. That had been part of the objective, he was sure of it. And he could swear he'd seen that guy before, somewhere. He remembered being mad that he'd been drinking. But the two memories didn't seem to fit; they were like two pieces to a puzzle that didn't actually click with each other and he gave up trying to figure it out. It wasn't his place to understand; it was his place to obey.

"Bucky!" Steve woke with a start and cried out as his forehead slammed into something above him. Something hard. He groaned and slumped back. His vision was spinning and his head throbbing. It took him a moment to open his eyes again. He was wearing his uniform, but this time it wasn't crusted up with ice. And still no shield.

Steve felt around. There was the odd pipe and wire around him. Everything above and below was cold and felt like metal. He was in some kind of... in-between area. Limbo, maybe?

No. Not limbo. Nothing in the Bible had ever mentioned floorboards?

He tried pushing, gritting his teeth. With a creak the floorboard above him thumped away, landing heavily on its side. Steve pulled himself up and squinted at the bright lights. It looked like he was in a laboratory, or a hospital, maybe. There was no one around. He didn't know where he was but it wasn't crusted up with ice. And still no shield.

Steve felt around. There was the odd pipe and wire around him. Everything above and below was cold and felt like metal. He was in some kind of... in-between area. Limbo, maybe?

No. Not limbo. Nothing in the Bible had ever mentioned floorboards?

He could feel his pain and anguish and roiling confusion; it tugged at Steve's chest like asthma and ice. He stumbled a little, falling heavily in the doorway as he clutched at the wall. "Fuck," Steve whispered and looked down at himself. Something was wrong. He felt a weird tremor of nausea deep in his gut. He felt... strange inside. He ran a hand down himself, but he couldn't find any injuries. He pushed on.
Steve heard voices, whispers around him, but the building appeared empty. He kept moving. He just felt the tug of Bucky in his gut like nothing else and it was that he followed, ignoring everything else.

He was so dedicated to his task he nearly walked right in to a room full of people. Steve quickly ducked out of the way and stuck his head around the doorway. He blinked, eyes widening. There were at least a half-dozen men clustered around a chair, all Alphas, arguing loudly in Russian and German and English. Steve's skin crawled at the sound of the German. The chair they were clustered around held a slumped-over man with long hair. A prisoner?

Bucky couldn't be here. Steve moved to back away and then loudly walked into a metal cart behind him, knocking off files, medical instruments, and several small tubes full of bright blue liquid.

The files had fallen open to a picture, the same picture, over and over, a white-haired, mustached man. A familiar face, though Steve couldn't place it. **ELIMINATED,** read the text across his face.

The clatter had attracted the attention of the men in the room. They turned, spotted Steve, and began shouting.

Steve broke into a run. He didn't need to understand Russian to know what the HYDRA symbols on their shoulders meant.

He was quietly counting prime numbers in his head when he smelled him.

**Omega.**

His eyes snapped open but his hair had fallen in front of his face again. He couldn't see what was happening and the sounds were too loud for him to really make anything out. He let out a desperate growl. He knew that omega. **Knew** him. He didn't even know his own name, but he knew that smell, that familiar smell he'd known since childhood. That was his omega, and his best friend, better even than Colonel Karpov, and he smelled scared and he wanted to go to him, reassure him that everything was under control, he’d completed his objective and everything was just fine.

Suddenly, a memory!

They were at Baby's, a dance club, and it was packed with soldiers on leave and women clamoring to dance with them. There was a live jazz band that was playing over the din of people talking and laughing; everyone seemed to have had a little too much champagne. Round tables were set up around a dance floor and booths on the wall were upholstered in red vinyl. They were packed in like sardines, him and his omega and three other men and four women, all squeezed into one booth, and he wanted to pull his omega onto his lap but it felt wrong for some reason, because his omega was inexplicably bigger than him and everyone was paying attention to him and one of the other Alphas there seemed to be acting like the omega was his, and, perhaps worst of all, he knew that, for some reason, his omega didn't want to be held, that there was some sort of weird distance between them and that there had been for a while.

"Hey, Eddie, Pete, good to see you, here's the Captain himself, this is my girl Patty, someone get me a scotch, I'm starving..." one of the Alphas was saying, shaking hands furiously with the other men.

"Howie! Heard you were making planes these days!"
"Oh, sure, you know, just a little side project to keep me busy," he said, flashing a smile at everyone.

He felt out of place, wrong. Like his was the sidekick and his omega was the real star. It wasn't right. He felt like they'd been to lots of clubs before, but he was the charmer, the lead man, and his omega was the sidekick. Now, no one was even looking at him. They were all paying attention to the guy named Howie and to the breeder, ignoring him completely.

"Heard you went into business with a Jew. Is that true?"

"I figured if Hitler hates 'em, they must be alright," replied Howard with a laugh, accepting a drink. "His name's Stane, great guy, sharp as a tack. Hey, is that Ruby over there?"

In answer to his question, a furious female voice across the room suddenly yelled, "Howard Anthony Stark!"

"Well, fellas, that's my cue to exit. Hell hath no fury, you know... here, round's on me... paint the town red, Rogers!" Howard threw down a couple of twenties, downed his drink, and scrambled over the back of the booth. Everyone laughed as he darted across the room to avoid Ruby.

"Rogers," he whispered to the breeder, prodding him. "...I..." What? What could he possibly say? That he didn't even know his own name? This was possibly normal, though, right? He remembered hearing somewhere that sometimes soldiers got confused when they'd just come back. Shell-shock, they called it.

But that was assuming this was even real. It wasn't, he knew that. This was half-dream, half-memory. Yet he felt in control.

"Rogers," he whispered again. "I... I don't feel good. I gotta go outside and have a smoke. You wanna come with?" He didn't add that he hated the way Howard was parading him around like a fancy little show dog. He wondered if he should possibly tell Rogers the truth: that he didn't know how he'd gotten here or what his name was or even what Rogers's name was, and that he was frankly not sure this was real and that it was possible they were having this conversation in a trench somewhere in France.

Rogers.

Steve hated it when Bucky called him that. He never used to- not before the war and Steve got bigger. It felt like a distancing tactic. It felt like it was Bucky saying you're just Rogers now, not Steve. It like a further line had been drawn between them and Steve hated it. He couldn't even feel their bond anymore; he couldn't even see it. Was Bucky mad at him for getting the serum, for losing his mark? He sighed and fiddled with the sleeve of his uniform awkwardly. He hated the thing; it was too tight. And too warm in here. And Howard was being his usual over-friendly self.

Steve remembered the first time he met him. Howard patted his arm and squeezed. Steve must have looked alarmed.

"Don't worry," Howard laughed and patted him again before pulling away. "I've already got a gal, and anyways, I don't do men."

It had been oddly endearing to be called a "man" and not simply a zero or a breeder or a horseshoe. Steve had felt proud to be called a man, something male omegas never were. He'd felt like Howard had maybe respected him.

Of course, the very next time they were together, Howard had gotten drunk and coped a feel,
disproving Steve's temporary hope that maybe now that he was in the army, people might treat him better.

"Rogers," whispered Bucky insistently.

"Sure Buck. You don't look so good," Steve said even though the last thing he wanted right now was to be alone with him. Dugan was gathering up the money Howard had left them. "You boys buy a round, we'll be right back."

Dum-Dum gave him a wink, his cheeks rosy. "You got it, Cap'n."

They stepped outside. Steve let out an awkward shudder as Bucky lit up his cigarette, his eyes distant and glassy.

His hands shook as he cupped a match flame and lit a cigarette. He offered the blond one, and he took it; Buck lit it for him.

"Are you... are you angry at me?" Steve asked softly.

It was such a stupid question to ask. He should be mad at Bucky, if anything. The way he'd treated him. After everything he'd done. Liberating his camp, against orders, no less. And yet here Steve was, asking Bucky if he was okay and if Steve had done something wrong. This was so typical. Right when Steve felt like he was going to grow a damn backbone, he looked at Bucky and just melted. And the thing was, Steve was mad at him. He was plenty mad. He was mad at the way Bucky ignored him, the way Bucky never wore his helmet, the way Bucky flirted with girls all the time even when he knew Steve was watching. He was mad, and he had every right to be.

He wondered how he'd react if Bucky finally asked why Steve was mad at him. Maybe he'd snap. Maybe he'd shrug it off. Steve had been mad at him for years; he doubted if Bucky even knew what he was like when he wasn't mad.

Bucky mulled over Rogers's question. He was doing his best to piece everything together. They were at war, he knew that much. His name was Buck, apparently. Captain Rogers was his friend, his omega friend.

Beyond that he felt utterly lost.

"No," he said with surprise. "Of course I'm not mad. We're pals... aren't we?" He looked over Captain Rogers. There was a weird disconnect between his smell and his appearance. He looked like an Alpha; he was tall and muscular, with a strong jaw and straight back. But his smell was omega, and it made Buck feel a powerful tug toward him. He liked Captain Rogers a lot. He'd never smelled an omega whose scent gave him such a warm, familiar, home association. If they weren't in the army and if the captain weren't a captain, Buck would seriously consider courting him. But Captain Rogers also smelled irritated at him. Like Buck had been doing something annoying for a long time and he knew exactly what it was and he ought to quit it. Buck couldn't think of what it could possibly be. He was trying his damned best to be respectful of the guy, wasn't he? Frankly, he thought he ought to be commended on his progressiveness. He genuinely respected Captain Rogers even though he was a breeder.

A zero for a Captain. Ha-ha. Boy, were the forties wild.

He focused on his cigarette for a moment. The smell carried a lot of associations and none of them made sense. He remembered smoking out of a window the morning before his deployment, feeling scared, not for himself, not really, but for his omega, who was small and weak and sick.
But to Buck's knowledge, he didn't have an omega, or maybe his omega was dead or something. And he remembered smoking in the snow, shivering, a man speaking Russian to him, but he didn't speak Russian and had never been to Russia so that made no sense. And he remembered an Alpha holding him down, pinning him, a burning on the back of his neck... but he was an Alpha himself and the idea of being mated was nutty.

"Captain Rogers... I think I might... might have something wrong with my head," he admitted carefully. He didn't want to say he was incompetent for battle; he was certain he could follow orders if they were given to him. He didn't want to make a big deal out of this. He was great at hiding things. Case in point: he'd longed to mate his omega for years and had forced himself not to because he knew he'd only hurt him, and he'd also hidden the palladium poisoning from Pepper, of all people, who was pretty much always at arm's length and probably had X-Ray vision.

Buck blinked. Wait a second. Who the fuck was Pepper? And why couldn't he even remember his own omega's name? What the fuck.

Okay. Okay, Buck, he thought sternly. Just 'cause you can't think straight doesn't mean you can't shoot straight.

"I, uh, I still feel capable of performing my duties," he added. He rubbed his left arm; there was an itch in the crook of his elbow. He rolled up his sleeve to scratch it. There were old scars, needle marks everywhere. Buck looked down at them.

Azzano.

That was right. He'd been captured. He'd been held in a cave for 96 days. They'd put stuff in him, stuff that burned the veins. They had operated on his heart. It was blurry but he definitely remembered that stuff, sort of. They had wanted his weapon designs. He had refused.

No wonder he was experiencing shell-shock.

Captain Rogers still seemed annoyed. He didn't inhale his cigarette like Buck did; it was burning between two of his fingers and he was glaring off into the distance and his jaw was set like he wanted to say something and didn't dare. He hadn't confirmed yet that they were pals. Buck didn't know what he was doing wrong. Behind them, music was filtering out from the club.

"Pals. Yeah. Ha," Steve let out a bitter sounding laugh. Buck would use that word all the time. They were just pals, right? Sure, because pals bonded and felt the other having sex all the time. Because that was normal and healthy and wonderful. Didn't Bucky know what he'd done? Couldn't he feel how shattered and withered Steve's self-esteem was? Maybe he didn't know it was because of him. Maybe it was easier for him to ignore it than acknowledge it. Maybe it would be easier for Steve too. Dragging up old feelings wasn't important right now. They were fighting a war.

"Captain Rogers?"

Steve frowned when Bucky called him captain. Now that was strange. He didn't understand him anymore. Perhaps he never had.

"You been acting weird ever since you got back Buck," Steve whispered. "Can't even feel you anymore, you know? It doesn't matter. Probably for the best, right? You didn't really... I mean, shoot, this is what you always wanted." It wasn't a question; it was a statement. Steve had already made his mind up. He flicked his cigarette onto the ground. He could smoke now his lungs weren't made of shit but he never much liked the taste anyway. "I'll see you inside Buck," he said and then disappeared inside with a smile that didn't meet his eyes.
Buck stared at Rogers and he had a sudden memory. The two of them on a worn couch, Buck stroking his face, gently bending his neck, biting down on it... a vase of tulips in the dining room, a silent plea for him to understand that he was just too sick to be mated, that none of the beta girls meant anything but he had to get his energy out somewhere and it wasn't his fault Steve was so goddamn sick all the time--

Steve! That was it! That was his name!

But before Buck could use it, Steve had flicked away his cigarette and gone back inside and he was standing there alone, trying to figure out how in the hell that scrawny, wheezy little guy he'd bonded with all those years ago had turned in the captain, who, as far as Buck could tell, was utterly flawless.

Buck was glad, though, glad that their bond was broken, because now, Rogers could have anyone at all he wanted, and that Howard Stark was probably one of the most dominant Alphas Buck had ever met in his entire time. He hadn't even been aware bonds could break, but Steve had said it himself. He couldn't even feel him anymore. And that was for the best too, because now Buck knew exactly why Steve was so furious at him. For years, he'd been hurting, desperately wanting to be mated, and Buck couldn't do it. He would rather be the bad guy, rather be hated by his best friend, than risk pregnancy. A pregnancy would kill him, no doubt, and deep down, Buck was pretty sure they both knew that.

He sat on the stoop and put his face in his hands. The air was fucking frigid, but he didn't want to go back into the club and watch Rogers having the time of his life. It was better this way. Them just being pals. Buck deserved this, after what he'd put Rogers through. He'd saved his life, sure, but also been a real jerk about it.

He felt someone press something against the back of his neck and he hissed softly. It hurt.

"Ow. Jesus Christ, Yinsen, warn a guy, won't you?"

"You need to take care of that, or it will get infected."

"I don't care," he said, and he didn't. He almost wanted it to get infected. The throbbing mark was a memory burned into flesh, a memory of helplessness and humiliation and pain. His father had been right about everything. He was a soft, weak, entitled brat. He didn't deserve his station, didn't deserve to be an Alpha. He'd fought, but it hadn't mattered. He hadn't been strong enough.

The only real thing he could say he was happy about was the knowledge that he was going to go out in a blaze of avenging glory. The fuckers had no idea what he was planning. He was going to burn this whole god-forsaken hellhole to the ground, cleanse it with fire. They wouldn't know what hit him. They thought he'd been broken, and in a way, he had been. But he had every intention of bringing them all down with him.

He realized he couldn't hear the music from the club anymore.

He looked up. It was dark. Yinsen was quiet.

"Yinsen?" he called.

"Who's there?" called out someone else.

He opened his mouth but didn't remember his name. "It's--" God damn it. "--me," he finished.
He felt helplessly confused about who "me" was. He felt like he was three, maybe four different people. "Hold on. I've got a light." He yanked down his shirt. The arc reactor burned its steady, soft, white-blue light, temporarily blinding him.

He almost wished he hadn't tugged down his shirt.

He was nowhere. They were in a cold, dark, vast place. All around him was emptiness and he'd never felt this alone in his entire life. Not after Howard and Maria had died; not after Jarvis and Ana had died; not after Yinsen or Obie had died. The abyss stretched on forever and the light of the arc reactor didn't hit any ceiling or walls, simply faded away. He was sitting on a barren rock in space and he was a singular star, glowing silently alone, inconsequential, forgotten.

He didn't believe in an afterlife, but he was pretty sure he was dead. In addition to the fact that he appeared to be Nowhere, there was also the fact that here, in front of him, was what could only be the angel of death. He had blond hair and sharp, piercing eyes; his naked body was sculpted and covered in blood. He was standing before him, fists clenched, jaw fixed, looking like some sort of incredible propaganda poster. No wings, but he wouldn't have been at all surprised if he'd suddenly unfurled a pair from his shoulder blades, because he looked exactly like an angel, like the kind he'd never believed in.

And the weirdest thing of all about Death was that he was an omega.

He smelled like comfort. Like home. He wanted to run to him. It made sense, that Death personified would have such a smell.

What didn't make sense was that Death seemed confused.

...Steve blinked in the bright light shining out of the other man's chest, startled by it. The man looked middle aged. The light in his chest was strange; Steve didn't understand it but he was grateful for the light.

"We need to get out of here. I don't know where we are but I don't like it much," Steve said, glancing around a little self-consciously. He heard a patter of feet around them and spun around. He couldn't see anything in the dark. "Did you... did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I thought..." Steve looked back at the alpha and frowned in confusion. "You were bleeding. What's happened to your chest? I don't understand. You...you were bleeding..." There had been wires and red everywhere. It reminded Steve of a battlefield wound. It was grimy and gory and now apparently the Alpha was fine? And where had the beta male gone?

Death was staring at his chest and babbling about him bleeding. He looked down. It had been a while and it was starting to heal. The burns were taking longer than he'd expected, but most of the nicks his body had gotten in the initial attack were scabbed over. His arc reactor glowed on. He was a little surprised his arc reactor was still in his chest. Was it going to come with him in death?

If he wasn't dead, then he was having a real bad trip. It was entirely possible that he would wake up from this to Obadiah shaking him and yelling that he had to stop taking whatever pills he was offered because didn't he know he had a board meeting to go to? And Pepper would be there, perfectly groomed, looking exasperated but offering him a small smile and a prepared speech, and his biggest problem would be feeling a little hungover and he would be better by lunch, which would probably be something too expensive and not very filling, and he would make his driver take his limo through a drive-through.
Regardless of whether he was dead or just tripping balls, he decided to play it cool. As cool as possible, considering he was Nowhere and Death was staring right at him. He thought he heard footsteps but he wasn't sure, and now Death was asking his name, and he realized he had no idea.

"Who did you say you were?"

"...I'm..." Wait a second. How could death come for him without even knowing his name?

...he could lie. He could cheat death. Death didn't know him so he could give any name at all!

"I'm..."  Fuck. Creativity wasn't his strong suit. Not unless it involved soldering together metal, anyway. "I'm... Steve," he said after a moment. It was the first name he could think of, aside from "Virginia," but he didn't think Death would be fooled if he lied and said his name was Virginia.

"Steve... Buchanan... Stark," he said slowly. "From Sycamore, New Hampshire." He had no idea if there was a town called Sycamore in New Hampshire but he felt like lying was definitely the best option here. He stuck out the hand that wasn't pulling down his shirt. "Nice to meet you," he said, a bit more confidently. As Obadiah always said, 90% of presentation was confidence and bullshit. He wasn't going to let Death intimate him. He had his pride. After all, he was a Stark, and not only that, but a Stark of Sycamore, New Hampshire, home of the Fightin' Rams. (The more details he invented, the more credible his story seemed. He was trusting that Death couldn't tell he was lying but it was possible Death might call him out. It was a chance he was willing to take. After all. He was a Stark. Of Sycamore, New Hampshire.)

"But I'm Steve," Steve said with a frown. Right? He was, right? Or was this Steve...and was he someone else entirely? He swallowed thickly. He didn't reach out to shake 'Steve's' hand. He didn't trust him. He was stealing Steve's name...or something. He didn't know. But he had a strange sense that this man in front of him had something that belonged to him.

There was another rush of air behind them. Steve twisted around. "Who's there?!" He called out. "I know you're there!"

There was a glint of metal under the stretch of the light from the arc reactor. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

Steve frowned and stepped out into the darkness. He took another step, listening intently. The blue, ghoulish light didn't stretch far enough to sit. The floor beneath them felt cool - almost like Steve were walking on water. He turned his head, focused on the sounds around him. He could hear 'Steve's' breathing, and his own, but that was it.

"Can you...can you hear-"

Steve turned around and a metal fist collided with his gut hard. He was on the floor, reeling as a body fell on top of him. And then a punch to his jaw. His vision span and he saw stars. He rolled, trying to get away. "F-fuck..." He stuttered. A second metal hand planted into the floor by his head. He tried to twist out again.

The man muttered Russian above him. He didn't understand it. There was a light source like 'Steve's' in the metal beast's chests. The metal skin he wore gleamed in the blue light.

"T-T-Tony!" The name spilled out shakily. Steve didn't know where it came from. But it felt right to shout for him, whoever he was. "Tony! You've got to-" Thick, metal fingers closed around his throat.

Tony.
Ah-ha! Yes! He remembered now! He was Tony motherfucking Stark.

And he was damned if he was going to let that son of a bitch, who had stolen his father's arc reactor designs, beat up his naked omega.

"Oh, no, you don't! I killed you! You're dead!" yelled Tony, lunging into the fray. No suit, but they were already dead, so what did it matter? He wasn't afraid. Not anymore. He had been chewed up and spit out and now that he remembered who he was, he was going to come out swinging. The complete and total lack of logic didn't bother him anymore. He remembered his name and he knew that this gorgeous blond fellow needed his help, and that superseded any of his earlier miserable musings about inadequacy. In death, all men were equal.

He jumped onto the guy's back, scrambling over him, trying to grab the arc reactor from him. One of his hands was wrapped around the omega's throat. He was gasping for breath.

And suddenly Tony had another memory.

A woman. Brown eyes, staring into his, popping as her life left her. This was the woman who had taught him to ride a horse; this was the woman who had read him Peter Pan; this was the woman who played the first eight notes of "Ode to Joy" every time she passed the piano in the living room; this was the woman who carried him to bed when he fell asleep in the garage.

It was as real as if it had really happened, the image of his mother being strangled.

The memory froze him for a split second; it was long enough for the other man to fling him off. Tony hit the ground with a shriek of pain; he scrambled to his feet and lunged back into the fight.

No suit; he was useless; he was hopelessly overpowered. And now he was in pain. Was he supposed to be feeling pain? He'd assumed he was dead. But no, he was definitely in pain.

"Fuck! Get the reactor! Get the reactor!" he yelled, clawing uselessly at the other man. Trying to bite him, trying to find some vulnerable spot.

The man was laughing. "You lose, Stark!"

Tony growled in response. He was still fighting. He would fight until he was dead, if necessary. Fear was rolling off the omega and Tony wasn't going to stop, suit or no suit. He wasn't going to let another innocent person die. Not on his watch. Not as long as he was still breathing.

Steve cried out with a strength he hadn't known he possessed and lunged forward, his fingers sinking into the arc reactor like it was made of flesh. Maybe it was. He shuddered, feeling the man's heartbeat pulse around his hand. And then he wrenched his heart out of him- wires and blood.

Tony got shrugged off again and he got up just in time to see the omega's hand shove into the guy's chest and rip out his heart.

"Oh. Oh, sweet Edison, you're kidding me," exclaimed Tony, bending over and retching.

Steve rolled out of the way as the metal body landed heavily, dropping the heart/arc reactor with a displeased sound. He crawled away a good few inches for safety.

"We...we shouldn't be here," Steve whispered, staring down at his hands. They were red and shining in the blue light of Tony's chest. The metallic tang in the air was making him feel sick. "This place isn't for us. We're not... are we?" He didn't want to say it: dead , just in case that made
it more true. Steve looked down at the metal bulk of a man and then up at Tony who'd fallen with him on his back. The man somehow looked more alive now he knew his name. "We have to get out of here," he said, curling in on himself. "There has to be a way out. I don't like this. This place isn't for us. Not for us. No. Not yet. Almost, but not yet."

The blond was curled up on the ground staring at him, and his voice was fearful, and Tony was starting to doubt his aptitude as Death. Death wasn't supposed to be afraid. Granted, ripping a guy's heart out was a very Death-like thing to do, but now Death looked terrified and he was saying they had to get out.

"I don't even know where here is!" snapped Tony, gesturing around. "I'm an aerospace engineer, not a fuckin' deacon, I don't know how the hell to get out of here, I don't even believe in an afterlife, especially not a crappy empty one like this! You're the angel. You get us out of here!"

Tony's words were crazy. Fucking crazy. He was talking nonsense.

The only explanation was that he'd truly gone mad. Maybe it was the palladium poisoning, or maybe, he was back in the cave, talking to himself, babbling bullshit while Yinsen tried to keep him from hurting himself. Or maybe he was just on a ton of drugs.

It was unfair of the Angel of Death to expect to solve this riddle. Yeah, sure, he was a genius. But that didn't extend to spiritual drug trips. Tony believed in math, not in higher powers.

He stared at the lifeless form of the man who the Angel of Death had murdered.

Inspiration struck.

"I got it," he said quietly. "Either this is real, and I'm already dead... or it's not real, and I'm dreaming. Right? But either way, in theory, I can't be killed. Which means..."

He reached up to his chest and grabbed the arc reactor. He twisted and pulled; the metal scraped; the device was heavy and warm in his hands.

He yanked. The wires tugged, then went limp.

He walked over to the omega and handed it to him, then crossed his arms over the hole in his chest.

A pause.

Oh shit. He really was dead, then. Because removing the arc reactor should have--

Then came a sharp, stabbing, shooting pain; his left arm went numb; he grabbed his chest with a gasp, his lungs burning.

He dropped, gasping, vision blurring, getting dark around the edges.

Someone was yelling his name.

He was clawing at the surface of consciousness, trying to surface; he couldn't breathe; he needed that fucking arc reactor.

"Tony? Tony!"

All at once everyone snapped into place, and Tony let out a blood-curling scream, flinging himself to the ground.
His face smacked against the ground and he felt cool, antiseptic tile against his cheek.

"Tony?"

"Fuck!  Fuck!  Fuck!" he screamed, ripping wires off his head.  "Fuck!  Oh, fuck!  Fuck me!  That was-- what the fuck is wrong with SHIELD?  What the fuck!"

Tony rolled over but didn't move to get up.  He lay on the floor, breathing shallowly, one hand on his chest.  He could feel the arc reactor's warmth through his clothes.  Natasha was staring down at him, her face haloed by energy-efficient bulbs.

He had lost himself.  He had been... not him.  His memories, his thoughts... it was all muddled up in dreams of Russian winters and wars fought before he'd even been born.  That was the worst part.  Not the death or pain or any of that stuff.  The loss of self had been...

He rolled over and gagged.  He was going to puke. Steve's words about not drinking before the simulation suddenly made a fuckton of sense.

"Steve!" he remembered.  "Natasha.  Steve?"

"Breathe, Tony.  He's still in there.  He'll wake up in a second."

---

One moment Tony was gasping and clutching his left arm, and then, in an instant, Tony was simply gone. Steve was angry. He'd left him alone in this terrible place, when he'd put him here! Hadn't he...? Steve looked down at the red on his hands. Both bodies were gone and there was no smell either. But Steve was stuck with this strange sense that he wasn't alone.

He turned around in a circle once. The darkness was pressing and consuming, suffocating even. Steve was beginning to feel dizzy. Was he still spinning or was he standing still?

Steve gasped.

For a split second he thought it was Vanko, back from the dead.

But almost immediately he knew it wasn't. This new man's smell was familiar to him. Comforting.

Metal fingers brushed over his cheek and then cupped it. The metal-armed man wore a mask, and googles over his eyes, but Steve wasn't afraid of him. His voice was raw and unused when he spoke. "Stevie-?"

Steve was wrenched awake with Natasha hand on his arm. And then, with seconds, he was leaning over the side of the bed and throwing up. Natasha patted his back until it was over and all his lunch from the Italian restaurant was on the floor.

"You okay?" Natasha asked.

"No.  Fuck-" he gagged again, but didn't throw up.

Tony lay there, breathing hard, concentrating on the rhythm of his breaths. One hand was on his chest, feeling the arc reactor, its warmth a comforting reminder that he was alive. Behind him, he heard vomiting, and Natasha's low voice.

He was trying not to think over what had just happened but it was inevitable. He and Steve were bonded, but he was still embarrassed and disgusted by everything Steve had just seen. His father,
drinking at 9 am, and the omega he'd grown up with, never meeting his eyes, calling him "sir," being casually bossed around by the family. In a way, almost, that was worse. Steve knew he'd been a POW, knew he'd spent three months in a cave, and could probably guess at everything that had happened to him there. But Tony had never communicated all the minutiae, and it was that that bothered him. He'd never shared Yinsen with anyone. It just felt too personal.

Behind him, Natasha was still tending Steve; she was rubbing his back while he gathered himself up, gagging occasionally.

"It's a good thing we did a test run," she said quietly. "I don't think he'll pass. There's... a problem."

"You know I can hear you, right?" snarled Tony, sitting up. His stomach flipped but so far he was holding everything down. "What problem?"

Natasha looked over at Tony, seemed to weigh the pros and cons of telling him, and then, as usual, defaulted to her typical bluntness.

"The computer picked up three EEGs."

Tony stared at her blankly.

"Yours. Steve's. And..." She trailed off.

Tony's skin broke out in goosebumps.

He'd had such incredibly vivid memories, memories that weren't his. Memories of-- Tony's breath hitched-- he and Steve, close, intimate, on a couch in a tiny flat, him nuzzling into Steve's neck and biting him; a vase of fucking tulips; hovering around Steve in uniform in a club...

None of those were his.

"--Bucky," said Tony hoarsely. He could feel bile rising up in his throat. He might throw up, after all.

Natasha busied herself with helping Steve remove the electrodes from his head.

"--but he's dead. He's dead, isn't he?" pressed Tony. He was avoiding looking at Steve. Oh, God, it hurt; the memory of he and Bucky with their forehead pressed together, smiling at each other before the war...Tony had barely come to terms with the fact that his omega was previously bonded and now he'd seen inside his old Alpha's head, and it was terrible, knowing that Bucky had, in his own way, loved Steve. It made Tony feel sick to his stomach. He was beginning to develop something of a vendetta against tulips.

"He was declared dead," conceded Natasha. "They never recovered the body. He could be alive somewhere, maybe. Steve can't feel him and it's been seventy years. If he's alive, he must be compromised. In a coma, maybe."

"But if he's dead, or practically dead, why is Steve still thinking about him?" demanded Tony.

"That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?"

Not all of the memories Tony had experiences, though, were his or Barnes's. There were other memories. Memories of being in a too-bright lab where everyone spoke Russian.
"Who is Karpov?" he demanded, deciding not to think about Bucky for now. He was still avoiding looking at Steve. His brain kept replaying that moment on the couch, the two of them necking, Steve purring, Bucky's lips on his neck... ugh.

Natasha's hands froze for a split second and then went back to helping Steve clean himself up. "HYDRA agent," she said brusquely, glancing behind her at Tony. She'd kept her promise not to watch the simulation; she knew Steve would have done the same for her.

"The Winter Soldier works for him. I think. I don't know. I was in his head, and Karpov is like... like his Alpha or something."

Natasha abandoned Steve and wheeled around. Tony was climbing weakly to his feet.

"You saw him, too? The Winter Soldier?"

"I think so," said Tony. He didn't bother to correct her; he was the Winter Soldier.

"The Winter Soldier is an Alpha. He wouldn't have an Alpha."

Tony shook his head, feeling confused. "I'm just telling you how I-- I mean, how he thinks."

"He could be an acer," suggested Steve.

"This is bad. You both realize this is bad? Having some sort of connection with HYDRA's most dangerous assassin? Steve, he showed up in your simulation and now it's gotten worse."

"I have a theory," said Tony suddenly. Natasha didn't say anything, so Tony continued. "Steve's suddenly feeling... him... his old Alpha. But Barnes is dead. And, at the same time, suddenly, Steve's feeling the Winter Soldier. What if-- follow me here, this is so macabre-- what if HYDRA recovered Barnes's body and they took the gland out of the back of his neck and they put it into the Winter Soldier and that's why he smells like Barnes to Steve and also why Steve is confused and thinks they're connected?"

Tony looked at her triumphantly.

"HYDRA's capable of that," she said with a small nod. "...except Alphas don't have bonding glands. Only omegas do."

"I knew that," said Tony quickly, feeling stupid. He thought it had been a great theory.

He was on his feet and he felt shaky and tired and awful. But he was standing, at least.

"The only way he's going to pass is in a simulation by himself. When you went in, Steve, the whole thing went haywire and we ended up with a third party in there," said Natasha quietly. "Do you have any idea what a huge liability this is for the team? If your brain thinks it's connected to the Winter Soldier?"

"He told me he didn't do trios," sneered Tony, unable to help the bitterness from creeping into his voice. Finding out about Barnes had been awful, but had been made better knowing that Barnes was dead. Now they had this Winter Soldier business and it was like Barnes was back from the grave. Tony was honestly more upset by the idea of their bond being compromised than being partially bonded, through Steve, to a murderer.

Although, admittedly, Tony was pretty mad about that, too. He didn't dislike the trio system but he sure as hell didn't want to be bonded to two men or to another Alpha.
But he was too worn out to get into a big fight about it. He desperately wanted to sleep; he felt like he'd been awake for a week. Exhaustion was hitting him, hard.

"I'm not the one whose thinking about him!" Steve snapped. He was trembling. His mouth tasted of his sick and was too dry. Natasha offered him a cup of water and Steve downed it in an instant and then she wiped at his mouth. Why wouldn't his hands stop goddamn shaking? "That wasn't my subconscious. It was yours Tony."

So why was the Winter Soldier in it? Why did he know Steve's name? Steve swallowed and bunched his legs up, leaning his forehead on his knees in an almost fetal position. His nausea had gotten worse.

"Tony," said Natasha, and her voice carried a warning in it. "You're Steve's second Alpha. You're the trois ."

Tony glared at her. He accepted a glass of water.

What she was saying was true, but that didn't make it hurt any less. He didn't want to be Steve's silver medal. But Bucky was dead. That should have been the end to it.

"Do you think I want this?" Steve muttered, voice raw. "Do you think I want him hanging over me like a ghost?"

The whole of his life had been dictated by Alphas, been inhibited by them. Bucky had, unwittingly trapped him. The president, men in the army, Stark, Schmidt, all Alphas setting the course of his life for him ...and Tony thought he wanted this. Couldn't he feel how confused Steve was, how ashamed? He wasn't proud that some HYDRA myth was haunting him. No, he was terrified. Steve has had nightmares where the soldier tracked him down and killed him.

"...maybe HYDRA is trying to make him go crazy," said Tony. "Maybe their plan is to get him so fucked up in the head that he goes to them willingly."

"Maybe," said Natasha. "If that's what they're doing then they have no idea what they're up against." She gave Steve a gentle smile and put a hand on his arm. "You can't let them get to you."

Steve lifted his head up a fraction. "If HYDRA's so intimidated by me why haven't they just shot me already?"

"Well..." Natasha pulled back and sighed, averting her gaze. "You're the only truly successful super soldier. And potentially a baby maker. You're worth more to them alive than dead Steve."

A shudder ran down his spine. Now that was a chilling thought.

Natasha pushed a second glass of water into Steve's hands. "Don't worry about the vomit," she softly. "I've got it. Both of you should get to bed..."

Tony didn't meet Steve's eyes, but he extended a hand to him. "C'mon, pukey. Let's go home." He looked over at Natasha. "Romanov... how the hell am I supposed to pass that test if my subconscious is tuned to Steve, and Steve's tuned to HYDRA?"

She shrugged. "Beats me. You're the genius. Meditation, compartmentalization... there are tricks. You can cheat at any test. You've got a week to prepare."

A week. Tony turned it over in his mind. Yeah, he could probably find out a way to fool SHIELD into thinking his brain was safe in a week.
Steve wiped his hands on his shirt carefully and then reached out to take Tony's hand. It felt better already- being in contact. The simulation had felt distant. Steve hadn't even known him properly, it had been disorientating. He stood with a wobble and then straightened up. He didn't know why he felt quite shaken. He'd been pretty bad-ass back there. Ripping a guy's heart out with his bare hands...

He was really quite a violent person when he thought about it.

Steve turned to Natasha before they left the room, however. "Do you know... who actually found me first? And how long I was unconscious for?" He asked quietly.

Natasha frowned in thought. "I actually don't. Want me to look into it?"

"Please Nat," Steve sighed. "I just want to be safe. To know for sure."

"Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you guys," Natasha said. "I know it's hard to... share that thing," she cleared her throat. "It's not fun."

Tony tugged Steve's hand impatiently. "Can you drive? I'm crashing," he said. "Bye, Romanov. Thanks no thanks for the fucking awful trip. Seriously, what the hell is wrong with SHIELD?"

Natasha smiled at him but it didn't reach her eyes. "They're the lesser evil."

Tony had to admit, he liked Natasha in that moment. Tony had always considered himself a libertarian, someone who was socially progressive but who felt government was inherently corrupting and that society was better off without any of the meddlesome agencies that tried to restrain it.

She also had a point about tests being easy to cheat. With a week to figure out how to do it, Tony was sure he could pretty easily swing the psych eval. Plus, he would be going in without Steve there to muck everything up. It was Steve who was connected to the Winter Soldier, not him. If he could just find a way to bury his bond with Steve, the rest of his brain would be fine.

Child's play.

Steve was giving off vibes of hurt and shame. Tony would have liked to go off on him about Bucky but he was too tired to dredge up the energy necessary and besides, Steve was already low. Tony would have been, too, in Steve's position.

He pushed those feelings aside. He and Steve were bonded, and they were public about it, and that was that. HYDRA was messing with his head somehow; maybe they'd found a way to hijack bonding to torture people psychologically; Barnes was dead, and there was no use worrying about him.

They climbed into Tony's car, parked by the camp's entrance. An American flag was flapping in the breeze on a pole above them. Tony looked up at it with a small huff.

He didn't just want to join SHIELD for Steve's sake. Realistically, he knew Iron Man would eventually have to link himself to a government agency. The Senate hearings earlier in the year had proven that. Rhodes had been warning him for the last two years that he was eventually going to start coming under some sort of regulatory body; Iron Man was too powerful to be in the hands of a single individual, no matter how pure their intentions. And Tony had been trying to be held accountable ever since discovering what his weapons were capable of. SHIELD ensued Iron Man would have government protection and that Tony would be able to keep operating without worrying about getting arrested for building bombs in his basement.
He stared out the window, brooding, on the ride home. Bucky had loved Steve, despite Steve's insistence he didn't. Tony wanted to tell him but also didn't. He was conflicted. Doing nothing was still making a choice. But every time he began to reassure Steve, he stopped. What was the point in trying to validate a relationship that had ended seventy years ago? Maybe it was better than telling Steve the truth. Steve didn't need reminded of his old life, the one where he was weak and short and sick and an omega in a world that saw his kind as barely human.

By the time they got home it was a small wonder they hadn't wrecked the car. Both of them were nodding off.

Tony placed a hand on Steve's arm and pulled him toward the bathroom. "Brush your teeth," he commanded. Steve made a little humming noise and obeyed but Tony could tell he was on autopilot. This must be what it's like for Pepper, he thought. He made a mental note to call her, ask about how to best deal with things. She's know, he was sure. She was one of the most mentally healthy, capable people he knew. Granted, as a beta, she didn't have any first-hand experience with bonding, but that was okay. Tony still felt like she could help him out.

Steve wandered to bed like a zombie, threw his jacket on the floor, and passed out before hitting the pillow Tony wondered if he should take off Steve's clothes, like how Pepper would have done for him, but he didn't want to risk waking Steve up, so instead, he took off his own clothes and crawled into bed, pulling Steve's arm around him, cuddling up to his fully clothed body. He was unsettled and despite how tired he was, he found himself lying awake, listening to Steve breathing. He hated the idea of everyone in SHIELD seeing what Steve had. The childhood he'd tried to forget, the torture in the cave, the humiliation... at least he could say, though, that he hadn't let them win. At least he had that.

Steve's sleep was restless, but he didn't dream, his mind bogged down with enough visions for the day.

When he started awake the next morning his hand flew up to his face instinctively, his cheek feeling cold. Were those fingers against his face? He wasn't sure. The feeling had disappeared just as quickly as it came. But he'd felt it. Maybe Steve just hadn't remembered his dream from that night.

"Captain Rogers," repeated JARVIS.

"What?" groaned Steve.

"Aria Platsky is downstairs for you."

Steve sat up. Oh shit! Shit, he had an interview!

He rolled out of bed, still dressed his his jeans and button-up shirt from the day before; it was hopelessly wrinkled. He swapped it out and bolted downstairs, struggling to yank a comb through his hair.

Aria was standing by the indoor fountain in the main room, holding two cups of coffee.

"I got you an espresso. Quadruple shot," she greeted him. "Is that going to be enough to affect you in any meaningful way or do you need more?"

"Oh my God. I love you," said Steve, laughing and accepting the coffee.

Aria laughed dryly. "Careful. I don't want Iron Man on my ass."
Aria was strange in person. Or rather, not what Steve expected. They had only talked on the phone before. She was a short but feisty beta, strangely intimidating in her leather jacket and Converse sneakers. Her blue eyeliner was a little off, but still looked good. He was surprised Pepper had recommended someone so young but then Aria was still two years older than him. She tucked a black strand of hair behind her ear as she scrolled through e-mails with another. "They got you the same interviewer. Should be fun. You've got this."

Steve grimaced at the bitterness of coffee on his tongue. "Sure. Uh-huh."

"Shouldn't have stayed up so late," Aria said and sent him a pointed look. Steve wished he was just so tired because him and Tony had been lost in bed together. No, it was a far more depressing reason than that. But he didn't correct her. Instead, he let her drive him downtown, stopping at another Starbucks for another quadruple shot.

"Don't worry, I'm sure they can airbrush out the bags under your eyes in the pictures," she reassured him. Steve touched his face worriedly. Was it that obvious he'd had a lousy night.

Aria gave him a fist-bump before pushing him through a pair of doors into the studio. Steve still didn't really understand that gesture but he went along with it.

The interviewer had agreed to meet him there; when Steve walked in, a dozen people immediately turned and beamed at him. Steve forced a smile back.

The interviewer, Marcus, shook his hand and greeted him with a smile. "So a lot's changed in the past few weeks, huh?"

"Yeah," Steve said and smiled despite himself. "You could say that."

"So...shall we get started?"

They had an article out online by that afternoon.

CAP IS BACK: ON BEING BONDED, TACKLING CIVIL RIGHTS AND STARING A CHARITY IN THE 21st CENTURY.

The quote underneath read: "I don't have time for Alphas who are intimidated by equality."

True to her word, the picture that accompanied the article had been touched up. Steve was wearing a high-collared blue jacket on, his hair a bit of a mess, hands in his pockets, looking thoughtful and serious. There was a second one that circulated of Steve looking over his shoulder, the bite mark on his neck visible.

But the one that got the most media attention was the joke one. They sat Steve on a bench and had him reading a tabloid with the headline CAPTAIN AMERICA'S SEX LIFE. Steve's expression was one of fake shock. He had a feeling it was actually Aria's suggestion. But he saw the humor in it. And it was also making a point.

They did ask Steve, of course, about the pregnancy rumors.

He'd laughed and shook his head. "I don't know why people think a soldier would want kids. I really don't. I don't drink because I just don't like drinking. It doesn't mean anything."

And the subject was quickly dropped.

Another question: "Are you worried about getting lost in the Tony Stark limelight? I imagine he
casts a pretty big shadow."

Steve just shrugged. "A relationship isn't a competition. I don't see how his success would pull me down, or vise versa. We lift each other up."

Aria kept giving him thumbs-up from behind the scenes, pleased with the quotes they were pulling out of him.

"I don't think wanting equality is controversial. The charity is an idea that revolves around support for omegas and tackling the repression we face. If people feel threatened by that, they seriously need to ask themselves why."

"I don't know why grown adults having sex is controversial? But yes, I have it and I enjoy it. That shouldn't change how people see me. No one's asking Tony about his sex life."

"Yes, of course I'm happy with Tony... and that's all you're getting out of me."

When Tony woke up, light was streaming through the windows and Steve was gone. For a moment, Tony experienced panic. Then he remembered Steve's interview. He let out a mirthless laugh; poor Steve. Tony felt awful. How Steve was going to handle himself while suffering the after-effects of the simulation were beyond him.

"JARVIS," he called. "I need you to start compiling every known substance that could act as an antidote to hallucinogens. Anything that mutes the effects of LSD, salvia, peyote, any of it. I have a test to cheat.

He swung out of bed and instinctively checked the bedside stand for a note, but of course, Steve didn't need to leave a note; the interview had been looming over him all week and he'd mentioned a few times his concerns. Tony, for what it was worth, wasn't worried a bit. Steve was thoughtful and well-spoken and Tony, at least, was incredibly open about his sex life; he suspected a lot of Steve's misgivings were due to his forties' sensibilities. But Steve had a publicist hand-picked by Pepper, so he ought to be fine.

He loped downstairs after a quick stop to the bathroom to make sure his hair and beard were presentable, and to pop in contacts. It was already lunchtime. He nearly tripped over the orchids lining the stairs.

He settled down in the kitchen with a beer (carbs were a good breakfast, right?) and pulled out his phone to see what people were saying about Steve.

He frowned. More pregnancy rumors.

CAPTAIN AMERICA LONGS FOR CHILDREN, read one headline. There was a picture of Steve at the beach with a sweet little girl and another omega, presumably her father-mother. Tony rolled his eyes. He doubted a child would survive two days in the Stark mansion, considering he'd nearly killed himself coming down the stairs earlier.

Tony spent the day happily replacing the muffler on one of his cars while JARVIS pinged him with every update in the newest Steve Rogers interview.

Tony had to admit, it was a bit more... well... idealistic than he would have liked. It was Steve in a nutshell. Strong and optimistic, with lots of flowery language and powerful ideas and a sincere belief in the goodness of people. Tony was disappointed by the lack of details about their sex life. He would have to change that, when he had the chance. Maybe let slip a few details, like Steve's
ability to hold his breath or something about how Steve was lucky he had the serum to help him keep up. Tony didn't want people thinking he'd grown soft; he had cultivated a careful image of himself as a sexual force to be reckoned with. After Afghanistan, he had had a three-month hiatus from sex and then it back to business as usual, bedding a new girl every four days, on average, just to keep up appearances. He hadn't even enjoyed it, really. But it was important for him to act that way. It was a habit, a chore, and Tony had maintained an extravagant social life even through his Iron Man-ing, because doing otherwise would, in his mind, be a sign of weakness.

But he also decided it was probably best not to make any comments immediately. He didn't want to undermine what Steve was doing, and besides, he had to be on his best behavior for SHIELD.

What Natasha had said about cheating the test rang true with him and he'd decided to dedicate himself fully to passing the psych eval. He had already begun using JARVIS to study compounds to counteract the drugs, to compile lists of breathing exercises, to find ways to manage anxiety and dream lucidly and resist hypnosis. Tony felt that if anyone had the mental fortitude to completely and totally nail the psych evaluation, it was him.

Steve wasn't home until evening and by that time, his interview, pre-released on the internet, had already gone viral. Tony was watching the hashtags unfold: StatusEquality, EqualityNow, OmegaRights, StonyBond, CapWatch. He was still trying to get Ownmega to trend because he felt it was a rather clever portmanteau, but no one was biting. He appreciated Steve's comment about not worrying about Tony overshadowing him, but just to be safe, he was as uninvolved as possible.

Of course, he did send out a couple of tweets. He was only human.

> Alpha, schmalpha. I'm not special & my status doesn't define me. Just ask Steve Rogers!

> Clarification: I am special for being a supergenius, superlover, and #IronMan, but not for being an Alpha.

> I'm not intimidated. I'm proud. Steve and I are a team and we both stand for #StatusEquality.

> 618 orchids and counting, please stop guys, we're not even honeymooning anymore. #StonyBond

> I'm secure enough to support Steve in anything he does. #CaptainAmerica is revolutionizing #OmegaRights & I'm behind him all the way!

> Oh shit I didn't mean "behind him" like sexually nvm.

> I mean yes, obviously, like that too, but that's not what I meant, guys.

> 625 orchids, guys, srsly, stahp. #StonyBond

> @Dominos: Please consider a sponsorship deal for me and my omega, I am very hungry rn. :( (An hour after the last one, to his delight, he'd received a couple of pizzas.)

It was after sunset by the time Steve came home. JARVIS alerted him; he jogged up the stairs to greet Steve.

"Hey Stevie. Great interview. Loved the pictures," said Tony cheerfully, wrapping an arm around his waist. He tried to pull Steve over but ended up pulling himself against Steve instead; Steve was heavy and built like a brick wall, and Tony couldn't really tug him around like he was used to doing with his girls. "Pizza?" he offered, gesturing to the Domino's box on the coffee table, half-buried in orchids.
He nuzzled Steve's neck lovingly. He had decided to employ his new meditation techniques not only to cheat the hell out of SHIELD's test, but also to bury his fears about Bucky and the Winter Soldier and Steve's old bond.

If that ever got out, it would be a vicious scandal and probably ruin both of them. Tony decided it was best for everyone to just pretend it didn't exist and never, ever mention it again.

Steve practically purred at the touch, happily threading his fingers into Tony's hair to press a kiss to his forehead. "Did I do okay? What does it look like out there?" He asked quietly, letting Tony tug him towards pizza. Fuck, he was starving. Steve inhaled three slices in as many minutes; he wasn't even really aware what the toppings had been. He didn't really understand why but talking about himself was exhausting. And Aria kept warning him that interviews weren't usually as nice as that. What was he going to do when they got mean?

Ugh. He didn't need to worry about that now.

He ended up sat on a sofa, legs tucked up and boots discarded on the floor. He chewed on the fourth piece of pizza slowly, actually tasting it this time.

"Least everyone won't think I'm pregnant anymore," he sighed and leaned back against the sofa, Steve's head on Tony's shoulder. He finished the fourth piece and sucked he tomato sauce from his fingertips. "How was your day?"

"You did great. I spent all day downstairs, working on the Mark VII and pulling apart the Tesla," said Tony. "People love you, don't worry. Hell, one more interview and maybe the Secretary of Defense will get off my back."

Tony was only half-joking. The disaster at the Expo was starting to hit home. His phone and e-mail were both exploding with calls from the DOD and the CIA and the FBI and Tony had spent almost as much time delegating the investigations to lawyers and aides as he had taking the calls themselves. He had to admit, joining SHIELD was looking better and better by the minute; he desperately needed the protection that came with a government contract. Pepper had already contacted him five times and in one of those she sounded ready to reach through the phone and strangle him. She had never liked the Expo. Now that it had blown up in their faces (literally), she was bouncing back and forth between "I told you sos" and "I'm serious, Tony, you might go to jail." Tony was loathe to lean on Steve but, that being said, it looked really, really good for him to be bonded to Captain America at the moment.

No wonder some people were calling their bond arranged, a political alliance. Tony didn't think Steve needed to hear about those rumors. The poor guy looked exhausted.

"So the week after SHIELD fries my brain, it's your birthday. I was thinking we could go to New York," said Tony casually. He was still trying to get his hands on a bald eagle but so far no one seemed very willing to sell him one for some reason. "...if you want to, I mean." He was testing the waters. Steve's reaction to his old war memorabilia had driven home the fact that Steve's age was a sensitive topic. He was both young and old, stuck in a time that wasn't really his, and most of his friends were dead. Those that weren't, like Peggy, were close. But Tony still wanted to do something for Steve. Assuming his SHIELD didn't destroy his brain. Flunking the psych eval or having a psychotic episode would probably put a damper on any celebrations.

Steve had only been back to Brooklyn once since this whole thing started. He'd gone to visit his Ma's house. The flat he'd used to share with Bucky had been turned into an ice cream parlour that sat above a hairdressers. That had warmed his heart a little. But the visit had been fleeting and soon Steve was dragged back into SHIELD training again. It had been good to go back there. His heart
had needed it. He nuzzled against Tony's neck and sighed quietly.

"I'd like that, I think," he murmured. Steve didn't really want to make a big deal of it but he could understand why Tony wanted to do something. And Steve figured it might be nice...but he was kind of sick of fixating on the past. He wanted to celebrate the future for a change. "What were you thinking of doing there? Do you think...maybe it wouldn't be weird if Clint and Nat tagged along?" he asked hopefully.

Tony shrugged a little. He didn't really know Clint or Natasha. Both seemed okay. Clint had answered some of his questions about bonding, and he'd trusted Nat enough to run a test simulation for him. They were going to be on a team together soon anyway.

"Yeah, sure, why not? They're your friends. It'll be like a double date," said Tony. "We can do whatever you want, Steve. It's your birthday. You name it, it's yours." He rubbed the back of Steve's neck with his thumb.

Even for someone like Tony, who was used to thinking a half-dozen thoughts at once, the amount of responsibilities piling up were starting to suffocate him. There was the SHIELD test and the investigation into the Expo, the lawsuits and the ongoing Senate hearings for Iron Man. Steve was... grounding. Tony liked having him around. He was a bit like Pepper, an immovable, consistent part of Tony's life. When everything went to shit, Steve was still there and he was still Steve.

Tony dropped his head on top of Steve's and sighed, relaxing. The next week would be busy, but that was fine. Tony liked being busy. He had one week to train himself to be unflappable. He knew what to expect from SHIELD now, at least. And knowing is half the battle! he thought to himself. He snorted softly; the phrase was twice as funny considering he was cuddling with someone who was practically a living version of G.I. Joe. Steve probably didn't know who that was, though.

"I'm going to turn in early," said Tony, untangling himself from Steve. "I'm on a health kick for the next week to make sure I pass that SHIELD field test with flying colors. Don't worry, though, I'm over chlorophyll smoothies," he added with a grin. One week of rest and healthy eating and training... it wasn't a lot of time but it was better than nothing. Tony had every intention of going in there and giving them hell.

"Okay. I'll come up in a bit," Steve whispered. He caught Tony's hand before he could leave though and tugged him down for a kiss. A proper one. "Night Tony," he murmured and squeezed his fingers before letting go and letting his alpha head up. He watched him leave before sinking back down into the sofa, checking his phone to find half a dozen texts from Clint.

> Captain America's sex life! Lol. Captain America actually enjoys sex! Lol. So controversial. :o You shoulda told me Steve.

> Kidding. Kidding.

> Very proud of my boi.

> You're NOT pregnant tho, right?

> If you are dibs on being god parent.

> Seriously though... you're not?

> Steve?
> STEVE!?

> GODDAMMIT ROGERS ANSWER YOUR PHONE.

Steve quickly sent a text assuring him that he wasn't.

He collapsed into bed about twenty minutes later, pressing a kiss to a half-awake Tony's shoulder. He curled into his side, head tucked against his shoulder as he eyes slipped shut. Steve felt right here. Felt like he belonged here. The distant darkness of being left alone in Tony's subconscious was alien to him now. It felt like a life time ago.
Conscious and Subconscious

Chapter Summary

In this chapter: Tony gets recruited to SHIELD! One more mind-bending SHIELD subconscious brain scan! Plus, general Stark snarkiness around psychologists and nurses!

The week passed quickly. Tony was apparently serious about his health kick. Some mornings he even woke up with Steve before the omega slipped away to the gym. Whilst Tony puttered in the workshop Steve was working out, doing research on his tablet about charities and non-profits while he ran on the treadmill. He’d had several lawyers approach him already; Steve had even agreed to meet with a few in the coming weeks. They were all betas. There wasn’t many omega lawyers out there; Steve knew he shouldn’t get his hopes for it.

He wasn’t completely homebound. Pepper took him out shopping one day; it was an incredibly sweet gesture. Steve found much of the 21st century overwhelming and he appreciated having someone to go with him. She introduced him to different fashions, told him simple do's and dont's... and for the first time in this century Steve actually chose his own clothes rather than just being given them.

He had a few sparring sessions with Nat, just to make sure he didn’t lose his touch. She didn't mention the simulation and Steve was grateful for it. It was clear that, the more they paid attention to it, the worse it was going to get.

On the morning of Tony's psych evaluation, Steve made Tony waffles in bed with strawberries and Nutella (Steve freakin' loved Nutella; it was one of the better inventions of the last sixty-five years, in his opinion.) He made him extra-strong coffee too. Colombian. He brought everything in on a tray and caught Tony as he was getting out of the shower.

Tony was toweling his hair when he nearly collided with Steve.

"You're awake," said Steve, eyes darting between his Alpha's damp chest and face briefly. "I, er, made breakfast... I figured you'd want to get your strength up."

"Steve! ...are those waffles? ...are those waffles with strawberries?" Tony swept the towel around his body. Steve had noticed Tony had a habit of wrapping the towel under his arms instead of at his waist; the towels were thick enough to cover the arc reactor. Despite Steve having told Tony a million times he wasn't bothered either by the device or the scars around it, old habits died hard; unlike the proud, shirtless teenager in the simulation, Tony often covered up. He was, Steve had discovered, more likely to wear a shirt than pants; at least twice, Steve had caught him in the shop working in boxer-briefs, and once, he'd been wearing swim trunks. ("You've never been surfing? Really?" said Tony, who seemed genuinely surprised that Steve, a poor kid from Brooklyn during the Great Depression, had never surfed.)

Despite the weirdness of Tony's habits, Steve had come to appreciate that there was a method to his madness. Every whim had some basis behind it. Tony had spent the last week getting eight hours of sleep, burning sage and patchouli, drinking kombucha, meditating, working out, and choking down health food that was of questionable origin. Malibu was like a Mecca for pseudo-
nutrition and fad diets and fashionable workout regimes; Steve watch Tony bounce between yoga and tai chi and krav maga without any of his usual irony, and eat kale and quinoa with barely a word of complaint. A bottle of probiotics appeared in their medicine cabinet, followed by another one of serotonin supplements and then a third with fish oil capsules.

Tony had even cut down on the drinking. At least a little. He was still downing two bottles a night, but it was red wine now instead of hard liquor.

"You know how bad this looks, right?" asked Tony, plucking a strawberry off the plate and popping it into his mouth. "You know what a scandal it would be if anyone found out Captain Omega, Mr. Equality, was serving me breakfast on an actual silver platter?" He grinned at Steve and picked up another strawberry, offering it to Steve, letting him eat it off his fingers. He was in a great mood. He was eager for the damned test to be over, but he was feeling pretty confident about it, too. Short of buying crystals, Tony had leaned on nearly every trendy health practice he could. (He drew the line at crystals and homeopathy, both of which he was fully aware were bullshit.) Steve bringing him breakfast was the cherry on top. ...the strawberry on top. Whatever.

"Good omega," he said softly, tenderly, leaning forward to nuzzle Steve's neck. "God, Steve, you're gonna make me late, looking all sexy and holding a plate of waffles. Gimme a second to get dressed, okay?" He disappeared into the walk-in closet, his voice floating out to Steve. "I'm gonna slay this test, Steve. And then, you and me, New York, a nice little getaway for us."

"Someone has to feed you." Steve pointed out, smiling was Tony sipped a half of a sweet strawberry between his lips. "I'm not making you late for anything Tony," he told him with a fond laugh. He leaned on the edge of the doorway, watching the curve of Tony's shoulder blades as he slipped a shirt onto his back. It was his lucky shirt (something he'd picked up during his time as a PA).

He set his/Tony's tray down on the bedside table before moving to get dressed himself. Smart dark jeans, a white tee. His leather jacket would finish it. He liked to look put-together for SHIELD (he was a captain inside those walls, after all) but he also wanted it to be clear that he wasn't there in any official capacity. He fixed his hair in the mirror with a tiny bit of Tony's gel to keep it in place, but only a little. He hated it shiny. It reminded him of the old Aphas in pinstriped suits that used to march around the city streets, absolutely full of themselves.

They'd found a good rhythm leaving together after another week. They moved together well. Steve went to brush his teeth then moisturize his face (something he'd learned from Pepper.)

"You ready?" he called out as he backed back into the bedroom. "Tony?"

"Super ready!" yelled Tony back, making minute adjustments to himself in the mirror. "Ready to rock n' roll. ...I could use a drink, though. God, I'm glad this is nearly over. Not that I'm nervous. I'm Tony goddamn Stark. SHIELD needs me. Hey, d'you think it's funny that you use a shield and they're called shield and like... like it's kind of connected?" Tony was doing that thing he did when he was nervous, speaking all his thought out loud in one continuous train of thought. He only paused in his monologue to wolf down the food Steve had prepared.

"Love the look, classic, Steve, you look great. I threw the Mark V in the trunk. You wanna drive? I'm going to go ahead and bring some scotch, I'm feeling pretty energetic, maybe it's this coffee. Great coffee, by the way. You know sometimes I like to throw a few shots in there and call it Starkbucks. Steve, hurry up, you're making us late." Tony checked his watch. "Are Clint and Natasha going to be there? ...does everyone have to watch the psych eval? I mean, I'm not worried, I think it'll go great, obviously, I just... just want to know, that's all, it's good to know. knowledge is power, Francis Bacon said that, you know, bacon would go great with these
pancakes, man, I love strawberries, Pepper never used to use them for some reasons, it was always blueberries with her..." Tony continued as he loped down the stairs.

There were still orchids everywhere, but for the most part, deliveries had tapered off. The official count was over eight hundred; half the pool deck was occupied by little pots, the tall, bright, exotic flowers creating a kaleidoscope effect every time you looked out the back window. Tony had moved the orchids from Pepper and Rhodey into his shop. The rest were scattered haphazardly around. Tony was glad that no more tulips have arrived. It was a cheap flower, anyway.

He grabbed a small bottle of liquor from the bar on their way to the garage. He was practically vibrating. Steve had seen Tony manic plenty of times, but every time was a little unsettling nonetheless.

"Hey. Tony. Breathe." Steve put his hands on his shoulders and squeezed lightly, standing in front of him as they paused by the door to Tony's workshop and garage. He leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "You've got this. I know you do. You have nothing to prove to me; you've just got to show them how awesome I already know you are."

He took his hand, threading their fingers together in hope of reassuring him. He could feel his nerves. Steve had been the same way.... SHIELD tested you in every way possible. There was nowhere to hide. Tony was right to be jittery.

Steve got into the McLaren on the driver's side. He'd gotten quite fond of driving the thing. He missed the agility of a bike but he enjoyed the real rumble of a real engine beneath him in a car. He glanced over sideways at Tony as he started her up.

"Wanna put some music on? Calm your nerves?" Steve offered softly as he pulled out onto the street.

"Yeah," agreed Tony, reaching for the radio.

He and Steve had very different definitions of what constituted nerve-calming music; Tony put on some Pantera and turned up the volume so that the only sound was the scream of electric guitars. Between his music tastes and his love of building things that exploded, it was a wonder that he wasn't completely deaf.

Tony didn't speak the rest of the ride; he sat with his eyes closed, looking surprisingly serene. By the time they were pulling into the base, Tony looked as calm and cool and collected as Steve had ever seen him. He reached out and put his hand over Steve's on the lever as they parked.

"Steve? ...we're gonna do great," said Tony with uncharacteristic seriousness. He sounded like he was reassuring Steve, even though Steve hadn't said anything.

They clamored out of the car and Steve saw Tony do what Tony did. His mask came down and he oozed charisma as he shook hands and greeted a team of army grunts, doctors, psychologists, and others. Steve found Natasha in the crowd and she gave Steve a small nod. Clint and Phil were conspicuously absent.

Fury gave Steve only the tiniest nod of acknowledgement, but it was difficult to say whether it was because he was too busy or whether there was some unresolved issue between them. No one in SHIELD had expressed any opinions about Steve's sudden interest in omega charities or civil rights, except Steve's close friends, like Nat and Clint, who, off the record, were extremely supportive.
Natasha sidled up to Steve while Tony spoke with a senior agent about firearms. The group was heading into the base; everyone was orbiting around Tony like he was planet with a dozen moons. Any of Tony's earlier nervousness had been transformed; Tony was grinning easily and acting like he did when he was on stage, basking in the attention, cracking jokes and making quips.

"...he seems... enthusiastic," she observed, crossing her arms across her chest. Steve knew from his own experience that the tests started easy and got harder. There was a reason the psych eval was the very last one; it was the hardest and had the highest rate of failure.

"He's really tried his best," Steve hummed. "He's taking this seriously." He sounded proud, and he was. Immensely so. It didn't matter to Steve if Tony passed or failed - he had his approval regardless. He and Natasha made small talk while Tony was briefed on the day's schedule and was shoved various forms, which he signed with a flourish and without reading. ("That's what I pay Pepper for," he said when Agent Hill asked him if he wanted to check what he was signing. Steve cringed a little.)

Natasha and Steve followed in at the back of the group as they made their way across the base. After all, they were just here to observe. The first practical field test was firearms. Natasha and Clint had both showed up for it; they seemed intrigued to see how someone like Tony did. ("If they actually let him on the team, he'll need to be able to shoot without some fancy targeting system hooked up to his head," said Clint. Clint was a bit of a purist when it came to long-range weapon proficiency.)

They took up some good seats on the bleachers, facing the range, chatting freely until Fury arrived. Then they mostly went silent. Fury leaned against the edge of the bleachers beside them, arms crossed, face serious as he watched one of the range instructors setting out firearms.

"Good honeymoon, cap?" Fury asked and Steve was taken back. Maybe it was a gesture of kindness. Or maybe it was Nick realising he needed Steve on his side.

"Great, actually," Steve said, speaking a little slowly out of carefulness. "Thanks."

"...you never asked how mine was," said Natasha. Her voice was cool, measured, but Steve knew her well enough to know she was joking.

Fury did, too; he cocked an eyebrow at her. "If I recall correctly, yours took place in the middle of one of Barton's special assignments and delayed his return by a week."

Natasha flashed the tiniest hint of a smile. Steve hadn't asked, but she and Barton had been together a long time; clearly, the circumstances leading up to their bonding were ancient history. They rarely mentioned being bonded at work, except around people like Steve and Coulson. It was a bit odd seeing her buddy up to Fury. Perhaps that was her way of encouraging him for being kind to Steve, especially considering Steve's recent foray into politics that didn't involve SHIELD.

Their attention turned back to the range. Tony looked very much like a civilian; he had thrown on a suit jacket but was wearing a t-shirt underneath and his shoes, clearly worn for comfort, mismatched his slacks. He took a semi-automatic delicately from one of the sergeants, checked it over, and then fired off a round with surprising ease.

"Holy shit," blurted a man to Steve's left, holding up a pair of binoculars.

"...that's one of his," said Natasha with a roll of her eyes. Sure enough, Steve caught a glimpse of STARK printed on the gun. Tony handled every weapon with a loving familiarity. He hadn't merely shot these weapons before; he had designed them. In fact, he'd demonstrated more than
half of them personally at the very same base. "He still hasn't beaten Clint's record," added Natasha with a slight hint of annoyance. It probably had something to do with Tony showing off; he was talking shop with several of the enlisted men who had wandered down to hear him talk about the guns, and it was turning into an ad hoc demonstration. Tony may not have made weapons anymore, but he was clearly still proud of anything with his name stamped on it.

"Psst. Hey." Someone tapped Steve's shoulder; Steve's face lit up when he saw Sam. The man meant a lot to him. He was the only other real soldier on his team, and that in itself meant a lot. Sometimes he still missed the Howling Commando days. He moved up on the bench so Sam could sit down too, their shoulders nudging together.

"Man, you've been like a ghost, I've been trying to get ahold of you for over a week. You forget about me or something? I heard you were on base today and thought we could catch up."

"Sorry. I was kinda busy. And I threw my phone against a wall."

"We've all been there," Natasha hummed. It took all three a moment to realise she was serious.

"Seriously, I'm sorry," Steve told him Sam. "I won't disappear like that again. Promise."

"I sure hope not," said Sam. "...well, you only bond once, right? I figured you were busy."


His attention slid back over to the range, where Tony was walking the sergeant through some of the features of the gun he was holding.

"Congratulations," added Sam. On the range, Tony's fanclub had swelled significantly and Tony was running through the specs of a line of weapons, handling them with a disturbing level of comfort. So far, he hadn't missed a shot. Sam glanced back at Steve.

"...we're all thinking it. He's completely full of himself. Steve knows," Natasha reassured him. "Once you get to know him, though..."

"Good guy?" said Sam.

"...no, he's still an arrogant, conceited, self-absorbed, smug jerk," finished Natasha. "...but he makes Steve happy. And he's a straight shot."

Sam laughed a little. "That's pretty high praise, coming from her, isn't it?"

Steve was fully aware that Tony was coming off as a bit of a jerk right now. But he knew him deep down. Tony had talked him down from a panic attack and out of bad dreams. Steve knew him and that was what mattered. This was just him keeping a up a persona. Steve was sure that, at least, Nat was truly aware of that. Sam looked skeptical but he had every right to be.

"--the thing about the new standard infantry rifle is, we were going back to basics, removing the bells and whistles, focusing on a weapon that didn't jam," Tony was explaining below them, popping in a new magazine. Steve recognized the tapping motion Tony made with the heel of his hand as the same one he used to whack his arc reactor into his chest. "You can submerge this baby in mud for forty-eight hours and it'll still work when you need it to. We got rid of the uplink scope, which I know Hammer still uses, but let's be real, that component has a tendency to warp within two campaigns and fuck up your barrel--"
“You don’t always choose,” said Natasha suddenly. “Sometimes you click with someone. On a primal level. Even if they’re a showboating jerk.”

“I didn’t say anything,” said Sam, holding his hands up. “Look, he’s got a meeting with Dr. Brazinski in thirty. You guys wanna get lunch? I’ll make sure we’re back for the simulation component,” he added quickly, seeing Steve’s look of hesitation.

“Anything would be better than watching him brag about his guns,” said Natasha with annoyance. “Fury, are you sure--”

“A hundred percent,” said Fury. “Even if he’s just a consultant. He’s a powerful ally. He’s already hacked SHIELD twice. That’s one of the most brilliant minds in the world.”

On the range, Tony had switched from a rifle to a handgun. The popping sound of gunfire floated over them.

“Don’t worry, Romanov. He’s good, for a civilian, but no one’s going to replace Barton,” said Fury. Natasha sulked.

“He’s nothing like Clint,” Steve hummed, gaze flitting over to Tony and the team around him until they stepped out of the room.

Clint was quiet and clever. He knew battlefields and battle tactics, but more than that. He was stealthier than Nat (almost impossible). He had a hell of a track record, most of which was classified. When Steve idly thought about actually leading the team Tony was obviously the person who’d be sent to deal with security. Clint would be the person you’d send up top to take out men before they even got to them. Of course, Tony would be amazing on the field... Steve had no doubt. But that certainly wouldn’t diminish anyone else’s contribution. Tony was a tech guy. Not a sniper.

They ended up in the cafeteria on base. The food was okay, and dirt cheap. And they always had a good muffin selection (Steve's favourite was banoffee, it was to die for). Natasha and Sam got pre-made, pre-wrapped sandwiches. Steve followed suit and got a BLT, fully intending to demolish a muffin too before he left and hoping that they'd give Tony a break for lunch, too.

Tony had no illusions about being up to military standards. He doubted he could hit a perfect bullseye without a scope from 1,000 meters, or do seventy push-ups in a minute, or run two miles in four minutes, or whatever crazy bullshit most of the people on the base could.

But he held his own as a civilian. He was in better shape than most for his age and he knew his fucking weapons.

Combined with his natural ability to fake confidence, Tony was breezing through every test easily.

By the time they were introducing him to Dr. Brazinski (“or Sarah, if you prefer”), Tony was feeling a lot calmer than he had in the morning.

He eyed Brazinski thoughtfully. She was a brown-haired beta. Her glasses were perched on her head. Her office was plain, the decor carefully neutral. Tony might have made a pass at her if he was drunk; she was maybe a 5 or 6 on a 10 scale, but he caught a glimpse of her computer and noted that she was running Linux for her OS, which immediately endeared her to him.

Tony settled comfortably in a tan lounge chair on the other side of her desk, looking around
curiously.

"So, Mr. Stark--"

"Tony's good."

"Tony. A pleasure to finally meet you."

Tony smiled at her. Of course it was.

"There are four segments of our routine evaluation."

"Four?"

"Mm-hm. Starting with this questionnaire." She slid a thick stack of papers toward Tony. He groaned inwardly. Steve had said they were just going to be shit like word association; he hadn't mentioned paperwork.

Tony begrudgingly dragged it over and began slogging through it. He blatantly lied on nearly half of the questions. ("Do you experience recurring nightmares?" "Do you suffer from anxiety, panic attacks, or similar anxiety-based disorders or symptoms?") He knew SHIELD knew his past history so he tried to keep it believable while still making himself out to be a bastion of mental health.

He was relieved when they moved on to all the fun stuff. Tony had been itching to take an IQ test; he was too many standard deviations for his intelligence to be quantified accurately and most tests concluded he was somewhere in the low 200-range without giving a solid number. Word association was quickly abandoned almost immediately after Tony associated "trust" with "fund" and "capital" with "gains;" he beamed at Dr. Brazinski as she dug a pile of ink plates from a drawer of her desk. She was finding what she typically did; that the smarter a person was, the more they liked to play around during the tests, making it difficult to access what they were really thinking.

"Just tell me what you see in the image."

"Argentina."

"I'm serious, Mr. Stark."

"...so am I! It's Argentina! Look, the three blank spots in the middle are the lakes, and this is the bay it shares with Uruguay..." said Tony, pointing. "...and you've got the Amazon river here, and this is the southern tip. The ink blot people just filled in a map of Argentina."

Dr. Brazinski looked over the ink blot, then frowned. "I'll be damned. It is Argentina."

She tossed the plate into the wastebasket by her desk.

"Okay, how about this one?"

"I see you and me, sharing a romantic dinner."

"Mr. Stark."

"It just looks like a big splatter of ink. I'm sorry, I'm really not the creative type."

"We'll try a different one." She held up another ink blot.
Tony frowned.

"Well?" she pressed.

"...I don't see anything," said Tony, a bit defensively.

"Are you sure?"

"...yeah. I don't know. ...tulips, maybe. It looks like tulips."

Dr. Brazinski examined his face. "...you sound like you don't like tulips much."

"They're cheap flowers. Also, they're responsible for a massive economic crash in Holland in 1637," said Tony. It was the first time she'd managed to unsettle him and unease was coiling in his stomach, because now he was thinking about Bucky and about the way he and Steve had sat on the couch together, nuzzling each other intimately, Bucky being so gentle as he tilted Steve's head to expose his neck.

"Am I going to be allowed to eat today?" demanded Tony, checking his watch impatiently. "I'm starving. How many more inkblots do I have to look at?"

"Give me the first five words that pop into your head when you hear the word tulip."

"Bulb, spring, Easter, regret, petal."

"...did you said regret?"

"...I said petal."

Steve caught Sam watching him mid-sandwich bite. "What? What is it?"

"I just...you know..."

"What?" Steve asked, trying not to sound annoyed. He didn't like the way Sam was looking at him.

"I think you could do better, that's all."

Steve sighed and dropped his food down on its plate. "There it is."

"Boys," Natasha cut in. "Don't."

Steve wanted to be childish and tell Sam he didn't understand. He was into alphas exclusively and he'd only lost Riley, his partner, less than a year ago. Sam still had his bite mark on his neck, and he wasn't ashamed of it, even though Acers were rare, and rarer still in the armed forces. He wore it with pride and ignored any of the jeers he got from fellow SHIELD agents. Sam didn't care what they thought of it; it was the only piece of Riley he had left. The proximity mine had done away with the rest of him.

Rationally, Steve knew his was coming from a good place. Sam just cared...that's why he didn't think Tony was good enough. But it still annoyed him, because also rationally knew that Tony was.

"You don't even know him yet. At least give him a chance," Steve sighed. "Be fair."

"I know how he acts and how he talks. I know he has a reputation for sleeping around. I know he
drinks too much. This is all public record, Steve. I'm just making sure--"

"People change," said Natasha, picking a small, wilted piece of lettuce out of her sandwich.

"Do you like him?" demanded Sam.

"No. But I'm not bonded to him, so it doesn't matter. Now drop it," said Natasha. Sam did, but a moment later, Natasha was defending Tony again. "You think anyone around here was thrilled when Clint brought me back? Huh? You think Clint didn't hear everyone telling him he could do better than some Soviet assassin? You think we didn't deal with rumors about me being a spy or a mole or something for years before everyone finally realized I wasn't fucking around? I changed for Clint. People change. Just because Tony is a selfish, arrogant jerk with a drinking problem doesn't mean he won't be a good addition to the team. Fury likes him, Steve likes him. Maybe he'll surprise us."

Sam looked down at his food. Clearly, he wasn't entirely convinced. "I hope so," he said, nibbling at his lunch with less enthusiasm than before.

Something warmed in Steve's chest. He knew he had Nat's support but he honestly never expected to hear her sticking up for Tony like that. It meant everything, actually. She offered him a small smile as they stood. "I know you're just looking out for me," Steve told Sam quietly. "I just... your concern isn't necessary. I promise. There won't be any sleeping around and I'm working on the drinking thing. I can look out for myself, man."

"Don't look now, Steve, but you've got a couple of admirers," said Natasha, changing the subject. She was rarely emotional and rarely spoke much about her and Clint; clearly, she wanted them to forget it.

Across the cafeteria, a couple of young men in fatigues were watching Steve and jostling each other. Actually, they were really just jostling one kid. He was almost a head shorter than the rest and Steve was willing to bet anything he was an omega. The kid was bright red and was clearly shy; the rest of his peers were gesturing excitedly toward Steve and trying to push him over.

When they realized they had the attention of Natasha, Sam, and Steve, they all began yelling at them.

"Captain America! Captain America! Sean's your biggest fan!" yelled one of them, trying to prod Sean forward. Sean tried to duck away; someone else blocked him. "Captain Rogers! Come sign an autograph for Sean!"

"...almost makes me miss basic," said Sam, sarcastically as the young men tussled each other, grabbing Sean and trying to wave Steve over.

"Jarheads," mumbled Natasha derisively, shaking her head. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Steve wasn't entirely sure who was being made fun of: Sean or him. Either way, he didn't like it. Natasha was right; they should go.

But it was also important to put young men in their place sometimes.

"I'll catch up with you guys in a sec," Steve breathed and then made to walk over. The table looked absolutely manic with young, dumb energy. Sean looked like he wanted to die of embarrassment.

The laughter at the table went from boisterously loud to an awkward, quiet giggle. Steve was taller than all of them. Bigger than all of them, too.
Unsurprisingly, all of them were Alphas. Except Sean.

Steve put his hands on his hips.

"Someone wanna tell me what's so funny?"

"No, sir. Captain. I mean Captain," one of them blurted out, suddenly nervous.

"I didn't think so," Steve breathed. "You fellows look out for each other out on the field, okay? Status doesn't matter when you're getting shot at."

"Yes, sir," chorused the table.

Steve winked at Sean as he walked away and the omega's face lit up.

"Do you smoke?" asked the nurse.

"Only when I'm on fire," said Tony.

The nurse stared blank-faced at him. Tony sighed. "...no. I quit two years ago."

"Congratulations."

Tony didn't respond. He had quit for two reasons. First, no one had given him tobacco in the cave. Three months, cold-turkey. That hadn't been his choice. Second, the smell made him sick. He associated cigars with two things: Obadiah, and Raza.

"Your lung capacity is slightly above average. Looks like you bounced back pretty good. Any other drugs?"


"About how often?"

Tony considered. "Three, four times in the last two years. ...also occasionally E."

"About how often?"

"Three, four times in the last two years. ...also occasionally cannabis."

"Maybe you should fill out this form again," said the nurse in annoyance, shoving a blank form at Tony. He had marked "no" to everything; on the new form, he marked "yes" as the nurse inflated a blood pressure cuff around his upper arm.

"Mm-hm... your blood pressure is remarkably low..."

"I take care of myself," said Tony. That was perhaps the biggest lie he'd told all day. He had only begun caring for himself in the last week. The fact that his physical was going so well was nothing sort of miraculous. Starks had good genetics; that was the only explanation. Tony wasn't sure he'd ever had a routine physical; he normally only went to the doctor after getting sick or injuring himself. Despite the lack of proper physicals, he'd racked up an extensive medial history. He'd cracked nine ribs in Afghanistan and had a shoulder, the right one, that dislocated periodically. (He had first popped it out as a teenager on a Ducati, then again snowboard in the Alps in his twenties, and yet again in Afghanistan.) He'd cracked seven teeth in his life and lost four more, getting them capped by the best cosmetic dentists Hollywood had to offer. He had had chicken
pox twice (once as an adult), chlamydia twice, gonorrhea once, herpes (outbreak free since 2008!), and the flu at least a half-dozen times. Because he traveled a lot and engaged in risky behavior, Tony's medical history made him out to be a crash test dummy. Yet all his essential vitals were perfectly normal, and they finally released him with the begrudging admittance that he was in good shape.

Tony had to admit, he was relieved. The nurse's comment about "bouncing back" rang true with him. His body had recovered from the palladium poisoning; a month ago, he was certain he'd be dead by now, but instead, every test was showing him that he, like his father, was going to live a good, long, shockingly healthy life.

Come to think of it, it wasn't that surprising. When Howard had died at the age of 70, he'd looked like he was in his fifties. And that was taking into account that, at the end, he'd been drinking almost continuously.

Tony was still feeling pretty confident when he was led down the tile-lined, florescent-lit hallway toward the simulation room. He spotted Steve, Natasha, and a third guy; he waved. "Hey, folks," he said cheerily. "Stevie, can I get some sugar for good luck?"

"God, do you ever turn it off?" groaned Natasha.

"Turn what off?"

"The stupid, swaggering bravado."

"Oh, that. ...nope," said Tony.

_Lucky shirt, you've done it again,_ he thought fondly.

The back of his neck prickled a little. He didn't recognize the other Alpha with Steve. "...hi. You must be Sam. Anyone else think it's really funny that Steve's buddy is named Sam? ...like Uncle Sam? No?" asked Tony, sticking his hand out. He couldn't help the rising dander on his neck; Sam was attractive. He and Tony were the same height and both of them had a neatly trimmed goatee. Tony couldn't help but start drawing comparisons. He and Sam seemed about on the same level in terms of dominance. And he could tell that Sam was looking him over, sizing him up. But he knew Sam was Steve's friend and that Sam was also affiliated with SHIELD, so he ignored the prickling, even though of course every other Alpha and omega in the room could sense it.

Tony was glad that Fury and Dr. Brazinski were betas; there were far too many signals Alphas and omegas gave off that belied their inner feelings. This was another reason Tony had traditionally dated betas; they were blind to all the tiny little subconscious cues Alphas and omegas could sense on each other.

"...you watchin' the show?" asked Tony, sounding casual. He was desperately hoping Sam would say no.

"Natasha invited me," Sam said in a simple and indirect reply. He shook Tony's hand firmly, warmly even. Maybe he would silently remain dubious but he had no reason to be difficult. "It's good to finally meet you, Stark," he said. "But I don't have to hang around..."

Steve could feel Tony nerves even though he wasn't show any. It was quite impressive, really. He certainly wasn't that good of an actor himself. He slipped forward, leaving Nat and Sam to talk about...something. Steve reached up to squeeze his shoulders briefly. "You've got this, okay?" he whispered, voice sincere as he tilted his head.
Tony looked okay. Fury, beside the group of scientists, looked...satisfied. "Everything's good so far, Cap," the director breathed. "Let's hope there's no unwanted visitors again."

Steve swallowed and felt a cold tinge on his cheek. "Let's hope," he hummed.

"Got this," repeated Tony, giving Steve a wink. He felt a pang of worry from Steve but he ignored it. The day was nearly over and so far he was pretty sure he was *killing* it. Seeing Steve before the final test had given him a feeling of encouragement.

He watched Fury and the others disappear into the observation room. He'd been there, ages ago, watching Steve. Now their roles were reversed. It was one-way glass and Tony felt a little weird knowing he was being watched without being able to watch back.

The lab was as clean as an operating room. Tony settled into a chair and let the technicians buzz around him.

"What's the stuff you guys inject me with, exactly? Psilocybin or something?" asked Tony curiously.

"Classified," said one of the techs, tapping the crook of his arm to find a vein.

"Salvinorin?" pressed Tony.

"*Classified*. Squeeze your fist three times, then hold."

Tony obeyed, wincing a little when he felt her tap the vein. He didn't hate needles but he wasn't fond of them, either.

"Mescaline? LSD? C'mon... give me a hint." Tony's eyes were already heavy. They slid over to a monitor; the screen was currently blank. He glanced back over to the window. On his side, it was mirror. He stared at himself. Consciousness was starting to bleed a little bit around the corners. Tony struggled to focus on things that were good, safe, comforting. He didn't think about *him*. He needed his mind to be in a state of perfect emotional calm.

*Om...* he thought glibly. In the distance, he could hear a heart monitor.

A huge portion of his physical had revolved around his chest. Naturally. His sternum had been crushed, most of it removed to make way for the arc reactor. The X-rays showed shards like glass needles clustered around the middle of Tony’s chest, bright white and gleaming, standing out from behind the edges of the circular reactor. Tony was glad they'd spent so much time focused on that and not on the scar on the back of his neck.

*Shit. Shit!* Why did *I* think of that? he thought. Behind him, the heart monitor beeped a little faster, but it was too late, he was going under and he couldn't--

"STARK!"

"Huh?"

Tony looked up. He was kneeling. He was in a courtyard. The sunlight was bright, but he was viewing the world through a digital display. He was in the suit, kneeling behind a corner. He could hear artillery in the distance. That voice that had just yelled his name was in his head. A headset.

"Get your head in the game, Stark!" hissed Natasha.
Tony shook his head out a little, trying to figure out what had just happened. Had he been daydreaming? It was the middle of the day and he was crouched in the courtyard of a tiny villa. The house was a pale yellow color with red roof tiles and there was jungle around them, beyond the low stone walls of the courtyard. Bright flowers and tile mosaics were everywhere. Tony was reminded of the scene in *Scarface* when the main character goes to see a drug lord in Columbia. Actually, it was almost *exactly*—

"**STARK!**"

"Huh? What?" asked Tony.

"*Is the perimeter clear or not?*

Tony peeked around the corner. There were two men, one in a suit, one in a bulletproof vest. He slid his arm around the corner and targeted them at the neck; both dropped silently. "Yeah, yeah, it's clear," he reassured her. He was starting to vaguely recall what was going on. They were doing a raid, there was a target... an objective... something or someone they were supposed to find.

Maybe he'd gotten hit in the head. It was frankly all very fuzzy.

"Can I can an update on where in the hell Clint is? He should've been able to take those guys out from the roof. This suit isn't exactly what you'd call stealthy."

"Well, no one made you paint it bright red, Santa."

"Camo washes me out, though," said Tony, jogging across the now-empty courtyard to turn the bodies over. He checked them both over. "Fuck. Neither of these guys has an access card. Sorry, Romanov."

"Can't you just hack it? You're the tech genius, not me."

"Aww, I'm flattered."

A piece of the rock wall above Tony's head exploded suddenly, showering him with pebbles; Tony ducked behind a partially demolished fountain. "I've got a few more guys over here. I can't hack into anything without tripping the alarm. You need an access card. Seriously, where's Clint?"

"He's not responding. Maybe one of your hostiles has an access card. Can I get a birdseye, Stark?"

"On it."

Tony hit the jets and soared upward.

Below him, the villa-style house looked like a termite hive. Men with guns were darting back and forth, covering themselves with the walls of the courtyard, pouring in and out of the jungle, and it was hard to separate SHIELD from the hostiles. There was a huge, oblong pool in the back and at least one body floating in it.

"Okay, Nat, I think I see you. You've got a guy approaching from your southwest but he's distracted, looks like his firearm's jammed up. Coulson, watch your back, please, two dudes coming at you from the right, around that trellis."

"Thanks, Stark."

"De nada. I don't have a visual on Clint. Primary objective isn't visible. I'm going to go around
the front. ...that okay with you, Cap?"

"Go for it, Tones."

Tony swoop down (he felt the sharp, vibrating ping of a few bullets hitting his armor) and landed in the front of the hacienda just in time to hear an explosion from somewhere behind the house.

"Fuck!" yelled Natasha's voice in his headpiece.

"Romanov?"

"Fall back," commanded Steve's voice.

"They got Johnson, Coulson, and Hill, they're down."

"--what?" asked Tony.

"Fall back," repeated Steve in his ear.

"I think my leg's broken," said Natasha.

"Steve, are you fucking serious?"

"Yes. We're retreating."

"But-- but we haven't--" Tony couldn't remember what they were supposed to do. "--haven't--completed the objective, we hadn't found Clint, and Nat can't retreat, did-- did they just say Coulson is dead?"

"Tony." Steve's voice was firm. "Fall. Back."

Tony couldn't fucking believe it. Steve would never demand a retreat. It was unthinkable. And there were members of their team who were injured, missing... was he supposed to just abandon them?

"Steve."

"Tony. I'm ordering you."

Tony took two defiant steps toward the villa, but then, suddenly, remembered the time he and Steve had been fighting Vanko and his drones. Remembered how many times he'd yelled for Steve to duck or roll or cover, and then fired off a shot or a laser or something, trusting that Steve had gotten out of the way.

Steve would never demand a retreat... unless he had a damn good reason.

Swearing heartily, Tony powered up the thrusters and flew low, away from the fight, even though it went against nearly every instinct he had.

"Steve, I swear to God, you'd better have a really good goddamn reason for--"

"I do, Tony. I swear."

"Yeah? What's that, huh? You just left half the fucking team out there, why, huh?" demanded Tony, scanning the jungle below him, the augmented reality picking up running bodies using their infrared signals.
"Because, Tony. I was testing you. ...and you passed."

Tony's eyes snapped up.

He was in a chair.

Fury and Steve were both grinning down at him.

"...that... that was it?" blurted Tony, looking around. He felt weird, his limbs heavy, like they were filled with liquid instead of muscle.

He rose unsteadily, looking around the dim, empty lab. The technicians were gone. Tony reached a shaky hand up to run through his hair. No more electrodes, either.

"I passed?"

"You did. Congratulations, Stark. And welcome to SHIELD," said Fury, holding out one gloved hand.

Tony looked from Fury to Steve, then took Fury's hand and shook it, smiling a little. He turned to Steve and reached out to hug him; Steve stepped back quickly, holding out his hands. "Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Steve, with a little smile. He offered Tony his hand.

Tony's brow furrowed; he shook it. "Uh, thanks?"

"So. Who's my next assignment?" asked Steve, turning to Fury.

"...do I just... just see myself out, or what?" asked Tony, pointing toward the door.

"We'll be in touch. You can go," said Fury.

Tony took a few steps that echoed hollowly in the tile room. Then glanced over his shoulder. "Erm... Steve and I came together. Steve...?"

Steve glanced up. He and Fury had been hovering over a manila folder, looking at a dossier. "What?"

"...do you want me to wait for you outside?"

Steve gave Tony a look of confusion. "Why? What do you want?"

Confusion was settling even harder into Tony's gut. "Well, we came here together, remember? How are you going to get home if I leave now?"

"Oh!" said Steve, and he burst out laughing. Even Fury chuckled a little. "Oh, no, Tony... no, no, no. I'm not coming with you. My assignment is over. I recruited you and you've been approved for combat. We're done now."

"... done now?" repeated Tony. "Done now? Steve, we've been bonded for over two weeks!"

Steve shook his head, smiling patronizingly. "Oh, no, no... we weren't really bonded. Come on, Tony, seriously. That was just a recruitment tactic. I mean, I'm flattered, but obviously, I'm with Bucky. Sorry."

Tony felt his insides curdling with something like fear. "N... no? No, but... but... scent-mates..."
"I can't even feel you anymore," said Steve with a little shrug. "And, with all due respect, Stark, I wouldn't want to be bonded to you. No offense, obviously. It's just that... well... you're already, you know, taken."

"What?"

Steve and Fury gestured to the backs of their necks.

Tony's hand flew up to the scar on his. His heart was pounding, throbbing, like it hadn't since he'd replaced the reactor. He took a shaky step back, toward the door, then found himself glancing at the mirror in the room. Was the rest of SHIELD behind that mirror, watching him? Were Natasha and Sam laughing at him for thinking Steve had actually wanted him?

"I mean, you're no Howard Stark, but you'll still be a good addition to the team," added Fury. "Howard never would have knelt."

Tony bristled. "I didn't-- he made me! There was a fucking gun to my head! What was I supposed to do?"

"That soldier didn't kneel," pointed out Fury, quietly. And he was right. That kid hadn't.

Only one other person had survived the raid. Tony's driver had been shot, along with the man in the front seat beside her. The escort that had ironically thrown up a peace sign: also dead, shot trying to defend him. But there had been a fourth person there, in Tony's escort. That stupid kid, the one who barely looked old enough to be in the army, the one who had asked Tony for an autograph before the presentation that Tony had denied him.

They'd captured him, too.

And they'd made an example out of him. When they'd shot him with the gun, the one labeled STARK, Tony had felt something wet hit his face. That kid, the one Tony had scoffed out, had gone out a hero. His last words? "Fuck you." He'd spit in Raza's face. And Tony? He'd knelt when he'd been told to, because he didn't want his brains blown out like that kid's. He was a coward.

"I'm going to go now," said Tony, very, very softly.

Fury and Steve didn't respond, they were already going over the files again together, heads ducked, concentrating, talking in low voices.

Tony was shivering hard, uncontrollably. He wasn't cold, though.

He fumbled with the door handle and slipped out of the lab, into the hall. It was dimly lit, impossibly long and narrow. Tony couldn't breathe; he was gasping for breath but he still felt like he was drowning, like an invisible hand had a vice grip on his neck.

"Tony?"

Tony slammed his back against the wall and sank to the floor, unable to keep upright. It was snowing lightly. Maybe he was shivering from the cold, after all.

Natasha crouched beside him. "Hey, buddy. ...what's wrong?"

"Steve," Tony managed to croak out.
"Oh. Right. ...I can't believe you fell for that. He's Captain America, seriously. And you're... well, kind of a shitty Alpha. Hey, don't worry about it. At least you got approved for action. C'mon, get up, we'll get some drinks."

Natasha offered Tony her hand.

Tony reached up, weakly. But he couldn't quite reach far enough.


"I'm trying," said Tony, straining. Their fingertips brushed.

"Take my hand."

"I'm trying."

"Please, Bucky. Please, just a little farther, take my hand--"

He was trying, stretching; the desperation in Steve's cold, frosty blue eyes was killing him. He could feel his grip slipping.

"--Bucky-- Bucky please, don't let go, just a little farther--"

It was the perfect metaphor. Even since he and Steve had reunited, they'd be distant; Steve had been cold. He'd consulted Bucky as an equal, as a soldier. He never mentioned their bond. Bucky couldn't feel him and he didn't know why. Steve was so close, so very close, but he couldn't close the gap, and Steve was begging him, and Bucky wanted to say something, wanted to call him Stevie or Omega or anything, anything to close the gap between them; he wanted his last words to mean something, and he was opening his mouth to apologize for being such a rotten, lousy Alpha but the words never came out because he'd already lost his grip and was falling, weightless, into the dark, cold abyss...

"You just don't want me to be happy, do you?" Steve seethed and Fury had the audacity to roll his eyes.

"Rogers." Never had his tone been more patronizing. "You can't be serious. This is just a simulation."

"You've actively gone out of your way to undermine our relationship since day one!"

"This isn't about your relationship."

"Yes it goddamn is!" Steve let out a mirthless laugh and turned to face him, hands balled up into fists by his sides. Natasha could see that he was shaking. "You don't want me to be happy because when I was isolated and lonely I was easier to control. You want me to play at being a good little soldier like I used to. Well I tell you what, Nick, it's not going to happen."

Fury admittedly looked a little taken back. "Listen, Rogers. If you don't want to be a good little soldier, you can march right on out of here, because the Avengers Initiative doesn't have time for--"

"Steve," interrupted Natasha.

Steve turned. Steve's breath hitched. On one of the screens, he was seeing himself. He was frostbitten and bloody, his eyes red and wide with fear. He'd never seen himself so afraid, or so exposed
before. He was outstretching his hand, looking lost. The love of his life on a knife's edge before him.

"--Bucky-- Bucky please, don't let go, just a little farther--" His own voice from the speakers. He was watching a reel of a memory.

But it didn't make sense.

This was Bucky's memory. Those were his words, word for word. His very last.

Steve swallowed, his chest feeling tight. He didn't need to see his own point of view to know what Bucky's corpse looked like tumbling down into the crevasse.

Fury reached over and tapped on the glass.

One of the technicians looked up. "How many times do we have to tell you people not to tap on the glass?"

"What's going on?" he demanded. The monitors had gone black.

The tech heaved a world-weary sigh and made toward the door to the observation room.

Fury took the opportunity to turn to Steve. "Let's get something straight, Steve," he said. "First of all, we're running the program off of his subconscious. I'm not responsible for any insecurities he has. Second of all, this is not about your relationship. This is about whether or not he has vulnerabilities that can be exploited. I know you and him are feeling all lovey-dovey and you just came off your honeymoon, but think for one goddamn moment. You think HYDRA would pause for a split second before they exploited your bond? Huh?"

"Mine was similar," offered Natasha quietly behind Fury.

"Now, I don't care, Cap, I don't give two shits if you want to bond, or marry, or have kids, or adopt a three-legged dog, or buy a house up in Cape Cod with a white picket fence. I don't give a damn. But the moment that your partner is on the team, now it's an issue for SHIELD. I need to know he can follow your orders, that your bond isn't going to create a problem for us on the battlefield. You think HYDRA plays by the rules? You think they're gonna respect the special little relationship you two have? And, lastly, stop acting like it's the forties. You think everyone's out to get you because you're an omega. Well, I don't care, Cap. Never have. Not since I started the Avengers Initiative two years ago. Stop acting like I'm against you just because I'm shoving some hard truths in your face."

The door clicked and the tech walked in. She was an Alpha with pale, thin hair and a pair of thick-framed glasses. Her lips were pouty. She looked like a caricature of a woman scientist. Steve could feel the defensiveness rolling off her in waves; her expression was stony and he imagined she'd taken a fair amount of shit in her field because of her looks. Under her white lab coat, she was wearing a dark button-up shirt and there was a chewed-up pencil behind one of her ears.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Fury, gesturing toward the window.

"...quite fascinating, actually. When Alphas and omega bond, they have a connection, mentally. Generally a very shallow and subconscious one. We're not yet entirely sure how it works. In the case of trios, the Alpha can serve as a link between omegas. This is actually very interesting. I've never seen two Alphas and an omega. As far as we can tell, Rogers is acting as a go-between for Barnes and Stark."
"Except Barnes has been dead for sixty-six years," said Natasha, crossing her arms.

"Clearly, you're mistaken. If he were dead, there would be no live signal to pick up in the first place. Death severs the bond. You can't access a person's feelings if they're dead."

The room was quiet.

"He'd been in his nineties," said one of the SHIELD grunts next to Steve, sounding amazed. "How could he have been hiding for sixty-six years?"

The tech shrugged. "The circumstances of his death were traumatic. Perhaps he's been in a sanitarium or an asylum somewhere. All of the memories we've seen from Barnes were before 1944. Mentally, there may be nothing left. But physically, I can guarantee he's alive. It would be impossible for Stark to have that memory otherwise. That was definitely not his subconscious. Unless he was aboard a train in 1944 with Captain Rogers here."

Fury looked back out the window. Tony was still sitting there, unconscious, and the monitors were still blank.

"What happened to the program?"

The tech shrugged. "Search me. I've never seen anything like it. The simulation is still active."

"Are you sure? Is the AV equipment definitely online?"

"Yes, Director Fury. That's what he's experiencing. I can't wave a magic wand and make this any more interesting for you. A person's subconscious sometimes goes strange places."

"But that's not a place. It's nothing," said Natasha.

"Well, he did just fall to his death," said the tech, and with that, she turned and clicked smartly out of the room, leaving them to stare at Tony's sleeping form beyond the glass.

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_He was just beyond the veil of sleep and he could hear people talking, in English, in Russian. He didn't know where he was. He was seated, no doubt strapped down, but he didn't struggle. Struggling accomplished nothing, and strictly speaking, he wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, all things considered, things had been going very well lately. His last few assignments had been completed and his Alpha was satisfied with him. Karpov had told him so, and being told that he was adequate was just about the highest praise he could hope for. Lately his memory had been bad. From what he had gathered, it was his fault. He'd heard or seen something he shouldn't. Maybe even done something. But Karpov had been merciful and no one had mentioned whatever indiscretion he'd committed, so he had resolved to be as compliant as possible and to make it up to him. There was a lot of tension lately, tension surrounding him. They distrusted his loyalty, but he would show them. He was a soldier, after all, a damned good one. He wanted to follow their orders, but lately everything had been so murky for him. And occasionally, strange thoughts surfaced, thoughts that didn't make any sense but that he had learned, the hard way, not to mention, because if he mentioned them, they would shock him again, and then his memory would be even worse afterwards._

_The words of the people around him were coming in a little clearer._

"...ever since they reanimated the captain."

"Since they woke him up? I think you mean since 1986. Which proves just how tenuously our
"control over him really is."

"Well, the others can't be controlled, and he can. Do I need to remind you, lieutenant, how many men we lost in subduing the others?"

"No, it was a pity they were so feral. But we can't keep this program alive any longer. He's too unstable."

A slamming sound. "Too unstable? One hundred and twelve targets eliminated over the last sixty years! Twenty-five confirmed high-profile cases! Baxter! Tapper! Dupuy! Kennedy! The Winter Soldier program is one of the best tools we have at our disposal. I'll retire to Cleveland before I let you throw away a perfectly programmed resource."

"Colonel, your 'perfectly programmed' resource has been asking questions. How long before he gets tired of waiting for answers, and throttles you with that arm?"

"That arm cost us several hundred million. The more people he throttles with it, the better."

Laughter.

He wasn't following the conversation at all but that was okay. It wasn't really his place to do so. He felt bad for listening in at all but he couldn't close his ears, so it was hardly his fault.

It was odd, though, that he understood them so clearly. They were speaking Russian. He didn't really remember being on the Eastern Front much. The last place he remembered clearly was the Western Front... France, actually. His combat gear had weighed his down, made him feel heavy; he'd been holding a rifle. Marching with six or seven other, wading up to his knees in vast fields of spring tulips, the flower heads bobbing languidly in the breeze. He remembered the feeling so well. How bittersweet it had been, that field. It had meant something and though he couldn't recall now what it was, at the time, he knew, it had affected him strongly, so strongly that the man in front of him had stopped short and he'd nearly plowed right into him. And then he'd turned to say something (he couldn't remember the face at all), and his lips had parted, but he had decided against it in the end. His jaw had tightened and he'd turned and given a firm command and they kept marching. He had felt such a terrible loss from those unsaid words. Loss, and guilt.

"Is he awake? Look at his face. He's awake."

Something jabbed into his arm, roughly, and it burned through his veins. "пойти спать, солдат."

"да," he managed to whisper before he was gone again, sucked back down into the heavy silence of sleep.

"Hang on," Sam raised a hand. "Rogers and Barnes were bonded?"

"Didn't you read his file?" Natasha asked incredulously.

"No! Jesus. Fucking spies."

"Could we use the connection to try and locate Barnes?" Fury asked, stepping forward, his eyes fixed on the scientist. "Is there a way to strengthen it, somehow?"

"Don't you think if I coulda found Bucky, alive, I would've by now?" asked Steve furiously.
"Well we don't really have the--" began one of the scientists.

"I'm more concerned about HYDRA using this to have an exact location on Ironman and Captain America."

Steve was listening to any of them. It wall all fading into white noise. He'd never felt so cold in his life, not even when he was drowning. The sensation was similar to that, except this time it didn't feel like hundreds of tiny arrows were pricking and piercing his skin. Now he felt slow, and heavy. Steve saw the blackness on Tony's screen and felt sucked in by it. He couldn't look away. It reminded him of being naked and covered in blood and Tony thinking he was an angel. It reminded Steve of ripping Vanko's heart out of his chest. It reminded Steve of the crunch when he'd brought his shield down on Schmidt's neck.

Every time he'd killed someone, he'd lost a tiny piece of his humanity.

But nothing compared to losing Bucky. Nothing compared to being unable to stretch that last, critical inch and grab his hand.

**Stevie.**

He raised a hand to his cheek. Steve swallowed.

"No one human could have survived that fall," he said quietly. "He's dead. He's *gotta* be dead. I can't feel him. He's dead."

"Maybe Bucky wasn't human anymore. You said you stopped feeling him," Natasha pointed out, tone gentle. "It's possible that whatever Zola did to him meant he could survive the fall...hell Steve, look at what you survived."

Steve remained quiet.

"I'll call in some of our bond experts in Bern about this," one of the techs offered a moment later. "Obviously, we don't know the extent that this can be manipulated. Safe-guarding against it, however, might be impossible."

She shrugged when Fury looked at her. "The only way to get rid of a bond is to kill one of them."

It was a motivation for a surprising amount of murders, actually. Omegas or Alphas who couldn't escape their lives would often kill their mate in frustration, and less often hatred. They didn't like feeling trapped. It was escapism through murder.

Sam let out a long breath. "So where the hell do we go from here, huh?"

"We wait for Stark to wake up and we carry on," said Fury, clasping his hands behind his back. His face was expressionless.

"I just need some... air. I'll be like five minutes." Steve disappeared out through a door and ran through the halls until he found an egress. He needed to be outside. When he got there, he slumped down, back against the building wall. It didn't feel real. Bucky couldn't be *alive*. Not that it really meant anything... he still wouldn't love Steve. Not like Steve had loved him. His bond with Bucky had made him feel powerless and trapped... with Tony it was totally the opposite.

But that was beside the point. If Bucky was out there, hurting somewhere...and Steve had done nothing... and he'd left him alone dying in the snow... screw being a terrible mate, that made him a terrible *friend.*
Back in the observation room, Natasha waited to make sure Steve was really and truly gone, then tilted her head to Fury. She lowered her voice a fraction. "He really doesn't trust you. You should probably work on that."

"I don't need him to trust me," said Fury in reply, expression hard. "This team is a last-resort measure for threats to humanity as we know it. Not a popularity contest."

Natasha's lips twisted a little and she turned back to the viewing window.

Her own simulation had been similar, because her experience was similar, having an omega from SHIELD recruit her. In her opinion, Tony should consider himself lucky. She had also had to witness Clint getting tortured. Those memories were clear, clearer even than some of her own, real memories, and they still haunted her.

Beyond the glass, Tony was stirring.

He could hear beeping. It took him a while to realize that the beeping was perfectly psyched up to his heartbeat.

His left arm was tingling. He reached out without thinking and rubbed the crook of his elbow, then felt surprise that he wasn't strapped down.

"Mr. Stark?"

He opened his eyes. A young woman in a lab coat was peering at him through thick glasses that magnified her eyes. "Welcome back," she said.

He stared at her; he felt numb. She offered him a cup of water; he took it and drank.

He looked around the room. Lots of people. Lots of white and chrome. Someone was moving his head for him, pulling out wires. He felt the first twinge of panic.

"Don't pull out my arc reactor," he said hoarsely.

Someone above him patted his shoulder sympathetically. "Don't worry, we'll leave that in. I'm just disconnecting some electrodes. The simulation is over. I know, it's a little disorienting when you first wake up."

He looked down at the cup in his hands. His hands were shaking.

"...I need a drink," he concluded.

The person above him laughed. "Well, I think you earned you. You're all finished up here."

Someone else was shining a light into his eyes. "Can you follow my finger? Right... and left... and right... excellent. How's your head? Any nausea?"

He took a few moments to answer. "No."

"Well, you're one of the lucky ones, then. ...I know it's not pleasant. But you're all done now. You can stand whenever you think you're ready."

He kept staring at his hands. He wasn't sure whether they were telling him to stand or not. He wasn't sure who they were or where he was or whether or not this was real.

He glanced up. He was looking into a mirror. His eyes were wide. His skin was pale. He had a
beard. He was wearing a vintage t-shirt, from '78. His lucky shirt.

It was all starting to come back to him. SHIELD. Camp Pendleton. Simulation. Subconscious fears, brought to the surface. Probably recorded on tape. Knowing the government they were still using 8-tracks or something.

He rose unsteadily. He hadn't eaten all day and his insides felt empty. "So I'm done?" he asked groggily.

"All done. Go have something to eat. Don't drive or operate machinery for at least a few hours. And yes, Mr. Stark, that applies to your exosuit."

"...'k," said Tony. He let one of the techs lead him out a door and into a hallway. It was long and narrow, but not as long or narrow as it had been in the simulation, and it wasn't snowing, either. There were six people there. Tony recognized Fury, Natasha, and Sam, but not the other three. A man in a suit, a woman in tactical gear, and a third woman in business clothes, holding a clipboard.

"Did I pass?" he asked.

"We need to analyze both the simulation and your oral psych eval with Dr. Brazinski. But the outlook is good," said Fury, offering Tony a hand.

He shook it automatically. Everything felt surreal and dreamlike. Steve was conspicuously absent. Tony wished he were there, asked for him, but didn't dare ask, because he wasn't sure whether he and Steve were really bonded or not. Steve had said they weren't. Steve had been assigned to him. Steve had reached for his hand and he'd been unable to grab it.

He was having trouble parsing out what had really happened and what hadn't. Steve had said they couldn't feel each other anymore. But was that outside of Baby's or was that in a field of tulips in France or was that just an hour ago when Fury had welcomed him on to the team? Or had that never happened at all?

"Let's get you something to eat, okay?" said Natasha gently.

"Uh-huh," said Tony weakly. The swagger and bravado that Natasha and Sam had complained about earlier was gone, replaced with a stupefied docility that was extremely uncomfortable to witness. A lot of people came out of the simulation with this sort of dazed compliance, though.

"You know that wasn't real Tony," Natasha said, voice still gentle with a hand on his arm. "Steve loves you and he's here... he just went out for some fresh air. Maybe go get him, Sam?" she prompted, patting Tony's shoulder a little awkwardly when she didn't get an immediate response. "Tony? Hm? It's not real. Repeat it to yourself a few times. It helps."

Tony thought about the train. The memory of the icy sting of snow on his face. The feeling of vertigo. The smell of metal and smoke.

And Steve's hand.

Their fingertips, brushing. And then, weightlessness.

"Not real," repeated Tony, dragging a hand across his face. "It's not real. It's not real. It's not real..."
Steve was outside, squinting up at the clear, California sky. He looked up when he heard the door open. It was Sam, not Tony.

Tony. Shit, he should really go to him. The bond was back, full force, which meant that they were out of the simulation; Steve could feel Tony's anxiety and unease rolling off of him in waves.

"He's out."

"I know," Steve breathed and took Sam's hand as it was offered. "How is he?"

"As expected. A little shaky, but he didn't throw up- Nat told me about that by the way."

"Oh God... she didn't."

"Hey, I won't tell," said Sam with a smile. "Come on. When you're ready we can go see him. Nat took him to the cafeteria."

Tony had let Natasha lead him to the cafeteria even though the smell of food turned his stomach. "Steve really likes the muffins here," Natasha informed him. There were only two occupied tables; one with a large group of men, presumably new recruits, who were behaving because of the other table, where several officers were having an intense discussion over their dinner. "Carbs are supposed to settle the stomach, you know. Go ahead and pick one."

Tony stared at a display case for several long, silent moments before Natasha grabbed four and then dragged him over to a table in the corner. "Here. Eat," she demanded, setting a muffin in front on him on the table. Tony picked listlessly at it, his face pale.

He only perked up when he saw Sam directing Steve towards corner table their corner table. Steve moved to sit by him immediately, finding his hand under the table and taking it. Steve could have his own panic later; reassuring Tony was more important than anything else right now. He wasn't even thinking about Bucky anymore- only Tony.

"Hey," he breathed softly. "You okay?"

Tony looked down in alarm as Steve took his hand, then looked up.

"Yeah," he breathed.

"I got us muffins," said Natasha, pushing one toward Sam and one toward Steve.

Tony stared down at the muffin. He wanted to ask Steve if they were really bonded but he didn't want to look stupid in front of Sam or Natasha.

"...you know, you didn't do bad in there," said Natasha. "In mine, I attacked Fury and bit off part of his ear. ...you really kept your cool. I bet they'll approve you for duty before the end of next week."

Tony nodded weakly.
Natasha and Sam exchanged knowing glances. Tony picked off a tiny piece of his muffin but didn't put it in his mouth. After a moment, he looked up. "I really need a drink, though," he emphasized.

"I think you need to sleep it off, first. Steve can take you home," said Natasha. She pulled out her phone and began texting on it.

"Thanks for the muffin," said Sam.

Natasha shrugged dismissively. Steve's phone pinged.

> Fury's organizing a search of all the asylums and hospitals in Switzerland, Germany, Poland, etc. Trying to find him. What are you going to do if he does?

"...I... I think there's a Mexican place a few miles south of here," said Tony suddenly.

Sam laughed. "You want Mexican food after that? Seriously?"

"No... no, I want a margarita..."

Sam laughed again, more out of relief that Tony was coming around than anything.

"May as well just go to a bar," Natasha pointed out drily, picking at a blueberry muffin lazily. Steve glanced down at the text and swallowed.

> He won't find him anyway. Doesn't matter.

> He's the winter soldier, Nat.

"Do you wanna go home now?" Steve asked Tony quietly and squeezed his fingers gently, the pad of his thumb brushing over the bumps of his knuckles. Tony still felt a little too cold- like he'd really been out in all that terrible wind and snow. "It's up to you. Whatever you want Tones."

Tones. He wondered when that nickname had slipped in. Maybe he would actually start using it.

Natasha glanced down at her phone. Her face betrayed nothing.

"No, I... I want a drink," said Tony, glancing anxiously at Steve. He was clinging to Steve's hand a little bit harder than necessary.

"I think one drink wouldn't hurt. Besides, it'll be good for us all to get to know each other," said Natasha casually.

> The fuck do you mean, Rogers? That better have been auto correct.

"Well, any change of scenery is going to help," said Sam. He had a point. The cafeteria had low ceilings and artificial fluorescent lighting and it was not designed to be pleasant, but efficient.

"...I thought I died," said Tony suddenly.

Natasha and Sam nodded sympathetically.

"Yeah, it's shitty. But they normally only make you do it once," said Natasha. "And it's not real."

Tony's grip on Steve's hand tightened a little. "...can't get rid of me that easily," he joked weakly,
flashing them a grin.  

"Clearly," said Natasha with a friendly eye-roll. She and Sam herded Tony and Steve out of the cafeteria. Tony had barely touched his food at all. His grip on Steve's hand remained there, like a steel trap.  

Outside it was already dusk. The sun sat low on the western horizon, lighting up the ocean. Tony pulled out a pair of sunglasses with his unoccupied hand and slipped them on.  

"Holy cow! Is this your car?"

Tony gazed coolly at the McLaren. "Oh, that? V8 engine, nine hundred horsepower. Not bad, huh?" said Tony, a little more confidently. "It's kind of Steve's now, actually." He glanced anxiously at Steve. He was desperate to get into the car together and confirm that, yes, Steve still wanted him. Steve's thumb kept running soothingly over his knuckles, but he had to hear it. And he was starting to get the shakes and a splitting headache that he knew only alcohol would cure. "You wanna race to the restaurant?"

Sam and Natasha looked at the car parked next to the McLaren. It was a white Honda Civic.  

"Maybe another day," Sam said with a gentle laugh. "See you guys there, yeah?"

Steve was starting to lose feeling in a few of his fingers. The others got into the Honda, starting the engine. He didn't get into the McLaren. "Tony?" He murmured. He turned to face him. He moved to cup his face, making his Alpha meet his gaze. He brushed his thumb over his cheek. "You know it isn't real, right? None of it is."

Bucky falling from the train... *that* had been real. But that wasn't important right now.  

Steve leaned forward to kiss Tony's forehead. He could still feel his hesitation. "I love you and I'm not going anywhere, okay? That simulation was bullshit. None of it was real. None of it meant anything. A big part of the test is how you deal with it afterwards."

He gently reached down and took one of Tony's hands, moving it to the back of his neck.  

"Yours? Remember?"

Steve was pointedly not replying to Natasha's text.  

Tony's fingers ran over the scar on the back of Steve's neck. "Mine," he said quietly, tentatively, tracing the ridges. "...omega," he added. His voice was hopeful. It was almost a question.  

"Yours," Steve whispered and shivered a little as Tony's fingers traced over the scar. He stepped closer, neither of them noticing that the Honda was very much gone by now.  

Steve's words were reverberating through his head. Hadn't Steve said he was a shitty Alpha or was that a false memory? Hadn't Steve said that he couldn't feel him anymore, or was *that* a false memory? Steve and Bucky, bonded: true or false? The simulation had left Tony feeling uncertain of everything, a sensation he had frankly very little experience with.  

"I had all these... these visions. Of us. You were so mad at me. I couldn't talk to you," said Tony. He was staring at the ground instead of Steve, his hand still on his neck. "...you're not mad, though. Right? That wasn't real." He glanced up, then down. "It was different than when we did it together. It was just me. I couldn't feel you."
His hand dropped. He looked up at Steve again. "...you don't care, do you?" he blurted suddenly. "About...?" He gestured vaguely toward his own neck.

"I'm not mad at you," Steve promised in a murmur and reached a hand up to run his fingers through Tony's hair gently. He kissed his cheek and then nuzzled against it. "I do care, but now how you think," he whispered in his ear. "It makes me angry, that someone took something from you that you didn't want to give."

"It makes me angrier than I can ever express that I can't make him pay for it. But I also care because it proves how strong you are. It's proof of what you've endured and that you've come out the other side." Steve tilted his head and kissed the corner of his mouth. "That wasn't real." He kissed Tony's bottom lip. "But this is."

Tony's body relaxed and he made a soft noise of longing against Steve's lips. He kissed him back, pressing into him and parting Steve's lips with his tongue; it was like their first kiss all over again. Steve, despite being taller, bigger, and stronger, let Tony take the lead and within moments of moving his mouth against his omega's, Tony had pushed Steve up against the car and and reaching down to fumble with his belt buckle.

"HEY!"

Tony broke away and looked up guiltily.

Fury was standing there glaring at them, car keys in one hand. "Don't make me turn a hose on you," he warned.

"I was just looking for the car keys," said Tony.

"Normally, pockets are *outside* of a man's pants."

Tony feigned a look of shock. "My God, you're right! I guess that simulation really messed with my head more than I realized. You'd better drive, Stevie." He pulled away, looking entirely unruffled.

Steve saw a look of begrudging impression flicker over Fury's face. Tony had gone through a hellish experience and here he was in the parking lot less than two hours later, making out with Captain America and cracking wise. If not for the embarrassment of being caught necking like teenagers, it actually couldn't have been more perfectly planned; Tony was coming off looking great. As if he were entirely unaffected.

Steve could still smell Tony's anxiety, of course. But Fury couldn't. It took twelve to twenty-four hours to completely shake the aftereffects, but Tony was willing to dismiss his feelings and pretend he was over it already.

He was forced to admit that Fury was right. Their bond, though wonderful, was extremely exploitable. Tony had gone forty years unpaired, thinking that it was stupid and pointless, but he had never realized what he was missing. Now that he had bitten Steve, the thought of being without him was unthinkable.

Tony had to give credit where credit was due. SHIELD had hit all of his major fears. Fear of leaving people to die: check. Fear of losing Steve: check. Fear of failure, humiliation, abandonment, not being good enough... check, check, and check. He thought the death scene was weird, though. He knew Steve's old mate, Barnes, had fallen to his death and figured it was a glitch in the system. Tony was taking Steve's lead and not mentioning it.
In his pocket, Steve's phone was chirping over and over as he received texts. No doubt from Natasha.

"We better go. We'll never hear the end of it if we arrive after a Honda," said Tony quietly, stroking Steve's waist softly.

"It feels like my dad just walked in on us," Steve mumbled as he watched Fury disappear, his cheeks still a little inflamed with embarrassment. He cleared his throat and pushed away from the door.

Sure, he never had a dad but he could appreciate the embarrassment of a supposed authority figure walking in on them. Steve liked the private to stay private, and all that.

He got into the car and started her up whilst Tony settled himself in. "Kinda wish I could drunk right about now," he admitted, affected by Tony's own nervousness. "But I don't wanna know how much alcohol that would even take..."

Tony put his hand over Steve's on the lever. "You could drink straight ethanol," he said. His tone was serious.

He stared out the window, brooding; Steve's phone pinged again. Tony glanced down. "You gonna answer that?" he asked. He didn't mean to sound irritated but it came off that way. He felt like he'd aged years in the span of one day. Steve had been right about the simulation being isolating. And he was still trying to shake off the effects, try to sort through his memories.

He hoped Dr. Brazinski didn't get all worked up about the tulip thing. He'd mentioned tulips and then had a memory of being in a field of the damn things. He didn't think they needed to explore that, though. Tony had a chip on his shoulder about Barnes, but Barnes was dead and he and Steve were fine, so it wasn't anything that needed discussed.

"Go south. Turn right at the second light," he instructed Steve. Steve's phone pinged again. 
"...okay, seriously, what's going on? Nat's been texting you all day under the table. I'm not blind, you know. Are you guys talking about me? Is this about the simulation? I think I did pretty okay. I'm sorry that my subconscious doesn't trust you. I mean, I'm really trying here, Steve, I love you, but in fairness, you lied to me for weeks about who you were, so I think those feelings are sorta justified, you know? But I swear, Steve, I'm really happy we're bonded and you know I love you, right? You can feel that. I'm sorry the simulation made you out to be a spy... I don't know what the hell that was. It's just you know, your brain goes some real dark places, and--" Tony trailed off. He shrugged helplessly and squeezed Steve's hand. "--anyways, let's grab some nachos and tequila and put this behind us. I definitely think I did really well. ...hell, maybe they're gonna make me the new captain." He shot Steve a grin.

"We're not talking about you," Steve said quietly, looking a little stressed as he took another corner. He clearly didn't want to talk about it. "It's not about the simulation. Sort of. Just ignore it."

He took the next curve a little sharply.

"And I don't blame you for what's in the simulation. It's not all you, Tony; they put ideas in your head and direct your subconscious in the right direction. There's a reason it goes straight to a battle of some kind for every one." Steve's voice was still soft, cautious almost. He was keeping his gaze fixed on the road.

For some reason he couldn't stop thinking about his first simulation. The Winter Soldier raising a gun, saying sorry and then shooting him. Steve remembered waking up trembling, muttering that
the Winter Soldier was going to kill him. He believed it then and even with suspicious about Bucky... Steve believed it now. And that thought alone was chilling.

Suspicious... ha. Steve's rationality was trying to fight it but deep down he was convinced that Bucky had spoken to him through Tony's subconscious.

Or maybe Natasha was right. Maybe HYDRA was fucking with his head and Steve was breaking into pieces just how they wanted.

He sighed.

Steve pulled into the parking lot as Tony instructed but didn't get out of the car. "I know you want to be able to trust me again," he murmured. "But there's some things... I just, I don't know what's going on Tony. There's all these ideas in my head. I can tell you about it if you want but you don't want to hear it. And I don't even know if it's real yet."

Tony stared at Steve in confusion. He was still feeling groggy from the simulation. He didn't know what "ideas" Steve was talking about. He hated being out of the loop, but on the other hand, he was scared to ask. And Steve had said he didn't want to hear it.

"It's... it's not us, though, right? Me and you... we're good, yeah?" he asked hesitantly. "Cause that's all I really care about, Steve. I thought I would be dead by now. But I got a new arc reactor and a second chance and... and I'm really happy that I found you and you let me mate you. I feel like everything is going good... better than good. I'm happy. You're happy, right? The last couple of weeks, they've been amazing, yeah? We're good? As long as you and me are good..." He trailed off. Steve wasn't quite meeting his eyes.

Suddenly Tony wondered whether this was about Barnes. There had been a lot of Barnes-related imagery in his simulation and Steve had been watching. Remembering Steve's old Alpha made his dander rise automatically, but he didn't want to make Steve feel bad. Barnes was dead. Or, if not dead, then missing for sixty-six years and well into his nineties and not a threat.

"Hey. Stevie," said Tony quietly, reaching out to touch his cheek. "I know... I know things aren't exactly easy for you. Being from another century and having to adjust to a new time and losing..." He couldn't bring himself to say it. "...people," he said instead. "But I've got your back. I'm your Alpha." He ran his thumb over Steve's jaw. There was the faintest hint of peach fuzz there. Tony felt a surge of affection. "...and you can tell me anything," he added. "Real or not real. If it matters to you, it matters to me. We're in this together. 'Till the end of the--"

Tony suddenly felt a splitting pang behind his eyes; it was like someone had just driven a screwdriver through his head.

He yanked open the door of the car and leaned out to gag. "Oh, fuck me... Maxwell's Equations, that hurts..." he gasped, spitting onto the pavement of the parking lot. "S-sorry... I g-guess I'm still... getting over..." He gagged again. The headache that had flared up so suddenly was already ebbing, leaving Tony feeling worn out and shaky. "...no one told me I'd have hangover flashbacks," he joked weakly, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. "What was I saying? Right. We're in this together."

Steve was physically shaking. He stared at Tony, choking on the floor and bent over and he couldn't move to go help him. He felt frozen and his cheek felt too cold. Tony's voice hadn't even sounded like his own—he almost felt angry. The winter soldier, Bucky...whatever. He was fucking with their bond. He'd already screwed Steve over before. And now he was doing it again. How goddamn dare he.
"Tony- Tony it's..." Steve pushed himself up suddenly, finally able to move. He got out of the car and moved to help Tony stand, hands on his arms gently. Steve ran his hands down his biceps. "It's okay. We're together in this. And yes, I love you and I'm happy," he promised and moved his hands to cup his cheeks, pressing their foreheads together as if that would somehow push Bucky out of him. "Please, just...don't ever say that again."

_Till the end of the line_.

The words became all the more chilling after he'd watched the man plummet to his supposed death.

"We're not going to let anyone beat us, okay? We're not going to let anyone get to us," Steve breathed shakily. "We're winning this fight. We have each other and that's all that matters, yeah?"

His heart was still hammering away in his chest and Steve's reassuring words certainly weren't working on himself. The notion of drinking ethanol was getting more and more tempting by the minute.

Tony let Steve pull him to his feet. The headache that had come so suddenly had vanished just as quickly, leaving Tony only with a shaky memory of it.

Steve's smell was all wrong and his words weren't exactly reassuring. What fight were they winning, exactly? What was Steve talking about, letting people get to them? Everyone loved them. Their bond was a national sensation. Iron Man and Captain America, two beloved, not to mention good-looking heroes... maybe this was just Steve's weird omega paranoia. Growing up in the forties, he sometimes said things that reminded Tony of just how differently omegas were treated.

"...never say what again?" he asked, trying to remember the last thing he'd said before the headache had hit him. "...that we're together?"

"Not that, no-"

Before Steve could finish, there was a yell.

Tony looked over. The restaurant wasn't the usual five-star affair Tony went to when he wanted to be seen. It was family-owned, hung with garish Christmas lights that seemed oddly out of place in June but were warm and friendly in the night. Natasha was waving to them.

"What the hell took you guys so long? Steve! I need to talk to you!"

Tony looked back to Steve and linked their arms together. "She sounds serious. We'd better go before she unhinges her jaw and swallows you whole. I need a drink. C'mon, the simulation's over, it went pretty good, I think... let's just both relax, okay?...hey, d'you think this place has karaoke?"

Steve sighed. The place looked low key, at least; hopefully they wouldn't be bothered in there. Nonetheless Steve felt a little intimidated. There was a fiery look in Natasha's eyes that he dare not mess with. Oh...this was going to be fun, wasn't it? He wasn't sure who did it but soon his fingers were interlinked with Tony's and they walking up the steps.

"I think Sam and Tony should go get drinks whilst me and Steve find a table."

"O...kay..." Sam said as slowly as if his own mother had asked him.
Steve didn't really want to let go of Tony's hand, however.

"...what is karaoke?" He asked, pointedly avoiding Natasha's piercing gaze.

"Karaoke is the best goddamn thing in the world," said Tony. He gave Steve a quick peck on the lips and untangled their hands, then gave Steve a friendly slap on the ass. "C'mon, Sam. First round's on me. I got this splitting headache and I thought I was going to throw up but..."

His voice trailed off as he dragged Sam toward the bar. In the presence of two other Alphas, Tony's usual obnoxiousness was back.

The moment he and Sam were out of earshot, Natasha grabbed Steve's arm in a vice-like grip. "Steve. Are you serious?" she hissed. "Do you know what's happening? Do you? HYDRA is already exploiting your bond. Do you realize what a huge security risk this is?" Steve must have looked like he was about to protest because her voice softened a little. "Steve. It's not him. It can't be. He's, what, ninety-two, ninety-three years old? I've seen the Winter Soldier." She lifted the hem of her shirt a little. There was a scar on her stomach. She locked eyes with Steve. "I don't even know if he's human, Steve. It's not him."

Over at the bar, Tony had thrown down a triple margarita and was working on his second. Sam had gotten a soda and was watching him with fascination.

"So," said Tony, looking Sam over. "...army, huh?"

"Special ops. I fly."

"Oh, neat. My dad was a pilot. I'm a pilot in a sense, too, I guess. Man, it looks like Natasha's really giving Steve the ol' what-for, huh?" He tilted his chin across the room; Natasha and Steve were engrossed in an intense discussion. "Welp, guess that means we won't be getting a table anytime soon. Fine by me. I'd rather keep close to the booze. Hold still, you have something on your neck." Tony reached over to brush it away, but his hand stopped a few inches from Sam's skin when he realized what it was. For once, he seemed to have nothing to say.

"...it's okay," said Sam quickly. "It's supposed to be there."

"Oh. Oh, thank Tesla, I did not want to have that conversation. So you're a homo?"

Sam stared at Tony incredulously. Tony's face was unreadable. It was entirely unclear whether Tony was being purposefully insulting or whether he was just so completely out of touch that he had no idea what he was saying was offensive.

Unlike in betas, Alphas' and omegas' statuses superseded their sexuality. It wasn't considered strange for an Alpha to bond with either sex so long as they were an omega; after all, any omega in heat was desirable. This was one reason trios existed; Alphas who bonded to the same sex but considered themselves straight often sought out a partner of the opposite sex. And it wasn't especially weird, at least in the twenty-first century, for two omegas to share a bond; omegas who were close tended to cycle together and, if they were the type that nested, they would often nest together, which was considered extremely intimate. But two Alphas bonding was a rare event and had long since taken on the same connotations as homosexuality, complete with the same prejudices and slurs.

"...we don't really like that term," said Sam.

"Oh," said Tony, who didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed. "What do you call yourselves,
then?"

"Acers."

Tony waved at the barkeep. "Hey, can I get another margarita over here?"

"...you might want to slow down," said Sam, unable to keep the judgement out of his voice.

"It's fine, Steve's driving," said Tony, who didn't seem to appreciate that even the bartender looked a little off-put by his downing two margaritas in less than five minutes.

Across the room, Natasha was gesturing wildly. "...you think I ought to go rescue him?" asked Tony.

"Steve isn't really the kind of guy who needs rescued," said Sam. "I think he can handle himself."

"I'm ninety-two and look at me," Steve breathed, giving her a pointed look. "Nat, I know it sounds crazy, but..." The wound on her stomach made it all the more real. It was a shot that could have killed her. The fact that Natasha had seen the Winter Soldier and hadn't mentioned it before was troubling though. What else wasn't she telling him? Steve frowned. "I know it's insane. But when you pulled Tony out of the simulation first you left me in there alone, in his subconscious," he whispered. "Except I wasn't alone. He was there. I felt him with me. He touched my face and he had his voice." Steve's own broke a little then. He ran a hand over his face and breathed out slowly, his shoulders sagging down. "I know it was him. I know what his presence felt like, I'll never forget it and that is that."

Natasha didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Her expression spoke volumes.

"How could HYDRA possibly be exploiting my bond already? They probably thought I was an Alpha up until five months ago, and even then, maybe not until I came out to the public. Nat, I don't know how they would be doing this to me. I don't think anyone is. It feels like Bucky is highjacking our bond. Over a week ago I had a dream where he was in the garden but I woke up downstairs, by the very window and the flowers I'd moved were in different place! I don't even know if it was real or not."

"Steve," said Natasha, grabbing his upper arms. "You were frozen and that was a one in a million chance. Barnes... I don't think he was that lucky. Maybe HYDRA found him and that's how they knew you were an omega, I don't know. But have some goddamn common sense, Steve. The Winter Soldier is dangerous. He's responsible for over a hundred deaths. And now you're having dreams and... and, I don't know, hallucinations... Steve. If you're compromised, you need to tell Director Fury. This isn't safe. What if they're trying to lure you to them to kill you, huh? Did you ever think of that? That maybe, just maybe, there are a lot of people out there who want to assassinate you, and that it would be really easy to lure you out by making you think that your best friend and mate from the forties is somehow, against all odds, miraculously alive?"

She fixed him with a stern look. Steve saw her eyes dart briefly behind them, toward the bar. Tony was throwing back margaritas like it was going out of style and Sam looked extremely uncomfortable. Clearly, he wasn't sure whether he ought to be intervening in Steve and Natasha's conversation, or whether he should continue to sit next to Tony, who was brazenly getting drunk.

"...all we know is that Barnes is alive. There's no evidence he's the Winter Soldier. Maybe HYDRA found him and they're keeping him somewhere and they've found a way to... I don't know. Isn't that exactly what Fury said? That if they found a way to exploit bonding, they'd do it in a heartbeat? ...what are you going to do, Steve?"
Steve could appreciate the situation Natasha was in. She wasn't a snitch; she probably trusted SHIELD less than Steve did. But there was no denying that Steve was now a liability. Being mentally connected to the Winter Soldier was probably about the worst person in the world he could be linked to.

"...he doesn't know, does he?" said Natasha softly, eyes sliding across the room toward Tony. He was sipping on his third drink, talking animatedly with Sam.

"No," Steve whispered. "I offered to tell him, but I don't think he's ready to hear it yet. Jesus, Nat, I didn't realise he was still so insecure; I don't know how he'd handle all this. ...though if the Winter Soldier really does have a metal arm Tony will probably be the best man to fight him."

He would probably kill him.

Steve felt a cold shudder run down his spine. He swallowed.

"I'll...I'll talk to Fury when I'm ready to. But I need to sort out my head first, okay? I'm not having him take me off active duty before I've even been out there. I'll go crazy." Steve had to be doing something. He'd been more still in the past five months than he had been in years back in his day. He had to be moving, fighting, resolving. Steve needed a mission like it was nobody's business.

"But I think we both know that if HYDRA wanted me dead I would be already," Steve pointed out. "Everyone knows where I am. Stark security or not- HYDRA always find a way in if they want to. I think they want my attention, but they don't want me dead."

Natasha looked unconvinced.

"Can we just... not do this now?" He pried his arms gently from her grasp to squeeze her hands instead. "Tony's had a terrible afternoon and he needs me." He sighed when he saw all the glasses lining the bar already and felt that tug of guilt in his gut. Like Steve should be stopping him. He reminded himself that Tony was his own person, that Steve didn't get to make those sorts of decision for him. "Let's just go save Sam. He looks as uncomfortable as hell," Steve said and with that he peeled away.

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"Steve. Promise me not to do anything reckless. That's all I ask. If a person gets into your head... they can do a lot of damage," said Natasha softly. But she let him go. Natasha knew that, in Steve's position, she would probably not want to tell anyone, either. She followed him to the bar, where Tony was regaling Sam with tales from the last week.

"...and then I said, to hell with playing it safe, I'm already dying, let's see what this bad boy can do, and so I put it in my chest and, bam! You're looking at the only stable source of badassium in the world!"

"You're really calling it that?" asked Sam.

"Well, what else would I call it? ...edwinium?"

"Edwinium sounds a bit more dignified. Who's Edwin?"

"Hi, Steve!" called Tony, patting the barstool next to him and ignoring Sam's question. "Man, I feel way better, a couple of drinks was just what the doctor ordered. I can't believe how weird that was. ...I bet they use salvinorin, I bet you anything that's how they do it. What were you guys arguing about?"

Natasha's phone chimed and she pulled it out to check it. "Clint says hi," she said without replying to Tony.
"He's still in New Mexico, isn't he?" asked Sam lightly.

"At the JDEM Facility guarding the Tesseract," confirmed Tony, fishing for a slice of cucumber floating around in his drink.

"ты че блять охуел?" snapped Natasha, reaching over and whacking Tony over the head. "Fucking idiot, top secret means you don't talk about it openly in bars!"

"Ow! Well, how was I supposed to know it was top secret, I don't have clearance to look at the files yet!"

"Steve!" growled Natasha, while Tony rubbed his head.

"Oh, he's gonna be fun to work with, I can tell," said Sam, giving Steve a look.

Steve badly suppressed a chuckle. "Fury knew what he was getting himself into. If he doesn't want us to know things, he has to use more effective protection."

"How could you even protect yourself against Stark tech?" Natasha said, exasperated.

Steve shrugged. "I don't know. Write it down on paper?" Even Sam smiled a little at that.

Natasha muttered something foul under her breath and waved the bartender over, ordering a Long Island iced tea. "You want a drink Steve?"

Steve figured the bar didn't have pure ethanol. He politely said no.

They finally moved to a table. It was a corner booth, so more privacy. The waiter recognized them and gave them complementary breadsticks which Steve immediately tucked into. Natasha was quietly drinking her drink; she looked angry still in a pensive sort of way. At Steve, probably. Maybe Tony too. Steve wasn't sure anymore. It was the look she'd wear just after landing his ass on a gym mat: one of pure concentration.

"So, did you guys have a good honeymoon?" Sam asked, trying to steer the conversation away from SHIELD as he sipped at his soda.

Tony smirked as he pulled over a fourth drink. "It was fantastic," he said, shooting Steve a look. Steve looked and smelled and was acting stressed. Tony put a hand on his thigh under the table. "Hey, Steve... slow down. They'll give us more breadsticks, geez." He turned back to Sam. "Yeah, the honeymoon was great. We only got attacked once, so that was nice, you know, good to have a break."

Natasha snorted. "You couldn't just stay at home like most people, could you?"

"Steve's adoring fans needed to know," said Tony with fake seriousness. He reached over and put his hands on Steve's shoulders, giving him a friendly little shake. "Besides, if we waited to tell everyone, they would've found out. At least this way we got to control the information. Not our fault Vanko decided to waltz in and shake things up."

"Yeah, you're gonna give Fury an ulcer," said Sam idly.

"How's the investigation going?" asked Natasha.

"Actually, it's going great. I mean, it wasn't our fault, and people love Iron Man-- and you, too, Cap-- and I've got Rhodes on my side and Pepper got me all lawyered up. Hell, Stevie and I are
going to the White House next month! Mark my words, Romanov: I'm going to receive a fuckin' award for what went down at the Expo. We talked to Ellis directly and I don't think we're in any trouble...

Despite Tony's reassurances, Steve could tell he was feeling anxious. And he knew why, too. The six civilian deaths that had occurred at the Expo weighed on him. Tony was constantly bragging about all the good Iron Man did, about the people he'd saved and the threats he'd neutralized. But that wasn't what Tony dreamed about. Steve knew he was haunted by the ones that fell through the cracks, the inevitable casualties. Never mind that they'd managed to minimize damage and save thousands. No. Leo Rothstein cast a long shadow, and Tony's cheerful insistence that they would "get off scot-free" was clearly a defense mechanism.

Maybe Natasha and Sam understood that, because they didn't push him.

"Well, good for you. Most people wouldn't want to spend their honeymoons being attacked by terrorists, but---"

"Didn't you and Clint spend yours in a shady motel in Serbia?" Sam asked Natasha.

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Oh, God... it was awful," she said, struggling not to smile.

Sam smiled back. "Did you get an award, Romanov?"

"No, but Barton nearly got tried for treason," she said, mouth still quivering. "You think you've seen Fury mad? Not like this. We both came back with frostbite, half-starved, and Clint's bite infected... I thought they were going to put us both out in front of a firing squad. Ever heard an omega growl? Barton and Fury were about ready to rip each other's heads off when he dragged me back home." She put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile; after composing herself, she looked at Steve. "You're welcome, by the way. Barton and I pretty much guaranteed bonding is a protected institution. At least within SHIELD, anyway. After they pardoned us, your and Stark's bond was pretty much a cake walk."

"Then why's Fury being such a dick to us?" demanded Tony.

"Oh, he's just like that," said Sam, waving a hand. "Typical brass dick-waving."

"He knew your father," said Natasha. "They weren't on the best of terms when Howard passed."

Tony's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Stark. Everyone knows how your father was. A reckless drunk, like you."

Tony's dander rose. "That's harsh, Romanov. True. But harsh. How would you know anything about my father, anyway?"

"I read your files. And his. He's in SHIELD's archive, y'know. He did a lot for this organization, back in the day."

Tony frowned, considering this. "Y'know, you're like, the second or third meanest Russian currently in my life," he said after a moment.

"Calls 'em like I sees 'em," she said with an unapologetic shrug.

"Which I appreciate but nonetheless resent," said Tony. "...another round?"
Natasha seemed to consider, then nodded. A moment later the two were throwing back shots.

Sam caught Steve's eye and shook his head with an amused expression. Despite their bickering and despite everyone's reservations about Tony, they were getting along about as well as could be expected, considering Tony's personality. Steve knew that everyone was probably giving him a break because Steve vouched for him. But Natasha was definitely thawing. At least, as much as she ever did.

Natasha and Tony ended up back at the bar whilst Sam sipped at his soda and Steve picked at breadstick crumbs. "Gonna have to take him home already at this rate," he sighed and glanced between the bar and the crumb filled basket with a soft sigh. He was honestly glad Tony was letting go, in hindsight. After such a tense week it was so very important for him to let go. To relax. Steve leaned back in his seat, wanting nothing more than to get back home and cuddle up in bed next to him. Public spaces weren't his friend right now.

"Sorry if I was a bit of a dick earlier; I legit want you to be happy, man." Sam said and reached over to squeeze his shoulder. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah," Steve offered a small smile. "I know. I'm sorry he's..."

"A dick?"

They both laughed a little awkwardly.

"As long as he treats you okay, that's all that matters. I bet his house is pretty sweet though, right?"

"Oh my God," Steve hummed and shook his head. "It's insane."

"What was it like being his PA for weeks? Like...did you get together before or after?"

"After. Sort of. It was...confusing," Steve went a little pink. He didn't think Sam would want details from his heat on the plane. "But he didn't know who I was...you know, it wouldn't have been fair."

"Nah, man, you're right."

It looked like Natasha and Tony were losing it at the bar a little.

"Maybe it's time to take them home," Steve murmured and Sam stood too.

"Roger that."

Steve smirked when he met Sam's gaze.

"Hey," Steve appeared at Tony's side, a hand on his arm. "You think maybe it's time to head home, Hm?" He asked with a gentle squeeze.

"Steeeve!" exclaimed Tony with delight, leaning into his touch immediately. "This is Steve, my omega!" he informed the bartender happily. Loudly, in a stage whisper, he added, "He's Captain America."

"You already told me, honey," said the bartender gently.

"За любовь!" said Natasha, throwing back another shot.

"...and many more!" agreed Tony, matching hers. "If you'll excuse me, Roman up --" He hiccuped the last part of her name. "--I believe I must be taking my leave now. ...did anyone ever...and many more!" agreed Tony, matching hers. "If you'll excuse me, Roman up --" He hiccuped the last part of her name. "--I believe I must be taking my leave now. ...did anyone ever..."
"Tell you that you are drop-dead gorgeous?"

"Early and often," said Natasha, a hint of her accent creeping into her voice. "You two be good and have fun."

"Wait. Which one do you want us to do?" demanded Tony, throwing an arm around Steve to steady himself. "Steve... Steve, do you have the keys? I think I might be a little drunk. I'm celebrating my new job," he explained to the bartender. "But it's top-secret so I can't talk about it. ...but it's with SHIELD."

"Congratulations," said the bartender. She gave Steve a little nod. "...Captain."

"That's Mister Captain America to you! Steve! Lead the way! O Captain, my captain! ...mush!"
He staggered away from the bar, where Natasha looked torn between laughing and glaring, and Sam was shaking his head at them.

Tony held on to Steve's arm with both hands and leaned against him as they walked out. His mood was much improved. The simulation had been rough, yes, but it was over and he was glad he was drunk and besides, he was with Steve. He giggled quietly to himself the whole way to the car.
"...we owe Natasha and Clint and big thank-you. Their bond makes ours sound like it was, like, easy. ...you know what's sad, Steve? I bet no one sent them an orchid. Steve, let's send them an orchid, Steve. I like her. She can drink. And she is hot. Hot like greased lighting. No wait. ...fast like greased lightning. How's the song go? Oh, wait! You've never seen Grease. Well I know what were doing when we get home. We're watching Grease and then I am going to plow you." He tried to kiss Steve, stumbled, missed, and ended up kissed his neck instead. Because of Steve's size, having Tony dangle off him the whole way to the car wasn't really an issue, which made Tony giggle even more. "Steve, are you aware you are huge? I feel like I'm bonded to a rhino. ...Steve. Steve, I'm sorry, I don't know how to tell you this, but there aren't many rhinos left anymore. I hope you don't like rhinos 'cause they're almost endangered. I mean almost extinct. Like the dodo." He practically fell into the passenger's seat with a sigh of contentment, looking over at Steve. "Steve. I love you, omega," he said drowsily, giving Steve a grin. Steve had already begun to notice that the smiles Tony offered Steve were different than the smirks he offered the press and general public.

"That's lovely idea, actually," Steve breathed. He'd send them red orchids- fiery and dangerous, like them. Even if Natasha wouldn't appreciate it all that much, it would be nice to return Clint's gesture. Tony was still surprising him, even now. Something warmed in Steve's chest. He wrapped an arm around Tony's shoulders to help steady him, the alpha's own hand on his waist helping as they headed back out to the car.

Turned out drunk, celebrating Tony was a lot more cheery drunk, dying Tony. Steve always associated his mate's drinking with a depressive state, like his birthday party. But this was different. Tony was hyper and happy, his eyes lit up, and Steve couldn't even be mad at him. The simulation had been a horror show. Steve knew he wanted to drink too after his, probably would have if he could have.

"I love you too," Steve told him and leaned forward to peck his lips before he moved around to do up the other's seat belt and then his own. He started the car up and made to take them out of the car park. He was getting used to the McLaren now; he quite liked her. He quite liked driving in general, but nothing would beat the free feeling of a bike.

"I think it might be time for bed when we get back though," Steve murmured bemusedly. "We can leave Grease and other stuff for the morning..."
"Noooo..." whined Tony softly, already curling up into the seat. He fell asleep within moments, leaving Steve alone with the radio. By the time they got home, Tony had apparently forgotten all about his plans for the evening. He growled weakly when Steve tried to wake him up. "Carry me," he mumbled, throwing his arms around Steve's neck.

It was dark in the house and reeked like flowers. Tony had hired on a whole new gardener just to take care of the things. She was an omega named Lacey and she came by three times a week to water them, mist, and fertilize them, a process that all day. The first time she had seen Steve, her eyes had filled with tears and she'd stuttered out a non-specific thank-you to him before vanishing from sight.

"Steve," mumbled Tony. "I want you to move all your stuff in. It's been two weeks. Even though it's stupid and old-timey and totally clashes with my style. I'll pay for the shipping. Hold on, I gotta check my arc reactor before bed." Without waiting for Steve to reply, he tugged down his shirt and pulled out the reactor. Steve had gotten used to Tony pulling it out and digging around in the hole in his chest; he did it nearly every morning in the shower. He gave it a few swipes and then crammed it back in. "All's clear," he reported. "Good night, 'mega. See you in the morning."

With that, he passed out again. It probably had as much to do with the simulation as it did with the drink. Despite the trauma of it, though, Tony seemed to be bouncing back quickly. And why not? His greatest fears had already been assuaged. Steve was still here and still loved him. It was ironic that Tony's psych test had been more traumatic for Steve than Tony; while Tony could reassure himself that it wasn't real and that he and Steve's bond was secure, there was no closure for Steve, and no reassurance. Steve had thought he was the only one left alive to remember that field of tulips in France in the 1940s, the bright colors and the spring wind and the strange respite from fighting, at least for an afternoon. But it was clear he wasn't the sole keeper of that memory. Bucky was alive and now SHIELD was searching for him. Something that Tony was, at least for now, blissfully unaware of.

They carried on like normal and everything was oddly...perfect.

They sent Clint and Natasha the flowers. Red ones, at Steve's request. Clint sent Steve a lot of thank you messages with excessive amounts of sun emojis. Natasha just sent one:

> Tony's idea, huh? Guess you did better than I originally thought, Rogers.

The tone was teasing but the praise underlining it was evident.

A week later all of Steve's stuff was moved in. He left the furniture in the apartment, figuring it could be sold as it was. He wasn't especially attached to the furniture itself. Tony's room was so big that most of Steve's meager belongings ended up in there. The room with Tony's biroed form on the wall ended up as a studio, all of Steve's sketchbooks on shelves and materials in drawers. The rest of his clothes were put in the shared wardrobe and walk-in closet. His books found a spare shelf or two downstairs, along with his record player and record collection. And his... ahem... adult things were thrown into the bottom of a cupboard, as they definitely weren't needed anymore.

Steve kind of missed wearing Tony's robe in the morning, even if his own one was softer and fit a lot better.

He and Natasha took up a proper sparring routine again; he and Sam found a running schedule that worked for them, when Sam was in town. Now that Tony knew Sam's 'type' he was less bothered by his singleness. Not that had really ever come up since their honeymoon period. Coulson mentioned missions in the future but there weren't any now and Steve was growing restless. They had left him out of New Mexico; he didn't want to be left out of whatever happened next.
Yet life wasn't boring. He let Tony whisk him away to New York for his birthday; they visited his old haunts in Brooklyn, many of which were no longer recognizable. They shared a meal at a small pizza place; the evening ended rather dramatically when Tony unfurled Steve's birthday present. ("Ta-da!" he'd exclaimed dramatically as a woman walked in wearing a heavy leather glove. Perched upon it was a bald eagle. "Her name's Liberty!" he said; Liberty shrieked and flapped her wings, alarming everyone in the restaurant.) (Steve texted Aria and Pepper to ask if they could find a suitable refuge for Liberty, not wanting a rogue eagle flapping around the Stark mansion and overturning orchids.)

Between outings with Natasha and Sam and Tony, Steve was wading through press releases and public appearances, guided by Aria. He had an upcoming dinner at the White House and had spoken in passing with Agent Coulson and Director Fury about getting into the field.

The memory of Bucky falling from the train became distant, regulated to the backwaters of his subconscious, coming up only late at night, in dreams.

And Steve looked to the future with hope. Because everything had worked out so far, and now, for once, he was no longer alone. He was facing the 21st century with a bond-mate and, finally, he felt like he belonged there. The future was bright.

And Steve was glad to be in it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for joining us for part 1!

If you loved, liked, or at least put up with us for this long, you might as well check out Part 2:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/13798008

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